

The Lay Down Your Life on the Cross Kind of Love



Gary Wilkerson March 28, 2016

If you had to name the pinnacle of Jesus' teaching, what would you say it is? We gain some insight from his final night with his disciples before going to the cross. He only had a few hours left with his closest friends, so he concentrated all that he'd taught them. As Christ summed up everything, he boiled it all down to one word: love. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12).

When we talk about love in the church—in fact, when we read this verse—our minds go in gentle directions. We think of kindness, generosity, being good to others. The New Testament says a lot about this kind of love. It uses the phrase "one another" about fifty times, with commands to treat each other with patience, encouragement, generosity, etc. The book of Ephesians uses the word "together" often, emphasizing Christ's great command to love in community.

The disciples would have no problem with this command. They probably thought they were already pretty good at it. They had just spent three years in full-time ministry with their Master, learning how to do what he taught them.

But in this scene, Jesus speaks of love in a very different context. It becomes clear in his next sentence: "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (15:13). Now that's a serious kind of love. I picture the disciples looking at each other wondering, "Would I die for this guy next to me? Sometimes he really irritates me." Maybe they didn't love each other as well as they thought they did.

My point is that when Jesus commands us to love as he loves, it's no light thing. It isn't some romanticized idea based on feelings or ideals. What he commands of us is gospel love—powerful, unconditional, sacrificial love that has its roots in the cross of Christ. Jesus was about to demonstrate for his followers the most powerful act of love anyone could ever do by going to the cross for our sins. In doing that, he would show how this love applies even to our enemies—because he gave his life for them, too.

This was an entirely new way of living. Jesus was tossing out the old way of religion and giving birth to a new way. Love was no longer contained in the realm of the sentimental. It was now placed in the realm of the impossible.

I can picture the disciples thinking, "Jesus, we don't have agape love like yours. Ours isn't the unconditional kind. We're not perfect. Our love is bound to fail." But Jesus doesn't take no for an answer. He knew their own efforts to love as he loved weren't going to cut it. So he showed them how this kind of love happens: only through the Father's power.

"You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another" (15:14-17).

If we ask in the Father's name for that kind of love, Jesus promises he will give it to us. Yet true gospel love comes in only one way: through the crucified life. Christ is telling us, "The love I'm calling you to isn't love that happens through your flesh. Your idea of love is limited and conditional, and it has to die in you. The love I'm talking about

must be resurrected into new life by the Father.” The message is simple: If we want to obey Jesus’ command, we must live the Spirit-filled life.

What does it look like to carry out the kind of love Jesus describes?

Paul helps by showing what happens when we don’t live out this kind of love. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul lays out two types of sin. On the one hand he identifies gross sins, the kind we associate with outward behavior, like sexual sins or substance abuse. But Paul also lays out a second type of sin— relational sin—and shows how it is just as deadly and destructive. Relational sin affects our souls to depths we never could imagine. It has an awful effect not only on our witness to the world but on the deepest parts of our being and spreads to those around us.

Paul brings this to light in the Corinthian church by pointing out a glaring problem: the divisions among them. “I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder” (2 Corinthians 12:20). Note the final word in this list: disorder. There’s an indication that relational sin is at work.

Every one of the things Paul lists here is a relational sin. They have to do with failing to love as Christ loved. In these terms, it’s easy to see how love can’t just be a sentimental gesture. It is a battle to be fought, and the weapons we bring are forgiveness, grace, mercy and justice.

One of the Corinthians’ conflicts involved the teaching they would accept. Some said they would only follow Peter’s direction while others followed Paul. Paul had to tell them, “I can’t address you as mature people while you’re in this condition. It’s carnal. You’re reasoning through your flesh. I can’t offer you meaty spiritual truths. I have to feed you with milk, the way a mother feeds an infant.”

The Greek word Paul uses for “flesh” in Corinthians indicates the skin or fatty tissue of the body. But of course Paul is describing the condition of their soul. He’s telling the Corinthians they’re caught up in an earthbound way of living rather than walking out the Spirit-filled life.

The way Paul writes to them, it’s easy to assume the Corinthian church was rife with gross sins. The truth is, they were greatly gifted by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, it’s because of the Corinthians that we know about the gifts of the Spirit; Paul’s letter to them shows how powerfully those gifts were operating in them. But even though the Corinthians had a great knowledge of the things of God, they lacked the love that Jesus commands of us. Paul hit them hard on this point:

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

Note Paul’s operative word here: “nothing.” That’s what the Corinthian church’s love was worth. He was telling them it can never accomplish God’s purposes. Christ’s love—the lay-down- your-life-on-a-cross kind of love—is a tall order, one that’s impossible except through the Spirit.

Now, this may sound to you like a surprising interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13. Most of us know this chapter as the Bible’s “love chapter.” Even non- Christians are familiar with it because it is read at so many weddings. In that context, 1 Corinthians 13 isn’t much more than a greeting card sentiment. In truth, this chapter is a counterpoint to all of the carnal sins Paul would later list in 2 Corinthians 12. That list included quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. Note the contrast:

“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). When we compare this list with the other, we begin to see 1 Corinthians 13 as a spiritual solution to a problem of sin— indeed, the only solution.

Paul didn’t intend 1 Corinthians 13 as a romantic ideal but as sacrificial “tough love,” the only real solution to the problem of sin.

I want to challenge you. Which list do you see practiced more in your church? In your marriage? In your own life?

When someone insults you, do you always have to answer back? Do you find yourself dreaming up retorts for the next time? When someone else is chosen to do something you'd want to do, do you steam about it? Do you hope for that person to fail?

Some Christians think peacemaking means avoiding conflict. But doing that only leads to further division, strife and disorder. When was the last time you avoided a necessary confrontation with someone? Did you end up being passive aggressive toward that person and withholding kindness? Did your e-mails or Facebook posts about them contain an edge?

There's nothing Spirit-led about avoiding conflict, *per se*. In fact, Jesus commands us to do the opposite. He even gives us specific instructions on how to go about it. "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother" (Matthew 18:15). Jesus' instruction here is packed with wisdom. Confronting a person in private preserves their dignity in the face of their sin. It also allows truth to shine its light on sin.

Yet, confronting someone this way isn't a one-time solution. Why? First, it may not work, as Jesus points out. "But if he does not listen..." (18:16). Also, this isn't just a cut-and-dried command, where afterward we can walk away and say, "Well, I did what Jesus said. That's that. I won't have to deal with this guy anymore." According to Jesus, we've got more to do—because love goes the extra mile: "If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses" (18:16).

It doesn't even end there. Love keeps going the extra mile, on and on: "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (18:17). This last phrase sounds like a final rejection. But that isn't accurate. Our actions are meant to reflect back the sinner's behavior so that he might repent and enjoy fellowship again.

This sequence of actions shows us something else. It teaches us the lengths to which God extends his grace—and the cost to us as agents of that grace. God's heart is always to bring the lost sheep back into the fold. How far does this grace extend? As Jesus told Peter, we're to forgive our sinning brother "seventy times seven"—meaning as many times as it takes. Once again, this requires a lay-down-your-life-on-the-cross kind of love. It's a love that says, "I'm still here for you. I'm not going anywhere." This kind of love requires a Spirit-filled walk because our flesh simply isn't capable of it.

All of this may sound like minor stuff to you, the kind of "church chat" that pastors occupy themselves with. But as Jesus and Paul both point out, refusing to love at even the most mundane level can have huge consequences. It leads to grief, alienation and regret. Strife in a relationship usually ends up affecting a larger circle of friends or family. In turn, that can extend to an entire community, as Paul pointed out among the Corinthians. To love as Jesus loves, even in what seems like a small matter, isn't a choice—it's a spiritual discipline.

If you see your love as mostly conditional, I have good news for you: You don't have to be stuck. Your marriage doesn't have to endlessly replay a constant loop of bitterness. The tension between you and a friend doesn't have to stay icily frozen. Paul brings us hope of what we can be: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23).

This glorious picture becomes possible in one way: "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit" (5:24-25). Give Jesus your worthy obedience in every relationship. Then breathe the grace that only a life in the Spirit provides. Amen!

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