

The Deciding Factor: Making decisions we can live with

*“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son
as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”*

I John 4:10

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Over the past four weeks we've looked at four questions we should ask ourselves when making decisions, such as: Are we being honest with ourselves? Digging down into the real reason why it is we think we want something (or someone), and what is motivating our desires. Then we asked ourselves, "What story do I want told?" When the family is sitting around the table and my name comes up will I be celebrated or vilified; will I be the skeleton in the closet or the portrait over the mantelpiece. Someone once advised to live in such a way that people don't need to lie at your memorial. Then we asked: Am I justifying myself? Often we will ignore that inner voice that expresses caution or flashed the warning light for us to slow down. Last week we asked: "What is the wise thing to do? It wasn't Vince who talked you into a case of Sham Wow, you talked yourself into it, and convinced yourself that those ginsu knives were exactly what was missing from your kitchen. Today we reflect on what Andy Stanley says is the most dangerous question of all.

The Beatles couldn't buy it. Huey Lewis says it's a curious thing that makes one man weep and another man sing; and for Jeff Lynne of ELO, it's a livin' thing and a terrible thing to lose. What is this many splendored thing? Love. No other theme has inspired so many a song, poem, story, play or movie. The shocking thing is that after everything that has been written, sung or portrayed regarding love, we still get it wrong. The version of love that so dominates the culture of today is but a poor shadow of the real thing. Love today is often no more than a passing feeling or fad. It endures only as long as the initial thrill, but once the Ferris wheel stops its time for the next amusement. Then there is our tendency to dilute the meaning of love with an overabundant use in every area of our lives.

Let me issue a challenge for you to stop yourself each time you use this word for anything other than to describe how you feel about another person – as in "I love my wife", "I love my kids." Those are acceptable. But to love a movie, a team, or a food...those and other statements like those need to stop. Why? Because that's not 'love'. Even the expression "making love" is more about getting pleasure, and betrays how messed up we are when it comes to love—for love is all about relationship, not one night stands. Love is not about what makes me feel good, about what satisfies me. That is selfishness, not love.

On Mother's Day it is fitting that we look at this last question in our series *The Deciding Factor*, for our final question is: What does love require of me? What a good question for Mothers Day, because love requires much more of a mom than a dad. Although childbirth was for me a test of patience, waiting for

something to happen, and endurance, I spent a lot of time standing by Laurie and my feet were really sore—it was a whole different experience for Laurie. She was invested in a way I can't even imagine (nor care to imagine). Mom's have pretty well earned the right to constantly remind us that they carried us for nine months. Just saying. Call your Mom. The apostle John speaks of love in this way.

This is Love

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

John is no fool, and though times may change, human nature and character does not. As it is today it was in John's time—were many forms and definitions of love abounded. John wants to make clear point the he is identifying a love that is unlike the popular or prevalent views on love in the world. *This is love...* There are a couple of times during the year when our wonderful kitchen volunteers cook up turkey dinners for the community. During the morning the aroma of turkey fills the hall down from the kitchen, eventually permeating my the office. There are few things that smell as good as a turkeys being roasted. By lunch time I am salivating for my turkey dinner. You've likely had the same experience at home around Thanksgiving or Christmas – or it may be that Easter ham. Either way, the aroma is incredible. But the aroma doesn't satisfy. The aroma doesn't fill the stomach. The aroma is just a reminder of something delicious. It would be foolish to just smell the roasting turkey or BBQ steak, and settle for only the aroma, without indulging in the real thing.

Sadly, when it comes to love, most people settle for far less than what is offered. Even the love we see that is not twisted into perversion or lust is a far cry from the real thing. John wants us to know what love is—what the embodiment of love is, and not settle for less.

Not that we loved God...

This is love: not that we loved God...

Now, it is not remarkable that we should love God. God has given us life and everything we need to thrive in life. Just look around. We are surrounded by beauty, and have been given eyes to see, ears to hear and minds that can comprehend and explore the wonders that He has created. He could have created a world that was bland or that tasted like celery, but instead we have all manner of flavors and textures, and of course, the ability to discern all of those

flavors. It is no wonder then that we should love God—for he has given us so much more than what we need. The Bible reminds us:

He waters the mountains from his upper chambers; the earth is satisfied by the fruit of his work. He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate—bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart.

Psalm 104:13-15

George Herbert once wrote: “Man is one world, and hath another to attend him.”¹ We are being looked after. It is not remarkable or surprising then that we should love God. We are sort of like a flock of birds crowding around the park bench and feasting on the bread crumbs scattered by another.

The real remarkable thing, the shocking thing, is that there are many who do not love God. They refuse to acknowledge His existence and come up with all manner of theories and wild speculations to promote the thought that everything happened ‘naturally.’ Those whom we think the most intelligent tend to have a knack of proving Paul right when he says, “Claiming to be wise, they become fools.”^a “There is no God,” they say, “but there *is* a multiverse.” Of course, these ‘scientists’—and there is an idol or godlike quality in the way people use the term ‘scientist’ or even ‘science’—these scientists say, we will never be able to see the multiverse, interact with it or prove it exists, but it must exist. And they say faith is irrational!

Surrounded by the order, the fine tuning of our planet, our solar system and the galaxy, they maintain it all happened by chance. They see the wonder of all the systems that work in perfect balance to enable man to be a living being—to allow eyes to see, ears to hear, and the brain to comprehend and imagine things that are not yet in existence, as nothing more than a collection of random mutations. It is truly remarkable that they do not love God. Of them Charles Spurgeon writes: No more of love to God is there within the soul that is unsaved than there is fire within the depths of the oceans waves.”²

However, as John points out, that man does or does not love God is not where we find the true meaning of love. The true meaning of love is found in that God loves us.

^a Romans 1:22 NRSV

But that He loved us...

This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us...

Why is this remarkable? Think about it. We have only recently become knowledgeable as to just how big is the universe. The more advanced our telescopes become and the farther out into space we are able to peer, the more vast the universe becomes. At one time man was amazed just by the multitude of stars visible in the night sky, and then we discovered that some of those points of light were not single stars, but were instead galaxies of a hundred thousand of million stars—and that there are millions upon millions of galaxies besides the Milky Way. And yet, in this vast universe that seems to be expanding there is no place one can go and say, "Here is God," What I mean by that is, that God exists outside of or in an 'other than' realm. As we are told "Through Him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." To make the universe He must exist outside and apart from the universe. At one time this universe did not exist, and then He spoke. Of course, saying at one time means nothing to Him as He dwells outside of time.

Whether one believes the thousands of the young earth creationist or the billions of years of the science community, time means nothing to Him who created time. And so there God is, this perfect community of Father, Son and Spirit, and one day they say, let's create (again, use of the term 'one day' is wholly inadequate), and bang—or big bang—everything is. In this vast universe, a pale blue dot is formed, and on that speck floating in the vastness of space, you and I, and everyone who ever was, exists. What are we to the vastness of the universe? Even the ancient knew this without the aid of modern devices:

O LORD, what is man that you care for him, the son of man that you think of him? Man is like a breath; his days are like a fleeting shadow.

Psalm 144:3-4

And in another place:

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?

Psalm 8:3

Like most parents and grandparents, I have dared to purchase a bottle of slimy

liquid into which a tiny badminton racket shaped device is dipped. Then with the exhalation of breath, produced bubbles of various sizes. These bubbles float away, carried by a breeze, and after a short existence, they are gone. What iota of difference does their appearance and disappearance make in the grand scheme of things? When you think about it, what difference does our appearance and disappearance, our life and death, make to the universe. It just goes on, ambivalent to even the most glorious of man's achievements. We are little more than a bubble floating along in whichever way the breeze moves us. And yet, as inconsequential as we are...He loves us.

Back in 1 John 3 the apostle says: "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! 1 John 3:1

In another place God says: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness."^b

Paul prays that we: "...being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."³

Charles Spurgeon writes: Oh! This love of Christ; it is beyond all degree, standard or compass. In comparison with it, other love, high and noble as that other love may be, dwindles into insignificance.⁴

If you argue or quibble with that statement then you betray you do not know this love. You've perhaps only experienced the aroma. If we take issue with Spurgeon or John, then we are perhaps more like the publican than the pauper of whom Jesus said: "He who has been forgiven little loves little."^c Because we've never experienced this love, we give it little thought. But to know this love changes everything. To know the forgiveness that springs from this love is to be set free from the sting of death. Furthermore, this love is not just a spoken sentiment nor symbolized with a piece of rock that man has deemed to be of value. No, this love was demonstrated in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.^d

^b Jeremiah 31:3

^c Luke 7:47b

^d Romans 5:8

When we were reeking of sin and in the depths of iniquity we were loved by God. In whatever condition or circumstance you find yourself in at this moment: perhaps struggling from some addiction; fighting a hangover from the night before; engaging in some adulterous or promiscuous affair; having to delete your browser lest others in the family know your secret; being filled with spiteful thoughts, jealousy or rage—scoffing at the very love that could save you—you are loved by God.

And Sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

The significance of an “atoning sacrifice” has a long history reaching back into the sacrificial system of the Old Testament. When The Bible uses this phrase, or the terms ‘atone’ or ‘atonement’, it is alerting us to the reality of our problem with sin. The Bible tells us that sin has shattered the relationship between man and God. Isaiah says:

...your iniquities have built barriers
between you and your God,
and your sins have made Him hide His face from you
so that He does not listen.

³ For your hands are defiled with blood
and your fingers, with iniquity;
your lips have spoken lies,
and your tongues mutter injustice.

⁴ No one makes claims justly;
no one pleads honestly.
They trust in empty and worthless words;
they conceive trouble and give birth to iniquity.

Isaiah 59:2-4

There are four main theories as to how atonement takes place:⁵

1. The Moral Influence Theory – were the death of Jesus acts as an example or pattern of love that we are to imitate
2. The Ransom Theory – that Christ’s death purchased our lives from Satan, or paid a debt owed
3. The Satisfaction Theory – were the death of Christ appeased the honor God

He had been robbed of due to our sin

4. The Penal Substitution Theory – in that Christ bore the punishment that was due us, He took our place

Thankfully, our salvation does not depend upon knowing the four main theories of atonement—there will be no test—however, it may be helpful for us in reflecting upon our original state of separation from God, and need of reconciliation. To think of the dear cost of our salvation, and the lavish love of the Father. Our seventh doctrine, or Article of Faith, states:

We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ has, by His suffering and death, made an atonement for the whole world, so that whosoever will may be saved.⁶

Some will define atonement through the simple word play of 'at-one-ment'⁷ The atonement bringing about a reconciliation between ourselves and God. In and of itself though, the act of atonement does not save, rather, it is the 'whosoever will' that are saved. That is, those who appropriate or accept by faith the offer provided through the atonement. God's part was in providing the means—sending His son as an atoning sacrifice—our part is in believing that Christ is our atoning sacrifice, verified through our repentance from sin and obedience to Christ.

We hear this too in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (NRSV) The atonement makes salvation available, but only to those who believe in Him.

Have you made that decision? Don't answer too quickly, because to 'believe in Him' means more than just a mental affirmation. Even the demons believe. To really believe, in a saving sense, demands a radical change in our nature—so radical that the Bible speaks in terms of us becoming a new creation, or moving from death to life. There is quite a difference between being dead and being alive. This is the most important decision that you will ever make. To choose unwisely, to spurn this offer, is to make the biggest mistake of your life. One that you will literally regret forever.

But there is something more for us to think about here, because, as I earlier said, of the five questions we are to ask ourselves in making decisions we can live

with, this question is the most difficult.

Conclusion

With the first four questions, making the right choice will most likely lead to a positive outcome. Making the honest, admirable legacy-producing, no later guilt wise choice will leave us feeling pretty good. Those decisions have what we might call a guaranteed value-added outcome. However, there are no guarantees with getting this last question right. Doing what does love requires of us does not have any guarantees. Just look how it worked out for Christ? Or for any number of martyrs?

Hopefully, you now have, if you didn't already, a sense of how much God loves you, and how far beyond and above is God's love in comparison to man's love. "Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens..."^e Remember, the heavens are pretty far out there (and the more we know the farther out they get). So here is the difficulty, the risk, the challenge.

John has already said in verse seven: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God," and just to make sure we get the point, he writes in verse eleven: "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." What kind of love do you think John is talking about here? Are we to love with 'our' love, that is, the way we define love? Or is it the love of God? Are we are to love one another with a God-like love?

John learned this lesson well, for this thought is not his. John remembers the words of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who said to His disciples:

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

John 13:34-35

It doesn't sound optional, does it? First of all, it's a command, not a suggestion. Jesus is not adding a 614th law, but is instead encapsulating all the requirements of the law into one statement. Secondly, it is not a 'should', or an 'if you can' or a 'try real hard to'—rather, it is a 'must'. "You must love one another." Jesus is quite clear. "As I have loved you, so you *must* love one another."

^e Psalm 36:5 NRSV

You must love the person that cheated you out of what was rightfully yours. You must love the person that has lied about you. You must love the person that has hurt you in any way. You must love others the way that Jesus loves you. When was it He loved you? How much does He love you? He gave up His life for you.

Paul adds another twist, lest we try to find some wiggle room:

Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:7-8

You've perhaps seen the powerful images of returning soldiers being carried along the Highway of Heroes, with Canadian flags draped over the many overpasses, and crowds of people paying respects to those who have given their lives in serving others. Although much is done to honor their sacrifice and bring comfort to mothers, husbands and wives, and children who have lost loved ones, nothing can take away the sting of death. Every Remembrance Day we pause to remember those who have died in the too many wars that have been fought. We remember those brave soldiers who gave up their lives to protect innocents, to protect their brothers and sisters in arms, to defend their country. We can, in some way understand giving up a life for a loved one.

But God demonstrates His love for us in this, He dies for His enemy. That's what we were. It may be what you are. That is the plain truth of the Bible. Someone might die for a good person, however, that someone would choose to die for a wretched person; for a thief, a murderer, an abuser, a rapist, a bigot, a pedophile...there are so many ugly words to describe us. And it was then, when we were stinking of sin, when we would just as soon spit in His face, that He came and laid down His life so that we might live. He loves us.

And it is that love which He commands we show to one another—even if the other ignores our love, scoffs at our love, rejects our love or even abuses our love. In our foolishness we try to legislate our way out of the hate and bitterness one man has for another. We make laws, treaties, and promises. And then we break them. There is one solution and only one solution to what ails the world, and that is found in the correct answer to this final question: What does love require of me?

John learned what love is from walking with Jesus for three years and then witnessing the supreme demonstration of love when Jesus gave up His life on a cross in order to save us. And it is therefore all the more meaningful that John writes: This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice. When John says “This is love,” he is not saying this in a casual way, but emphatic way.

Let me conclude by reading Paul’s word on love, found in 1 Cor 13—keeping in mind that the love being described here is the love of God—that love His children are to demonstrate, if they are His children, for as John writes: This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother.^f The love Paul cites here is not the warm and fuzzy romantic love of a bride and groom standing at the altar. He is writing of the passionate love of God for his children.

Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, love does not boast, love is not proud.

Love is not rude, love is not self-seeking, love is not easily angered, love keeps no record of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil but love rejoices with the truth.

Love always protects, love always trusts, love always hopes, love always perseveres.

Love never fails.^g

Andy Stanley points out: Love doesn’t seek to win the argument. Love seeks to protect the relationship.⁸

This is the love we are to show always, not just read on our wedding day. This is the love we show all others, even our enemies. It is the love that has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

You will not learn about this love in a Harlequin romance or volume of Twilight. You will not learn about this love from reading People or from watching Paradise Hotel. You will not learn about this love from Brangelina or Bennifer or the Bachelor. If you want learn about this love then you must go to the source of

^f 1 John 3:10

^g 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 (my adaption)

love, and you must be filled with His love. One only does that by believing on the Son, the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

What does love require of us? That is a daring question to ask and a difficult question to answer, but if we love our brothers as we have been loved by God, then we will have fulfilled the command of Jesus, and demonstrated that we truly are God's children.

I pray that you will come to know this love that has no equal and knows no boundaries. And it doesn't matter where you are or what you have done, God still loves you, and the opportunity to know this love is just a decision to accept away.

We will not always know all the details, but we can always love.

Endnotes

¹ In C.H Spurgeon, *C.H. Spurgeon's Sermons on the Blood and the Cross of Jesus*. Rev. Dr. Chas T. Cook, ed. (Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1961), 7.

² C.H Spurgeon, *C.H. Spurgeon's Sermons on the Blood and the Cross of Jesus*. Rev. Dr. Chas T. Cook, ed. (Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1961), 9.

³ Ephesians 3:17-19

⁴ C.H Spurgeon, *C.H. Spurgeon's Sermons on the Blood and the Cross of Jesus*. Rev. Dr. Chas T. Cook, ed. (Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1961), 9

⁵ Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki & Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 17.

⁶ The Salvation Army Handbook of Doctrine, 127

⁷ The Salvation Army Handbook of Doctrine, 127

⁸ Stanley, Andy. *Better Decisions, Fewer Regrets* (p. 165). Zondervan. Kindle Edition