

LOVE

Lesson Number One

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Come back with me for a few minutes; back to the winter of 1967. Do you remember the snow? If you were here in Northern Illinois, you will probably never forget it. You probably have at least one favorite story that you always like to tell when talk turns to the Great blizzard of '67. How uncanny for a city of four million people to be virtually paralyzed under two feet of snow. What an awesome experience to look out through frosted windows at a desolate expanse of city streets and boulevards: corridors normally teeming with traffic of every description but now transformed to an alien landscape of windblown drifts and long, unbroken sweeps of white.

How does one react at such a time? ... At one end of the city an informal chain-of-command developed and a neighborhood crew of one hundred fifty people worked in teams of three to dig their various families out of the blizzard's cold and snowy grasp. At about the same time, a large group of high school boys were working under police supervision to dig out seventy-five buried automobiles and to haul several ill persons by toboggan to waiting ambulances. In the same suburb, twenty-five girls were doing volunteer duty in two hospitals to replace regular staff members who were snowbound in their homes and couldn't make it in to work.

But, at the same time, elsewhere in Chicago, a truck driver was held captive in the cab of his own stalled truck while a group of people stole twenty thousand pounds of meat from the trailer. Another group looted a stalled soft-drink truck of two hundred cases of pop.

This constant struggle between selfishness and kindness has crippled man's potential since human history began, for man has an astounding capacity for both selfishness and love. When forced into a situation that threatens him, he will frighten even himself by his ability to lie and cheat and steal. But his most satisfying moments come, quite unexpectedly, when he finds himself spontaneously doing something for someone else.

Surely we can all remember the warm experience of such moments: for many of us, the annual glow that settles briefly over the world at Christmastime has not completely faded yet. Think of the surge of caring friends that gather 'round the bereaved when death has struck or the simple thoughtfulness of the housewife who does an invalid neighbor's shopping for her. All of us have experienced the surge of well-being that fills our inner selves when we burst free of our own self-concern to bring pleasure to another.

And all of us know, too, the occasional moments of shamed awareness that we do this too seldom. "I don't understand myself at all," wrote Paul, "for I really want to do what is right, but I can't. I do what I don't want to It seems to be a fact of life that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong" (Romans 7:15,21). Perhaps no single factor has so limited the church down through the years as man's inhumanity to man - sometimes deliberate cruelty, but far more often sheer indifference.

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Open your Bibles to the Gospel of Mark, Chapter

twelve, verses twenty-eight to thirty-one. That's Page 881 in the Pew Bibles.

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These Pew Bibles are going to be here every week during this series so you don't have to make a special effort to bring your own Bibles unless you want to. Using these Bibles will also keep things moving smoothly because I will be referring to the Page numbers along with chapter and verse.

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Mark 12:28-31. "And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' Jesus answered, 'The first is, Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.'

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Now turn on to the Gospel of John, Chapter Thirteen, verses thirty-four and thirty-five. That's Page 938.

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While you're finding that Passage, think about the order of the two greatest commandments. There is a very good reason for the order in which Christ stated these two - the second is just impossible without the first! Love of neighbor can only become a real experience for us as we love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strengths.

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Now, John 13:34 & 35. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another."

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This is the only commandment in the New Testament which the Lord specifically emphasizes by bluntly stating that it is a New Commandment. If our Lord, who loved us enough to die so that we might live, had heaped hundreds upon hundreds of new commandments upon us, we would have no grounds to consider the burden excessive. How tender and merciful of our Lord to only lay one new command upon us. And yet ... what a command it is!

Suppose we think of life as a production line. From birth to death man produces good and bad, love and hate, beauty and ugliness, energy and boredom, order and chaos - often in rather direct proportion to how he is getting along with his wife! Seriously: our feeling of worth is directly related to our meaningful personal relationships.

The North Shore suburbs of Chicago have one of the highest teenage-suicide rates in the nation. Not too many years ago, you may have seen a small newspaper item about a fourteen-year-old boy who took his own life because "no one seemed to care." He had felt no relationship, no sense of love from any creature but his dog, and in a brief suicide note addressed to his parents he left instructions for its care.

NO ONE SEEMED TO CARE! What a stark summation of the world's lack of love - or at least lack of communication: Quite probably the boy's Parents did love him, but they evidently never let him know it, and his death illustrated sharply how minor deeds of lovelessness add up to major tragedies. This is no revolutionary statement of fresh truth; it is a heartbreaking reality that has been with us ever since the world began. Frustration, loneliness, self-pity, indifference, emptiness, hostility, hatred, close-heartedness, resentment, jealousy, and the resultant criminal acts and the ills of mind and body all grow to overpower the human spirit when nobody seems to care.

People of all ages and cultures have a sensitivity to genuine love and concern, and when these come through with unmistakable clarity, an amazing, mysterious energy leaps forth in response. And God, who is love, once again is revealed through the act of human loving.

"When you refused to help the least of these My brothers," Jesus said in Matthew 25:45, "you were refusing to help me." In Matthew 5:46 & 47, he told his followers, "If you love only those who love you, what good is that?...If you are friendly only with your friends, how are you different from anybody else?" But, if the mandate is clear, the method is not. We can talk about love and how important it is and how we all should love each other in Christ, but what does that really mean and how do we do it?

The good news of the Gospel doesn't just lie there and stare up at us in words printed on paper in a book. It grips us and shakes us with the awesome power of God. One of the main reasons why Christ did not remain on this earth in human form was so that more power would be available to us through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Turn with me to the epistle of First John, chapter three, verse eighteen. That's page 1066.

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"Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth."

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That's what this ten week series is really aiming at: to know what love really is, to know what it isn't, and to learn how to make it really work in our lives.

Come with me through these next ten weeks. Study with me the nature of God's love and our human reflection of it to one another. Learn with me how to lay hold on the power of God that does make loving possible.

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Begin by coming with me on a walk down a lonely road in Adams County, Pennsylvania. It is early morning, and the fog drifts across the pavement like wisps of new-fallen snow and we involuntarily shiver in the cool morning air that seems all the more cold for the eerie quietness and the swirling mist that cuts visibility to a few hundred feet.

We pass through a sleepy little town of seven thousand and continue south up a long and gentle rise. As we crest the top of the hill, we see a long fence lined with cannon and, in the distance, a sprawling graveyard, ruled over by a large metal soldier astride a metal horse on a stone pedestal. As we draw nearer to the scene, the fog swirls

about us deeper and deeper until we can barely see five feet in front of us and the sounds of the cars on the highway fade away into nothingness.

We stumble down the hill, tripping and scrambling to avoid falling in a ditch, and finally reach the broad meadow as the fog suddenly lifts. The graveyard stands before us in plain sight. But, where has the monstrosity of an iron rider gone. It is nowhere to be seen. Instead, we come upon a wooden platform bearing men in wierd and archaic costumes. Milling about us are more of the unusually clad figures and the crowd seems to be coalescing into a tight clump right where we are standing.

A man has been speaking up on the platform but we haven't heard any of his words because of the milling and mumbling of the crowd around us. Suddenly, a hush falls over the crowd as a spindly, scraggly figure, dressed all in black and seeming to tower above his neighbors on the platform, stands and approaches the podium. He surveys us all with tired eyes sunken in a sad face and gently clears his throat.

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"Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

"Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

"But in a larger sense we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us - that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion, that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

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Abraham Lincoln was one of the finest speakers the world has ever known. And I think his life testifies that he was also a man of God and knew God's love. But, without God's love, even these, his most famous and most stirring words would have been of no value. Turn with me to I Corinthians 13:1. That's page 1000. And, by the way, I completely deny any allegations that I chose the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians as the base for this study simply because it is on page 1000 and therefore easy to find.

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I Corinthians 13:1: "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."

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In this chapter in I Corinthians, Paul compares love with a number of other very highly regarded gifts. In every case, he points out that no matter what else a person excels in, he is of little value unless he possesses the greatest gift of all - LOVE.

Paul discusses the gift of speech first because this was a highly prized talent in ancient Greece. Demosthenes, Sophocles, Euripides and other silver-tongued orators were the stars of that day just like some Hollywood personalities are the stars of today. The Greeks were drawn to the city center where they would stand for hours, stirred by the abilities of these men. The power of persuasive speech is indeed a great gift, and throughout history masses have been moved by eloquence to heroic efforts and bloody wars. But Paul compares exciting speech without love to the tuneless crash of a cymbal, or the hollow sound of a brass gong without orchestration or melody.

The rapid spread of Christianity in the Roman empire was due very much to the fact that it preached the love of God by a strongly practical demonstration of love for people. The first Christians learned from Christ himself. He showed them through his personal association with the despised and downtrodden, and his concern for the poor and afflicted, how to live a life of love. David Livingstone, the great missionary, could not always communicate verbally with the people to whom he ministered, but these people could FEEL his love, for love has an ability that leaps over language barriers.

An inner-city youth worker once told the story of a young man from Harlem who spent a week with him at a high-school ranch in the Colorado Rockies. The first few days the youth was into all kinds of trouble, but by the end of the camping period he was completely won by the love of the work crew, counselors, and leaders. When he returned to the city he was asked what it was that most moved him to accept Christ. His answer was, "The way people cared about me. Everybody seemed interested in what was happening to me. Nobody ever loved me like that before." As the conversation continued he told how he had heard the gospel story all his life in the ghetto, but it had meant nothing because he had never felt the love of God in his own life before. People today are generally just plain sick and tired of religious words without love!

We call ourselves Christians and claim to know God. But we had better take stock of our lives and make sure that that is really true and that we are not just fooling ourselves. I John 4:8 says, "He who does not love does not know God; for God is love." Do we claim to love God but then allow things like fancy words and the comforts of this world to take precedence over what we know God would have us to do? I John 2:15 says, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If any one loves the world, love for the father is not in him." Fancy words minus love equal ZERO.

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Let's continue with I Corinthians 13:2, "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."

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Webster's dictionary defines Prophecy as the inspired declaration of divine will and Purpose. What a marvelous gift this is! The Prophets not only spoke forth God's truth but in many instances foretold future events. However, Paul continues to insist that wonderful as Prophecy is, this gift minus love equals nothing.

In fact, in the first three verses of the thirteenth chapter of Deuteronomy, God warns us that mighty Prophecies without the love of God are the works of the devil. Deuteronomy 13:1-3 says, "If a Prophet arises among you, or a dreamer of dreams, and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder which he tells you comes to pass, and if he says 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, you shall not listen to the words of that Prophet or to that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul." And I John 4:1 says, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false Prophets have gone out into the world." Prophecy minus love equals ZERO.

To understand a mystery is to have divine insight concerning hidden truths. Those who understand mysteries can often challenge us to greater living. But too often Christians are concerned about hidden truth, but indifferent about loving difficult people. Skill in unraveling the mysteries of God is very desirable and important, yet this without love for people equals nothing.

Knowledge is a rare gem, and we would never handle this expensive Jewel carelessly. Yet there is nothing so hard and cold as knowledge without love. But knowledge WITH love is a potent force. Love ignores high-sounding explanations and goes to work. Love gets in gear with God AND the times. Love transforms our doctrine into Power. Love takes the facts and builds upon them with action. The need of this hour is for the marriage of love to knowledge. Is it our rapidly increasing preoccupation with knowledge that makes us so tactful that we become fearful of trying to make contact? Are we more concerned about what people think, than about what God thinks? We must put knowledge together with love. Knowledge without love is impotent, but together they generate tremendous force.

Seeking after knowledge and wisdom for their own sakes and without they're being intimately intertwined with the love of God is what got mankind into the mess it is in today. Genesis 3:6 says, "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired TO MAKE ONE WISE, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate." The fall of man was caused by seeking after wisdom without doing it God's way. I Corinthians 8:1 tells us that "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." Knowledge by itself fills us with improper self-pride but love builds us up in knowledge of God. Knowledge and understanding minus love equals ZERO.

Even if we have enough faith to move mountains; if the faith is not built upon a foundation of love, it is meaningless. Faith IS important; it is fundamental: The great eleventh chapter of the epistle to the Hebrews is entirely devoted to the subject of faith and the sixth verse tells us emphatically, "And without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." But, while faith is necessary and great, love is greater. Faith has priority, but love has preeminence. Faith is first, but love is last. Faith connects the soul with God, and God is love. Faith is the means that God uses to bring us into his love, but faith without love places us in life's minus column. Faith and love must go hand-in-hand. Galatians 5:6 says, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love." Faith minus love equals ZERO.

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Continuing with I Corinthians 13:3, we find, "If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."

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All of us have given to help the poor. Prosperity imposes the obligation to help those who have not. The needy are all about us, but often benevolence is an act of relief for a guilty conscience. It is too easy in our relatively prosperous times to write a check and dismiss our responsibility for caring. Even the emperors of Rome gave lavishly on special holidays to keep the masses under their control, but they gave without loving. How humiliating would be a full revelation of the motives for our own deeds! We must remember that Jesus often invited the poor to eat with him; he didn't just give them a handout.

This quality of giving can only spring from love. It is not just a way to satisfy some "spiritual requirement" and it is not an excuse to buy our way free from personal involvement. We can give without loving, but we CANNOT love without giving. Benevolence minus love equals ZERO.

Martyrdom for Christ is rare in America today although it is not so rare in other parts of the world. But this giving the body to be burned is not quite the same thing as christian martyrdom. What we are talking about here is martyrdom because of fanatical devotion to a cause and not as a result of love for Christ. The war in Vietnam produced some spectacular instances of this kind of martyrdom, such as the young man who set fire to himself in Washington and burned to death in protest as people watched helplessly. The Buddhist monks who became fiery pillars to a pacifist principle were also in this category. Loving Christ enough to die for him has been part of christianity since it began. But today it often takes as much if not more courage to live for Christ as to die for him.

We humans are crafty creatures who rationalize so much that it is often difficult to decide what our real motives are. Even martyrdom, minus love, equals ZERO.

John 15:13 says, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." But Romans 12:9 says, "Let love be GENUINE; hate what is evil, hold

fast to what is good:". Romans 12:9 tells us to quit trying to impress others and fool ourselves; instead we should just love simply and openly. No attempt is made to define love in this verse; there are times when definition is destruction. Whoever questioned the beauty of the sunset? But who can define it? The astronomer can give us the mathematics of it, and there certainly IS mathematics in the sunset, but there is no sunset glory in the mathematics. There is chemistry of colors, but there is no wistful healing light in that chemistry. Beauty defined is beauty destroyed. And so here, God simply states that love is to take off every disguise and walk with heart bared for the world to see. It is a hard thing to do, for instinct warns us to protect ourselves and to keep the wounds away from our hearts. How easy it is to form a shell about our emotions and to withhold all that love might give, for fear of being hurt! Only when we recognize that the love of Christ will cast out all fear of being hurt, can we love as He wants us to love.

Are we new creatures in Christ? Then we must walk in love. The Greek theater had neither background nor scenery nor costumes; the actors carried masks, made with such expressions that the audience could easily see whether the character was tragic, comic, or melodramatic. The actor walked about the stage, mask in hand, and occasionally held it before his face. Since these performances were common at the time, when Paul wrote that love must be without hypocrisy - without acting - the Christians of his day caught the meaning and understood that a believer must not wear a mask; he must be absolutely honest.

The Lord Jesus Christ came in love and died for us. We who have been redeemed by His love are possessed by His love. Surely we should put no mask on it. Surely we should take it out among men and show it as it is - without hypocrisy - as the true love of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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Before we go on to discuss some of these points in more detail, let's spend a few moments together in prayer:
