

“Love Matters Most”
40 Days of Love, Part I
Luke 10:25-37, 1 Cor. 13:1-3, Eph. 5:1-2
February 21, 2010

Have you been watching the Olympics? Isn't it amazing what the human body can be trained to do? These athletes are the best in the world. World-class, every one of them, whether they win a medal or not, would you agree?

Welcome back to *40 Days of Love*. My goal for this study is that we would all become better lovers. [You know what I mean.] World-class lovers. Wouldn't it be a great thing if Church of the Covenant became known as the Church of Love? The church where people really loved each other and really loved everybody else? Well, just like these Olympic athletes we've been watching, if we're going to become world-class lovers, we're going to have to make love a priority, and we're going to have to train. You know, Olympic skiers don't just wake up in the morning and wonder whether or not they're going to ski today. Skiing is the main focus of their life. Skiing is what they think about 24/7/365. It's what they schedule their entire life around. It's what they do every day, *even if* that means there are other things they don't have time to do. *Even if* it causes them pain and costs them money and forces them to sacrifice, which of course, it does and it is. It's the highest value of their life, the central priority around which everything else revolves.

And it's the same for us. If we want to become Olympic class lovers of God and people, we're going to have to choose love as our highest value, the central priority of our lives around which everything else—and I really mean *everything else*—revolves. Because you don't have time for everything. *And* not everything is of equal value. One of the most significant things I ever got a hold of was this: The good is often the enemy of the best. There are lots of good things you could do every day. But you don't have time for everything. So you need to focus on what's best, rather than just on what's good. It's all about priorities.

And Jesus told us what our priority in life is to be. Our highest value. He said it's love. Loving God and loving people. There are two Scripture passages where Jesus said the most important thing to do in life—the priority of your life—is love. We call them the Great Commandment and the New Commandment, and we've printed them there on your sermon notes sheet. Matt. 22:36-39 & John 13:34-35.

Jesus said that the most important priority of your life is to love God, love your neighbor, and love one another. Jesus said that nothing is more important than relationships. That's Relationship Principle #1 from our study book, *The Relationship Principles of Jesus*. If you want to be a world-class lover, you will need to Place the highest value on relationships. Now, why is love so important that Jesus identifies it as the greatest commandment in all the Bible? Of all the things Jesus could have commanded in His 'new command'—of all the 'famous last words' Jesus could have spoken to His followers—why did He say, "love one another"? Why are relationships more important than anything else?

There are a couple of reasons. One we talked about last week: God wants us to love others because love shows the world what God is like. When we love others, people see Jesus, and we show people God, because God is love. 1 John 4:12: When we love one another, God's love is expressed through us.

Secondly, love is so important because Love covers our sin. 1 Peter 4:8 says this: *"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins."* What does that mean? Well, it has two meanings. First, it means that when you love Jesus Christ, Jesus' love for you covers up all your sins. When Jesus came to earth and died on the cross, He stretched out His hands and said, "This is how much I love you: I'm willing to die for you. I'm willing to take the punishment for all the laws, the moral laws, all of God's laws, that you've broken. I'll serve the sentence *you* should have to serve. I'll pay your debt." Jesus says, "Because I love you, *everything you've ever done* and *everything you ever will do* that is wrong, will be forgiven." Not just because God said, "Oh, okay, I forgive you." Because Jesus died to pay for your sins and my sins. Is that good news? *That is very good news!* When the Bible says that "love covers a multitude of sins," it means my sins. *Your* sins. God's love expressed in Jesus' death on the cross covers your sins. Makes it like it never even happened.

The other thing this means when it says, *"Love covers a multitude of sins,"* is that once I've been forgiven, God gives me the power to let other people off the hook. See, when you understand how much you've been forgiven, you start being more forgiving. When you understand how much grace God has given you, you start being more gracious with other people. Love covers. Now, this is easy to say, but hard to do, I know. In fact, this is so difficult, we're going to have a whole message about this in a few weeks. So if forgiveness is really a challenge for you, stay tuned.

The third reason Jesus tells us to place the highest value on relationships is that Love is what matters most of all in life. Even if you don't know much in the Bible, you probably know 1 Corinthians, chapter 13. It's often referred to as 'the Love Chapter.' You hear it read usually at weddings. "Love is patient, love is kind, love never fails," etc., etc., etc. One thing that's key to understanding this passage is that Paul wasn't writing about the love between a man and a woman in marriage. He was writing about relationships in the church. Listen to the first few verses of that passage from The Message: 1 Cor. 13:1-3 [The Message].

What Paul is really saying here is this: "If I don't love, nothing I say will matter, nothing I know will matter, nothing I believe will matter, nothing I give will matter." Because more than anything we say, know, believe, or give, love matters most of all. 1 Cor. 13:13, NIV. *"And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love."* Love is greater even than faith. It's greater than hope. Love matters most. And love is spelled T-I-M-E.

II. THE BEST EXPRESSION OF LOVE IS TIME. The Bible says this in 1 John 3:18. Listen to it from the New Living Translation: *"Let's not merely say that we love each other, let us show the truth by our actions."* We talked about this last week: Love is not something you *feel*, something you *say*. It's something you *do*. And that means loving others will take time. When you give your time to someone, that is the greatest gift you can give. A kid, a husband, a wife, a friend or anybody else. Taking the time to give someone your attention is the greatest gift you

can give anybody. Because your time is your most precious resource. Look: We all have different amounts of energy. We all have different amounts of money. We all have different amounts of talent. But we all have the exact same amount of time. A hundred sixty-eight hours a week. You get to choose how you use it. Every time I give you a minute of my time I'm never going to get it back. Every time you give an hour of your time you're never going to get it back. You can always get more money but you can't get more time. So we'd better choose very carefully how we give our time. When you give your time and attention to somebody you're saying: "You matter to me. You are valuable. You are worth listening to. You are worth paying attention to."

The Bible says this in Gal. 5:6: "*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*" In other words, Paul is saying this: It doesn't matter whether you are a faithful Jew obeying all the covenant Law as evidenced by your circumcision OR you are an unholy Gentile obeying none of the Law. The *only thing that counts* is faith—and of course, Paul means faith in Jesus—expressed how? *Through love*. Faith working [lit.] through love. Faith that *shows itself, displays itself* through love. *Agape* love: Love for the benefit of others.

Now, if you're thinking, "Okay, how do I find more time for the people I love in my life?" that's really the wrong question. Jesus says we are to *place the highest value on relationships*. So it's the people in your life who must be the priority. It's the relationships in your life that you should place the highest value on. *Then* you figure out how to fit the rest into that. One suggestion is to turn off the TV and the computer, and that great time-suck that is Facebook. I'm sure I don't have to give you all the statistics on how many hours a day people spend watching television or surfing the web or playing video games. Suffice it to say, it's a lot. You know, some people would rather watch reruns of *Friends* than actually *make* friends. What's up with that? We love to watch reality shows about somebody else's family instead of working on the reality of our own families.

In Ephesians, Paul says that we should "...*live a life of love*, [There it is again.] *just as Christ loved us* ["Just as" = Jesus is our model] *and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*" Circle "love," and circle "gave Himself up," and circle "sacrifice." You see, if it isn't a sacrifice, it's not real love. You can give without loving but you cannot love without giving. Love means giving up. It means I give up my preference for your preference. It means I give up what I'd rather do right now to do what you'd rather do right now. That is a sacrifice. That is love. Love means taking time. Love means making somebody else's agenda my agenda. One really good example of this is in a very well-known parable of Jesus recorded in the gospel of Luke.

Luke 10:25-28. "*Do this* and you will live." Not "Believe this" or "Feel this way." *Do this*. Love is an action, something you *do*. V. 29: You know, we're not so different from the lawyer. We *know* that love is the most important use of our lives, but we want to "justify" ourselves. We want to justify our lack of love for people we don't like. We resist the command to love our neighbor if it means we have to love people who have hurt us or people who irritate us or people who we just don't think deserve our love. We justify the fact that we don't want to take the time to love certain people, or do what it will take to show our love.

Luke 10:30-37. The cultural equivalent of the road to Jericho is the east side of Wilmington in the middle of the night. Levites were those who assisted the priests in the Temple. Now, you cannot really get the significance of what Jesus is saying here unless you understand that Jews and Samaritans did not mix. In fact, Jews *hated* Samaritans. We know this parable as “the Good Samaritan.” But if you were a Jew in the first century, that would have been maybe the biggest oxymoron of all. There was no such thing as a *good* Samaritan. That would be like saying “the good child molester,” or “the good Islamic terrorist.” The only good Samaritan was a dead Samaritan. The “good” people in this story were the priest and the Levite. The “good” people in this story see the man who has been beaten, and they just keep on going. Now, they had very “good” religious reasons for this, probably. They were on their way to Jerusalem, probably to serve in the Temple. Coming into contact with a dead body would make them ritually unclean, unable to do their jobs. And it might not have been safe. The Jericho road was notorious for this kind of attack. Maybe this man was just a decoy, and if they stopped to help, they would be attacked and robbed themselves.

All of this was probably on their minds as they passed by. And it all makes perfect sense, doesn't it? But the Samaritan didn't let anything stop him. Like the priest and the Levite, he saw the man. Like the priest and the Levite, he knew the risks. But unlike the priest and the Levite, he acted on what he saw. He loved his neighbor by stopping to see, taking the time, and even spending his own money to help someone he didn't even know. He saw someone in need and he acted to meet that need. And he acted immediately.

Which takes us to our third fill-in: III. THE BEST TIME TO LOVE IS NOW. The Good Samaritan didn't wait. The best time to love is now. Not tomorrow. Not later. Not someday. *Now*. If you have an opportunity to show love, do it now. The Samaritan didn't think, “Well, maybe if this guy is still here on my way back, I'll help him.” He saw and probably heard the guy's pain, and he responded. The difference between the priest and Levite and the Samaritan is not what they see and hear, but what they *do* with what they see and hear. The Samaritan takes the time *now* to stop and help. Never procrastinate in showing love. Never put it off. Do it now. The best time to love is now. [There are a couple of other good Scriptures about this on your sheet.]

The lawyer wants to know if he can be a neighbor to a select few, if he can just love the people he likes, the people he deems worthy, the people with whom he is comfortable. But Jesus says it's not about determining *whom* to help, it's about being a person who helps. It's not about figuring out whom to love, but about being a person who is loves with their actions. Sometimes we use the excuse that it isn't safe for us to help someone. And so we just pass by on the other side, like the priest and the Levite. Almost always, we don't have time to help, time to show love. And sometimes it will cost us money to love, to help. The truth is, we can pretty much justify not helping almost anybody. We can justify not loving pretty easily.

But Jesus doesn't say, “Love *if*: Love if it's convenient, love if you have the time, love if you can afford it.” Jesus doesn't say, “Love *except*: Love except if it's somebody you really can't stand, love except if it's somebody who has gotten themselves into their own mess, love except if it's somebody who has hurt you or abandoned you or abused you. Jesus just says, “Love. Love

your neighbor. Love anyone and everyone who is in need.” But in reality, we know that’s pretty much impossible to do. In fact, the very thought of it is overwhelming.

How can we love everybody in Haiti right now? Or even everybody in Edgemoor Gardens? The reality is as individuals, we can’t. Even as a church, we can’t help everybody. But we can all help *somebody* who is in need. We can all love *somebody* who needs to see Jesus. Don’t allow yourself to be overwhelmed by the size and number of the needs out there. Don’t be paralyzed by thinking you have to help everybody. Just help someone. Just do something to love somebody.

Who do you need to show love to today? Who do you need to go home after this service and make that phone call and share a word of encouragement and love? Or go home and write that letter? Or go and visit in a nursing home or at the hospital? Who do you need to invite over to your home for a meal or meet for coffee and show them some love? Who is it at your work or at school that everybody can’t stand because they’re so obnoxious, that person who needs massive doses of love and you could show that love to them? Write down their name under ‘Homework’ on your sermon notes sheet and make a decision to love that person this week.

You know, the problem isn’t that we don’t know we’re *supposed* to love. The problem is we don’t always *want* to love. So how can we change that? How can we begin to want to? How can we develop eyes and ears and hearts that are eager and willing to love, even when it is inconvenient, even if we don’t have the time, the money, even if we don’t want to?

Let’s look again at Ephesians 5:1-2. We’ve already seen it in the NIV, look at how Eugene Peterson interprets it in the Message: *Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with Him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn’t love in order to get something from us but to give everything of Himself to us. Love like that.*

If you are going to become a world-class lover, there’s really only one way: You must know God and love God and let God love you if you are going to love others. And in order to do that, you must “keep company” with God. You must spend time with God: reading and reflecting on His Word in the Bible. That’s how you watch what God does, so you can learn to do it. Keep company with God by praying to Him: ask Him to make you more loving. Ask Him to give you eyes to see the people all around you the way He sees them. Ask Him to give you a heart that desires to help, to love whomever and however and whenever. Read the gospels. Observe the extravagance of Jesus’ love for you. And then—as Jesus said: Go and do likewise. Watch God. Look at Jesus. And love like that.