

It's All About Love
40 Days of Love Kickoff
1 Cor. 16.14, John 13.34-35, 1 John 4.7-12, 19-21
February 14, 2010

I want to begin today by asking you a question. How would you complete this sentence? My number one goal in life is _____. Think about it for a minute. Would you say my number one goal in life is to be happy? Or my number one goal in life is to be loved? Or my number one goal in life is to be successful? How would you answer that question? My number one goal in life is comfort or fun or to retire or get married and raise a family? My number one goal in life is to be popular? How you answer this question is very, very important. Because however you answer that question is what I'm going to call your dominant life principle.

Everybody's got one. It's the most important value in your life. You may have never thought about it but you use it all the time. Every time you make a decision, every time you have a choice, you decide what you're going to do based on the governing value of your life, your dominant life principle. Now, you may not do this consciously, but you do it nonetheless. For instance if my dominant life principle is to have fun then whenever I get a couple of different invitations I'm going to tend to choose the thing that's the most fun to do. Because that's what's most important to me: to have fun. If my dominant life principle is comfort, then I'm going to choose the easiest thing to do, what's the most convenient thing for me, what makes me the most comfortable. If my dominant life principle is to earn approval, to be affirmed, to be applauded, then I'm going to tend to choose things in life where I get the most affirmation.

You get the idea. It's extremely important that you think about and recognize what is the most important value in your life. Because it's not what you *say* it is, it's what your life *shows* it is, it's what you *do*, the choices that you make that demonstrate what your dominant life principle *really is*. Of course, God has an opinion about what our dominant life principle should be. And He tells us in 1 Cor. 14:1. Here Paul writes to the church at Corinth, and, by the way, to the church at Wilmington, and he says this: "Let love be your highest goal." NLT. NIV = "Follow the way of love..." Literally: Pursue love, run after, chase after, love. God says that *love* is to be our highest goal, our ultimate aim, our dominant life principle.

One day, Jesus was walking down the street and a guy came up to him and said, "Lord, what is the most important command in the whole Bible? "Of all these things that God told us to do, what should I really focus on?" And Jesus said, "I can summarize the entire Bible for you in two sentences. If you get these two things you get it. You get what life is all about."

And if you've been hanging around here very long, you know what Jesus said next. We find it in several places in the Bible, here it is from Mark's gospel: Mark 12:30-31. That's pretty clear. Jesus said nothing in the entire Bible is more important than these two things: Learn to love God with all your heart/soul/mind/strength and, learn to love everybody else, too. Jesus says, "If you get those two things, you've got it. You get it. Everything else is secondary. Life is all about learning to love."

So, Happy Valentine's Day! Today we begin *40 Days of Love*. We've spent the last six weeks, about 40 days, focusing on the first half of the Great Commandment: Love God with *all*. Loving God with all you heart/soul/mind/strength is called worship. Now we're going to spend the *next* six weeks focusing on the second half of the Great Commandment: Love people. So maybe we really should call it *40 More Days of Love*. For the next 40 days, we're going to focus on our relationships with people. I hope you have already gotten your copy of the primary text for our next six weeks (after the Bible, of course), *The Relationship Principles of Jesus*. There is also a study guide that many of you will be using in your LIFE Groups or in our Sunday Morning Adult Ed classes.

I've been encouraging you for many weeks now to get those resources and get into a group to process and discuss the ideas you'll be reading about in the book and that we'll be talking about in our Sunday messages. Now, why am I making such a big deal about this? Because there's nothing more important in life than learning to love: first, God, and then others. That's not my idea; *God* says that. In fact, here's a theme verse for all of us to memorize. It's short—I *promise* you you can memorize this one. It was our preparation Scripture for today: 1 Cor. 16:14: "Do everything in love." You know, I looked up 'everything' and guess what it means? It means *everything*. Every thing. All things.

Does that mean writing emails? Yup. Some of you need to tape this verse to your computer, and before you ever write an email you need to think, "Everything I write must be written with love." Does this include ordering fast food when you can't understand the speaker? Uh-huh. "Do *everything* in love." Does it include being nice to people who vote differently than you or look different than you? "Do everything in love."

So today we're going to begin the journey of *how* you do everything in love. And we're going to begin by focusing on one passage that will give us some basics as we begin these 40 Days of Love together. 1 John 4:7-12, 19-21. This passage tells us much about love. We're going to look at three main things, which you can fill in on your sermon notes sheet:

1. Love comes from God. 1 John 4:7-8. John writes here that love—*all* love—comes from God because God *is* love. Notice that it doesn't say that God *has* love. Or that God is loving, though of course, He is. It says, "God *is* love." The reason why God wants us to love is because He *is* love. Love is the essence of who God is. And He wants us to be like Him.

Now, you know, we throw the word 'love' around a lot. I love my husband. I love hazelnut lattes. I love the Fightin' Blue Hens. I love snow. I love shopping for new clothes. I love God. But not in that order. And not all in the same way. So what does it mean to love? What is love? Well, if you look up love in the dictionary, love is defined as "a profoundly tender, passionate affection for another person." A feeling of warm, personal attachment or deep affection. Sexual desire or passion.¹

Now, that sounds like love is mostly a feeling. But if we are going to "Do everything in love," we need to know what love really is, according to God. And, as you probably know, the Bible has *lots* to say about love. You may know that the Greek language in which the NT is written has

¹ Random House Dictionary at dictionary.com online.

several different words for love. But the one that is used to refer to God's love, and our love for one another, is *agape*. Not agape, *agape*. *Agape* love is love that is *other*-focused. Love that is for the benefit of others. Selfless love. Sacrificial love. Giving love. God's love is *agape* love.

1 John 4:19. "*We agape love because He first agape loved us.*" Circle "He first," that is, *God* first. God is always first in everything. God *always* takes the initiative. The only reason you can love God or love anybody else is because God loved you first. Now many people have no trouble believing that God loves *other* people, but a great deal of trouble believing that God loves *them*. If that's the case for you, that's where you need to start. Because you can't even start thinking about how to love others until you know—I mean *really know*, understand, and feel—how much God loves you. More than anything else, that's what we want to happen in your life during these forty days. We don't want to just preach about love, read about love, discuss about love. We want you to experience the love of God.

Because the day you finally, fully understand how God loves you: completely, unconditionally; that you can never make God stop loving you—you can try but you will fail. When you feel that unconditional love, you're going to start cutting people a lot of slack. You won't get angry as easily. You'll be more patient. You'll be more forgiving. See, the reason why people are judgmental, sarcastic, mean-spirited; the reason why you see people who are angry, self-righteous, always putting other people down is because they're putting themselves down. They don't feel good about themselves. They don't feel loved. They don't feel forgiven. They don't feel grace. They feel bad about themselves. And if I feel bad about myself I certainly don't want you feeling good about you.

So I hope that during *40 Days of Love*, you'll experience some healing in your heart from all the hurts of life. Maybe you've been hurt by parents or friends or co-workers or by a spouse. Maybe some of you have been abused or rejected or abandoned or betrayed. So you've got some scabs on your heart, some scar tissue. We're going to have to do some gentle surgery on your heart because you can't love others until you feel loved. You cannot give to others what you have not received yourself. Unlovely people are unloved people. Hurt people hurt people.

2. Love is an action, not a feeling. 1 John 4:9-10. God's *agape* love is love that takes action. God doesn't just *say* He loves, He *shows* His love. He acts in loving ways. And the ultimate act of love was the sending of God's one and only precious Son to die on the cross for people like you and me. God's love is seen and shown in the cross. "*This is how* God showed His love among us.... And God shows us how to truly love—*agape* love—through the cross. *Agape* love is love which is demonstrated in actions for the benefit of others, even to the point of self-sacrifice. This is why this study is perfect for the season of Lent which begins this Wednesday. The cross is the ultimate demonstration of *agape* love.

God doesn't just *tell* us to love. God *modeled* what love truly is and does when He sent Jesus to die for you and me. God took action to demonstrate how much He loved you—action that cost Him dearly. Love is an action, not just a feeling. God commands us to love Him and to love one another. But you can't command an emotion. Feelings are often uncontrollable. If love were just a feeling then God couldn't command it. But love is something you *do*. It produces emotion

but it is an action. In fact, the Bible says this clearly in 1 John 3:18: “*Let us love not with words or tongue [in other words, just talk about it] but with actions and in truth.*”

You can say, “I love people.” But do you *really* love them? Let’s see how you act toward them. It’s easy to love somebody who loves you. That’s nothing. But real love *acts* and *does* the loving thing when the other person doesn’t deserve it, when they don’t respond to it, or when you don’t feel it. Look: Feelings follow behavior. If you want to *feel* loving toward someone, start *acting* in loving ways toward them. You can’t wait until you start *feeling* love toward them to act. That may never happen. You have to act your way into feeling, not the other way around. Feelings follow behavior.

3. Love is a decision. 1 John 4:11-12. God is not commanding us to *feel* love for other people, but to demonstrate love—to act in loving ways. And here’s the thing: If you’re going to act in loving ways—if you’re going to “do everything in love”—you’re going to have to make a decision. It’s not going to just happen naturally. You will not drift into obeying God’s commands to love Him and to love others. You will have to decide. Love is a decision. It is a decision to act in certain ways, or *not* act in certain ways. You must choose to love God. He is not going to make you do it. God won’t force you. Because love can’t be forced. It is a choice. You have to decide to love. And it’s the same with people. If you wait until you *feel* love for that person that just really tweaks you, forget it. You’re just not going to feel loving toward them. But God still says you have to *behave* in loving ways towards them: Love is an action. And taking that action requires a decision on your part.

When God says, “Love one another,” He doesn’t say, “Love one another, except you don’t have to love the people who really annoy you. You don’t have to love the person who just cut you off in traffic.” He doesn’t say that. God just says, “Love.” There are no qualifications or conditions on the love God says we are to exhibit. No exceptions to the rule. John says, “God loved us, so we ought to love one another.” We ought to, but will we? You’re going to have to make a decision to act in loving ways toward anybody and everybody you encounter in a given day. Because you’re just not always going to *feel* like it. You have to decide.

Okay, you have a couple of homework assignments this week. *The Relationship Principles of Jesus* is a 40 day devotional. Your reading for this week is the first seven, short daily readings. We have a few copies available for \$13 if you didn’t get one yet. Now, I know that you can’t learn to love out of a book. Even one called *The Relationship Principles of Jesus*. Even the Bible. You learn to love *in* relationships: in relationship with God and then with others. That’s why I’m always telling you to get into a LIFE Group. Because that’s how you learn to love: in relationships with others.

One of the things that I really like about this study that many of you will be doing in your LIFE Groups and others in our Sunday Morning Adult Ed classes is that every week, you’ll have a One-Person Assignment. A Homework Assignment that will give you the opportunity to not only *read about* love and *talk about* love but to actually *put love into practice* in some concrete way with some real person in your life.

Why is love so important to God that He commands it in the Great Commandment [“Love your neighbor as yourself”] AND in the New Commandment [“Love one another”]? In fact, God says,

“Love one another” *nine times* in the Bible. Why does God say we must “do everything in love”? Doesn’t He know how hard that is?! Is it just because God wants His people to be nice, kind, polite, loving people? No.

It’s because *this* is how people see Jesus. 1 John 4:12: No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and His love is made complete in us. [His love is brought to full expression in us. NLT.] In other words, when we *agape* love one another—when we make the decision to love one another by acting in love, *whether or not we feel like it*—when the world sees that kind of love between Christ-followers, they see God’s love.

They see God Himself, because remember, God *is* love. When they see *agape* love, they see God. One writer has said this: “If people want to see Jesus, they should meet Him in churches.”² Dear ones, that is my prayer for us: that when people encounter us—whether here among the gathered church or out there when the church is scattered into the world—when people see us loving each other—selflessly, sacrificially, in practical, down to earth ways, not just *saying* we love but *acting* in love—when people see that, they will see Jesus. They will encounter God. And they will come to know and experience God’s love through us.

² David Jackman. *The Message of John’s Letters, the Bible Speaks Today Series.* P. 123.