

April 8, 2012

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

The Depth of the Love of Christ

The greatest demonstration of love in all of human history happened 2000 years ago, one Friday on a hill they called Golgotha, Jesus of Nazareth died on a bloody cross for the sins of the world, was buried for three days, and rose again on a Sunday morning.

The depth of love is shown by what it cost

We can tell just how deep someone's love is by what that love costs him to display. If someone sacrifices his life for us, surely that speaks of a deeper love than someone who merely suffers some bruises and strained muscles. So we can see the depth of the love of Christ by the magnitude of what it cost Him.

The depth of love is measured by the unworthiness of the object

We also understand the depth of someone's love for us by how little we deserve it. If we have always treated them well and never said a cross word and always got along, then when they love us in return, it does not prove their love as much as when they love us when we have offended them, deserted them, talked badly about them, or ignored them completely. So we can measure the depth of the love of Christ by the unworthiness of its object.

The depth of love is known by its liberty to love

Finally, we know that someone genuinely loves us by the complete liberty or freedom with which they love us. Forced love is no love at all; or love that is predicated on something other than someone's free choice. You know this when your wife asks you that question: Do you love me? And you of course say "Yes". And then comes the kicker: "Why"? And if you answer that in any other way than "I love you because I love you", you're in big trouble. I want us to understand the depth of the love of Christ by looking at His complete liberty to love us.

The depth of love is shown by what it cost

He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. Isaiah 53:3 – 5

Very often we are so familiar with the passion of Christ that we can't really drink in what His love cost Him. We know the story, we have an intellectual appreciation for it – but it doesn't move us as it should – it doesn't really impact our hearts as it was meant to.

In his book, *Through the Valley of the Kwai*, Ernest Gorden, a prisoner of war in a Japanese prison camp during WWII, tells how he and the other prisoners were made to do hard labor building a railroad for the Japanese in that camp. The men were each issued a shovel in the morning, and would dig all day, then come in and give it back in the evening. One evening twenty prisoners were lined up by the guard and the shovels were counted. The guard counted nineteen shovels and turned in rage on the twenty prisoners demanding to know which one did not bring his shovel back. No one responded. The guard took out his gun and said that he would shoot five men if the guilty prisoner did not step forward. After a moment of tense silence, a nineteen-year-old soldier stepped forward with his head bowed down. The guard grabbed him, took him to the side and shot him in the head, and turned to warn the others that they better be more careful than he was. When he left, the men again counted the shovels and there were twenty. The guard had miscounted. And the boy had given his life for his friends.

Can you imagine the emotions that must have filled their hearts as they knelt down over his body? In the five or ten seconds of silence the boy had weighed his whole future in the balance—a future wife, an education, a new truck, children, a career, fishing with his dad—and he chose death so that others might live. Jesus said in John 15:13, *"Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends."* **To love authentically is to choose suffering for the sake of another.**

The cross convinces us of the love of Christ because it is here that the voice of Jesus says to us: *I will be the one despised and forsaken, stricken, smitten, and afflicted by God. Why? To convince you that I love you. I will go to the cross for you. I will take the spear thrust in My side for you. I will be crushed under the full fury of God's righteous wrath for you. I will take your punishment so that you will live and not die, and I will be whipped so that you can be healed. Why? Because I love you that much. Behold the supreme demonstration of my love—the cross. What more can I say? What else do you require to be convinced of my love for you?* **The depth of love is shown by what it cost.**

The depth of love is measured by the unworthiness of the object

A second way to see the depth of the love of Christ is to look at how undeserving you are of His love. Jesus points this out to His disciples in Matthew 5: *"For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?"* Matthew 5:46-47 In other words the depth of love is shown not only in its cost, but whether that love is given to people who may not return it – or perhaps don't deserve it at all. The love that staggers us is the love that comes to us from those we have wronged and abused and treated badly.

In August 1983, Russell Stendal was taken hostage into the jungle of Columbia, South American, by a band of guerrilla soldiers. For nearly 5 months he learned what it really means to love one's enemies. He wrote a letter home, saying, "I am in danger only of losing my life; they are in danger of losing their souls." Through kindness, Russell showed love to his guards. One day the commander told him, "We can't kill you face to face; we like you. So we will have to kill you in your sleep." For the next 10 days and nights he couldn't sleep. A submachine gun was repeatedly thrust in his face under his mosquito net, but the guards couldn't bring themselves to pull the trigger. On January 3, 1984, Russell was released. When he said goodbye, tears fill the eyes of some of his captors.

Look at Romans 5: *For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.* Romans 5:6 – 8 The depth of Christ's love for us is seen in this: when He chose to demonstrate His love for us, we were sinners, undeserving of His sacrifice. In fact we were deserving of the full measure of God's wrath. And what is worse – there is nothing we can do to better our situation. So here we are, deserving the full punishment for our sins – and Jesus comes and says, 'Put it on Me. I'll take your place'. The love of Christ is shown in precisely this – that His love did not wait for any moral improvement in us – He died for us while we were yet unworthy sinners.

Now I know that the default position of most of us is that we're really not that bad. At the heart, at our core, we're really good people. But if you believe that you will never know the incredible gift of the love of God in your soul. These verses tell us just how desperate our situation really is. Not only are we sinners, but we were **helpless** – unable to make any contribution to our own salvation. It says we were **ungodly** – irreverent with respect to God. We did not fear God – we had no respect for God – we were godless. Every thought and action – even our best thoughts and actions – were shot through with godlessness. On our best days we deserved not heaven, but hell. And into our sinful, helpless, ungodly, undeserving condition, the love of Christ breaks in on us to save.

Don't ever think that you can come to Christ on the merits of your own goodness. I have talked to too many people who say things like, 'I know my life's a mess and I need a Savior – but just as soon as I clean things up a bit – as soon as I get my life in order – then I'll become a Christian'. Jesus said, 'I didn't come to call the righteous to repentance – I came to call the sinners'. Understanding that the depth of Christ's love is measured by our very unworthiness sets us free to experience all the mercy and grace of His sacrifice.

The depth of love is known by its liberty to love

We see the depth of someone's love for us not only by its cost, or by how much we don't deserve it – we see that the depth of love is known by its liberty to love. Or to put it another way, we see the depth of the love of Christ in how freely His love is given. Genuine love is volitional rather than emotional. The person who truly loves does so because of a decision to love. They have made a commitment to be loving quite apart from any external pressures or considerations or internal feelings. And this is what Jesus says in John 10: *"For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father."* John 10:17 – 18

We need to understand the depth of the love of Christ in His freedom or liberty to love. First of all, Jesus says that there is a deep delight that the Father has in Him that He would willingly die for those He loves and defeat death on their behalf. That says that the liberty to love draws a reciprocal love from the Father's heart for His Son – who loves His Son for loving us. And that says volumes about how the Father must love us.

Sinclair Lewis writes: *'When we think of Christ dying on the cross we are shown the lengths to which God's love goes in order to win us back to himself. We would almost think that God loved us more than he loves his Son! We cannot measure such love by any other standard. He is saying to us: I love you this much. . . . The cross is the heart of the gospel. It makes the gospel good news: Christ has died for us. He has stood in our place before God's judgment seat. He has borne our sins. God has done something on the cross which we could never do for ourselves. But God does something to us as well as for us through the cross. He persuades us that he loves us'*

And then Jesus says, **'No one takes My life away from Me – I lay it down willingly – on My own initiative'**. What does He mean? Didn't Judas take it? What about the mob in the garden? What about Annas the high priest? And the false witnesses that came against him? And the crowds who cried, "Crucify him"? And Herod who sent him back to Pilate? And Pilate who handed him over? And the soldiers who hammered the nails? What does he mean, **"No one takes My life from Me"**? He means, *"At every point where it looks like I was under compulsion—every moment where it looks like I was being forced to do what I did not want to do—I was not being forced. I was choosing it. I was embracing it. In fact, My Father designed it and I carried it out—because We love you. No one takes My life from Me. I lay it down on My own initiative. My love is free."*

Think about it. If His love were not free, if His death were forced upon Him, if He was dragged unwillingly to the cross – there would be a cosmic question mark over His death. The depth, the quality of His love for us is that He willingly went to the cross. And the fact that He says 'This commandment I received from My Father' does not take away anything from the liberty of His decision. Why? Because His joy was to do the Father's will. You see, we look at commandments and they seem burdensome and dreary. But Jesus says, 'My delight is to do the Father's will'. Or to put it another way, 'My joy, My happiness, My greatest delight – is to do whatever the Father desires. Therefore I willingly choose the cross'.

I can almost hear the Lord thinking, 'These people I love – they might miss the fact that I went to the cross willingly – they might think that I was somehow coerced, or I had another agenda, or I got into this thing and have to see it through even though I don't want to'. So He stresses here in John, even before He gets there – 'I am doing this willingly, joyfully, gladly – because I love you'. No one took His life – He gave it. *'I lay down My life so that I may take it again'*. So His resurrection becomes the testimony to the liberty of His love.

So what does all this mean for us? What does the cost of His love mean for us? What does our unworthiness of this love mean for us? What does the liberty of this love mean for us? The cost of His love means that Jesus went to the very extremes to prove His love for us – personally. The love with which He loves you and me is personal and He calls you this morning to respond to that love. The fact that it is undeserved means that we can stop trying to save ourselves and lean on Him. The fact that He freely gave Himself to the whip and the nails means that He meant it. And His resurrection puts an exclamation point over it all.

An orphaned boy was living with his grandmother when their house caught fire. The grandmother, trying to get upstairs to rescue the boy, perished in the flames. The boy's cries for help were finally answered by a man who climbed an iron drainpipe and came back down with the boy hanging tightly to his neck. Several weeks later, a public hearing was held to determine who would receive custody of the child. A farmer, a teacher, and the town's wealthiest citizen all stepped forward and gave the reasons they felt they should be chosen to give the boy a home. But as they talked, the boy's eyes remained focused on the floor. Then a stranger walked to the front and slowly took his hands from his pockets, revealing horrible burn scars on them. As the crowd stared, the boy cried out in recognition. This was the man who had saved his life. His hands had been burned when he climbed the hot pipe. With a leap the boy threw his arms around the man's neck and held on for dear life and the crowd walked away, leaving the boy and his rescuer alone. **Those burned hands had settled the issue.**

Have you seen the nail scars in His hands and feet? Have you seen the wound in His side? Have you seen where the thorns ravaged His brow? Do you realize you could never deserve such a sacrifice? Do you see how willingly He died for you? He loves you with a love that is costly, undeserved, and free and invites you to revel in that love this morning.

Our gracious Father and loving Savior,

Incline our hearts to see the depth of the love of Christ for us and to embrace that love with joy. Grant it Lord that we would behold and believe – that we would see and savor it's cost, our unworthiness, and His freedom in pouring it out on us. Cause Your love to flow like a river through our souls and awaken us to faith. May we be staggered by the magnitude of Your love and may our hearts receive it with the affection of faith. May we not just know about it, but experience the reality of it, to the glory of Christ we pray, in the precious name of Jesus Christ our risen Lord, Amen.