

Love – With Actions
1 John 3:16-18
April 21, 2024

Millions over the last two millennium have come to know Christ as their Savior and Lord. They walked the pathways of the world and finally came to the realization that there was more to life than what the world had to offer. Christ offered them a new and better way with a deep and lasting love which they had never experienced before and they said “yes” to him and his leading in their life. But many I included didn’t quite know where to start this new way of life. They wanted to grow in their newfound love and to share its joy and wonder but didn’t know how to go about it. However, to walk closer and closer to Christ for guidance and direction seemed like the right place to start. Our first verse has helped many on their journey. It reads, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” (1 John 3:16)

This is the supreme example of the love of Christ for his sisters and brothers. John tells us that we are to do the same—that is, give our lives as an expression of our love to others. Let us take a closer look at what we are being asked to do as we try to better understand what love is. In Greek there are four kinds of love: eros, philia, storge (store-gay) and agape. Looking at each: Eros makes you joyful, giving you a sense of wellbeing. It is a pleasure-gained rather than pleasure-given relationship. It is driven by appearance and makes one feel good, even euphoric. You just can’t take your eyes off the object of your adoration. It is like the girl that got your attention in English class and as much as you really don’t like English you can’t wait for the next class. It is that feeling of “being in love.” Another is storge. It is a family-focused type of love—a parent for a child and vice versa; love for your sibling and other family relationships. It is family centered. It’s the four-year-old girl getting a word of praise, a hug and a kiss from her daddy. Third is philia—or friendship love. It is based on a give and take and centers around a common interest. For example, a friendship could be based on the love of reading, skiing, sailing or cribbage. The cribbage club I have been a part of for over ten years has had many different members over its sixty-plus year history. They come and go because of old age, health, loss of interest, moving away or passing away, but the club keeps going because the members love playing cribbage. The last is agape. It is the highest form of love. It is love without strings attached. C. S. Lewis calls agape “gift love.” David Owens says, “Agape is love that is of God and from God. It is a love that gives without demand for return. It is a love that makes the health, happiness, and growth of others as important to us as our own. It is a love that is committed to provide and protect.... Added to eros, agape can transform a relationship into a dynamic, fulfilling marriage. Added to philia, agape can transform a common friendship into a deep and meaningful bond.” (1)

Agape is the love of God. It is divine love and is available to us as followers of Jesus. Its source is not ourselves, but the living presence of God in us that allows us as C. S. Lewis puts it, “To love what is not naturally lovable: lepers, criminals, enemies, morons, the sulky, the superior and the sneering.” (2)

We hear expressions and echoes of this kind of love in the scriptures. Christ said, “Love your enemies.” (Matthew 5:44) Paul, when speaking of agape love wrote, “Live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.” (Ephesians 5:2) Peter wrote, “Above all, love each other deeply.” (1 Peter 4:8) And John the Apostle followed suit: “Let us love one another, for love comes from God...since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” (1 John 4:7,11)

The famous black preacher, Dr. E. V. Hill tells the story about a time when he was receiving many death threats. His wife took those threats very seriously. One morning, when Dr. Hill got dressed for work, he came out of the house and went to get into his car, but it wasn't there. He couldn't imagine where his car was. Perhaps it had been stolen. As he was still thinking about the disappearance of the car, his wife suddenly drove up. He asked why his wife had left the house without telling him and why she was driving his car. His wife said, “I was thinking...This community needs you more than it needs me. So, if someone had rigged your car with a bomb, I wanted it to get me instead of you.” Dr. Hill said, “I always thought that my wife loved me, but now I understood what love was all about.” (3)

If you look in a dictionary, which I did, at the definition of love the first thing that you will note is that love is defined primarily as a noun. There is much less mention of it being a verb but love for the Christian is an action word. Christ laid down his life on a cross because of his love for people. Countless Christians through the ages have laid down their lives for others, but for most they have given a part of themselves away in service and sacrifice so that others may experience the presence of Christ. For most Christians in our culture, real love translates into selfless sacrificial service as they seek to “meet the greatest needs of others in spite of the cost and sacrifice...The greatest act of love is giving one's life for others.” (4)

In verse 17 John calls his readers to be practical and real in their actions of love. To serving others with no thought of receiving anything in return. He calls Christians “to generous material acts of kindness to a brother or sister in need.” (1 John 3:17) This means giving of our time, energy, and resources—material and otherwise so that others' lives will be richer and fuller. It means finding ways through loving acts of service and sacrifice to make Jesus real to others.

Reverend Dennis Davidson talks about a member of his church in a town where he pastored. The factory where he worked closed down and soon after he was hospitalized. The bills mounted up. Another member of the church came with a check in hand and said, “The Lord has blessed our family with a steady income. We feel that he wants us to share

our blessing with you.” The money was useful; but the expression of love in their need was overwhelming.” (5)

After I grew up, my parents, through adoption, added four sons to our family making a total of seven sons and no daughters. I have never been very close to the four because I was out of the house before they were adopted. I have two natural brothers that I am close to. You know them both: Eugene and his wife Debra and Lenard with his fiancée Noreen. They have been here several times in my nearly nine years as your pastor. Growing up I was not nearly as close to Lenard as Eugene because he is almost six years my junior. I was born in January of 1948, and Eugene was born in December of the same year! That seems like a hard way to get two tax deductions in one year, but that’s what happened! As the years have passed, I have also become close to Lenard. We have many similar interests--sports and politics are among them, but not Christianity. My brother is not much into Christianity however Beth sends him and dozens of others a sermon every week which he reads. Over the years I have shared with him some of the things that have happened in various congregations where I have worshiped or pastored and he has often commented “that doesn’t sound very loving for a Christian.” Often, I have agreed. Sometimes Christians can be non-Christ like. It shouldn’t be that way, but it happens. All of us are human. At times it is hard to see Christ in us. Sometimes we talk the talk, but don’t walk the walk.

John writes, as we look at verse 18, “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth.” (1 John 3:18) Genuine love requires more than words. Saying, “I love you” or giving a Hallmark card are both important but love involves more. Love is both a noun and a verb. Acts of love that meet the needs of others are a good measure for the Christian as to if he or she is living for Christ.

A young boy crippled since birth was hurrying to catch a bus and also carrying gifts under his arm; he was struggling with his crutches. Suddenly, a man bumped him, knocking his parcels in all directions. The man then paused and scolded the young man for getting in his way. Another gentleman seeing the youngster’s distress, quickly picked up the scattered gifts and slipped a \$10-dollar bill in his pocket, saying “I’m sorry! I hope this makes up for your trouble.”

The boy couldn’t remember being shown such kindness, called after him, “Mister, thank you! And sir, are you Jesus?” “No,” replied the man, but I am one of his followers.” (6)

“No...but I am one of his followers.” To be a follower of Jesus sets the bar higher. Some could excuse the actions of the man who sent the packages flying. Maybe he was in a hurry to catch a bus, maybe the boy got into the man’s way because he wasn’t paying attention to where he was going. Maybe the man was having a bad day and after he knocked the packages all over, took his frustrations out on the boy. I am going to go out on a limb here and say that the chances are good that the man was not a follower of Jesus, because as Christians we are to take responsibility for our actions.

Christian love is sacrificial. I had friends who have both recently passed away, who had a granddaughter who is terribly handicapped with cerebral palsy and many other debilitating conditions. But rather than placing this child in a facility, her parents chose to keep her at home and the family has cared for her all of her life – almost 30 years! With the Lord’s help and because they love their daughter, they have made some tremendous personal sacrifices.

We have all been both the giver and the recipient of Christian love on our faith journey. Our church family and even our community abounds with kindness and love. Bringing light into the world by making Jesus real to those who are seeking love in a dark and lost world is one of the high callings for the Church and us as believers. Words are not enough.

“Shane Claiborne, who spent a summer in the slums of Calcutta with Mother Teresa, wrote the following about one of his experiences there: People often ask me about what Mother Teresa was like. Sometimes it’s like they wonder if she glowed in the dark or had a halo. She was short, wrinkled, and precious, maybe even a little ornery—like a beautiful, wise old granny. But there is one thing I will never forget—her feet. Her feet were deformed. Each morning in Mass, I would stare at them. I wondered if she had contracted leprosy. But I wasn’t going to ask, of course. ‘Hey Mother, what’s wrong with your feet?’ One day a sister said to us, ‘Have you noticed her feet? We nodded, curious. She said: ‘Her feet are deformed because we get just enough donated shoes for everyone, and Mother does not want anyone to get stuck with the worse pair, so she digs through and finds them. And years of doing that have deformed her feet. But you know, spiritually, I can think of nothing more beautiful than feet such as those.’” (7)

What is love, really? For the believer it means walking with and living in and through the Lord. Loving those he loves and putting that love into practice. Alleluia!

Amen

- (1) Sermoncentral “Love Is a Verb Series” David Owens September 30, 2013 p. 6
- (2) Ibid. p. 6
- (3) Ibid. p 7-8
- (4) Sermoncentral “Living in Love or Death” Dennis Davidson January 14, 2013 p. 5
- (5) Ibid. p. 6
- (6) Sermoncentral “Inhale and Exhale the Gospel” Jeffery Snead August 31, 2015 p. 1
- (7) Internet “What Shane Clayborne (and Mother Teresa) Got Wrong About the Body of Christ” Ellen Painter Dollar September 26, 2012 p. 9