



Love Simplified

Ephesians 1:15-16 NIV

For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.

What is Love?

When I was a kid, maybe nine or ten years old, I took a bus by myself to go visit my grandmother living forty-five minutes away in San Francisco. Looking back, it was quite an adventure for someone my age but when I got to the bus station, my grandmother was there to get me. Together we rode another bus and a cable car to her apartment in Chinatown where I spent the weekend. I am sure we walked through Chinatown and visited the shops and maybe we even went to Fisherman's Warf which wasn't too far away, but I don't know. In fact, I can't remember anything much that we did on that trip. One thing I can say about the weekend, I knew that my grandmother loved me and showed it in a number of ways.

Last week we looked at the significance of faith and the central part it played in our key verse. Just as important, and maybe even more so is how crucial love is to Christianity and it is placed side-by-side with faith in our key verse. **For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.** (Ephesians 1:15-16 NIV) In this letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul uses the verb form of love more times than in any other of His letters in the Bible. Only 1 Corinthians, which is much longer, uses the noun form of love more than is found in Ephesians. Clearly, love was a critical part of the way the Christians in Ephesus treated one another.

How the Bible describes this love of the Ephesians is illuminating. Literally, we are told that their love went into all the saints, it invaded them. We could describe it as penetrating love, a love that works in others, enters them. It is not just perfunctory love. It's not like saying, "I love the whole world", or "I love everyone". It might be true that you love everyone but how would they know it? What is it about your love that reaches the world? Such statements of course are absurd because there is no way of knowing if they are actually true. The love being described in our Bible passage is if not measurable, at least it is knowable. Actual love penetrates, it works inside those who receive it. Love, without it being transferred from one person to another, is of little if any value. It is like the Dead Sea. Without any flow out, it just loses its life and becomes useless. This love that we are talking about here is an activating force, an impactful dynamic of God working through His people.

It cannot be overstated; love is the greatest attribute you can possess. Love rises above every other part of your personality in importance and it goes with you into eternity. 1 Corinthians 13, the most important discussion on love found anywhere in literature, religious or not, insists, **"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."** (1 Corinthians 13:13 NIV) The ancient adage, "you can't take it with you" is not so with love. You actually can bring your love into eternity. In that chapter of 1 Corinthians, we are told exactly how love looks when it is functioning. **Love is patient, love is kind. It**

does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7 NIV)

The list of specific ways love penetrates is comprehensive and profound. It covers both what love does as well as doesn't do. Esau, the twin brother of Jacob, gets plenty of criticism for his anger after Jacob tricked him out of his blessing from his father, but he exemplified love on multiple levels as he got older. More than twenty years after Jacob fled his homeland to get away from his brother Esau who wanted to kill him, Esau came out to greet Jacob upon his return. The fury of Esau those many years before was understandable. Jacob had stolen from him his future success by getting his father to speak the prophetic words of God over Jacob rather than Esau. The prophecy was a powerful declaration of what God would do for whoever Isaac passed along the promises and by tricking his dad into giving the promises to him, Jacob took what Isaac intended to give to Esau. It is strange to ponder the intensity of feeling for all the parties involved in the misplaced deliverance of the prophecy because not many think in spiritual categories now, but all three, Jacob, Esau and Isaac knew that the words mistakenly given to Jacob rather than Esau were of unfathomable worth. It was a terrible loss to Esau, and it was his brother's crooked deceit that cost him the bright future his father intended he have.

Something happened though in Esau which did not find itself replicated in Jacob. God created love worked its way in his heart. With fearful apprehension, Jacob sent word to his brother Esau that he was going to return to Canaan to resettle there with his family. The messengers returned to Jacob with the news that Esau was coming to meet him with four hundred armed men. Jacob immediately assumed the worst. In a panic, he decided to try to win Esau over by sending ahead the gift of nearly six hundred livestock. The closer he and his family got to Esau, the more afraid he became and so he split up his wives and children into four groups, hoping if Esau attacked, some of his children could escape. However, to Jacob's complete shock, Esau did not carry with him an ounce of animosity. He welcomed Jacob warmly and offered to provide protection for him on the rest of his journey to wherever he might settle. Jacob declined. Esau, perhaps realizing how uncomfortable Jacob was around him, offered for his men to travel with Jacob and safeguard him and his family until they reached their destination, but Jacob even waved off that generous gift. Jacob promised though that when he and his family and servants found a place to lay down roots, he would come and visit his brother in Seir. It was an empty promise; one he never intended to keep.

Sometimes it is hard to be around people who love with the genuine sort of generosity Esau possessed. Like the definition of love found in 1 Corinthians 13, Esau seemed to have forgotten all-together the evil of Jacob's actions twenty years before. Whereas Jacob's guilt never left him, Esau's animosity disappeared. It was no small matter for Esau to gather up all those men and make the long journey to greet Jacob out on the road, but he wanted to bless him, to welcome him. Jacob though was trapped by fear and guilt and could not summon the psychological resources needed to love Esau back. For all his strengths and spiritual qualities, Jacob lacked the capacity to love fully. Esau, on the other hand didn't. Love, by definition is no bank vault for saving grudges, it is rather a great fan that blows them away. How fortunate we are when we come across an Esau who carefully forgets what he has against us.

Another example from the scripture is Rebekah. When Abraham's servant traveled all the way to northwest Mesopotamia to try and find a godly bride for his master's son Isaac, he arrived in the town of Nahor and stopped at the village well. Dead tired and thirsty, he prayed for God to guide him to the young woman most fit to marry his master Abraham's son. He asked God to make it the sign of who was to marry Isaac that if one of the young women there gave him a drink and then draw water from the well for his camels too, she would be the one. Suddenly a beautiful young woman approached, and the servant asked her for a drink. Just as he had prayed, she offered to pull up enough water from the well to provide drinks for the servant and his ten camels. Rebekah did not know this elderly stranger; she had no reason to go out of her way to help him, but she was kind and she went to all that effort because love directed her actions. How many

people do you know that are like that, are kind without any good reason to be so, without any ulterior motive pushing them to help others?

I recently finished reading Lee Strobel's The Case for Grace. He tells of a homeless man who went to visit a church that offered free showers and breakfast Sunday mornings. Cody hadn't taken a shower in months, his clothes were dirty and stained, his teeth rotten, hair matted, and he was scrawny. Standing around with several other homeless men, he was surprised when a middle-aged, petite woman approached him. "You look like you need a hug", she told him. "A hug? Ma'am, I haven't had a shower in three months. I smell horrible" he mumbled aghast. "You don't smell to me," she replied and then wrapped her arms around Cody and hugged him. "Do you know that Jesus loves you", she asked, looking him squarely in the eyes. Cody said that at that moment something spiritual sparked in him and even years later he can't retell the story without getting choked up. He revealed that the hug was "like a personal encounter with Jesus". It felt like pure love. That was the turning point in his life and soon he gave his life to Jesus. A hug translated into love and then faith in Christ. You might say that hug was worth the effort.

Love is kind. It does not remember wrongs. It is patient. It is not easily angered. Pick one of these four characteristics of love and give it a shot. Do a kind deed. Give up on some grudge you've held and make an effort to reestablish that relationship. Put up with someone who irritates you. Smile and walk away from an aggravating moment. Love is eternal and every act of love you do goes with you to heaven. Might as well make good use of your time this week and figure out a way to express God given love. It really is kind of crazy but the love you show someone could turn that person's life around and make you a hero...a love hero.