

LOVE

Lesson Number Seven

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By now you have heard John 13:34 & 35 several times. I am going to continue to open each lesson with this Passage because, if I accomplish nothing else in this series, I want you all to be thoroughly aware of these two verses. John 13:34 & 35, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." We are to love each other the same way that Jesus loved us. It's real easy to mouth those words and to bask in the warm glow of the gooey sort of love we tend to envision at such times. But what we're really talking about here is the love that makes us willing to die for each other, to get down on our knees and wash someone else's filthy, smelly feet. This is the kind of love that rejoices in doing the dirty, ugly, thankless jobs just for the sheer joy of saving others from having to do them. Gooey? ... Yes! But not the gooey of yummy chocolates; rather the gooey of searching through three-day old garbage to find a lost earring. This kind of love isn't so pretty and appealing on the outside. But it means infinitely more than the easy kind of "love" we often seem to opt for.

I Peter 1:22 says, "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere love of the brethren, love one another earnestly from the heart."

I John 4:20 says, "If any one says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen."

And I John 3:16 says, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." Turn with me now to I Corinthians 13:9 & 10 on Page 1000 in your Bibles. I know all you who have been attending this series regularly will, by now, probably never forget that I Corinthians chapter thirteen is on Page 1000 of the Pew Bibles; but I have to keep saying it for the benefit of those who may be newcomers.

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I Corinthians 13:9 & 10, "For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away."

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I Corinthians 2:9 says, "But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him,' God has wonderful things in store for us; things too wonderful and too perfect for our eyes to behold or our ears to hear or our minds to imagine. Our bodies and our souls cannot comprehend such perfection because our bodies and souls are imperfect and, if confronted by the perfect, would simply pass away. God has revealed these things to our spirits through the Holy Spirit as it says in I Corinthians 2:10. This works because we have been given new spirits by God; spirits which ARE perfect and are kept perfect by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. But we still cannot really comprehend all the perfection that our Lord has in store for us and we will not be able to until we go home to be with him and are like him because we see him as he is."

How could we possibly comprehend the Perfection of God. We cannot even begin to comprehend the infinite eternity in which it resides. II Peter 3:8 says, "But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." With our pitiful threescore and ten year lifespans, we attempt to make some inroads into eternity through the use of history books. But the cold words cannot begin to approach the reality of being there. And there are no future books. Science Fiction calls itself such but it is really nothing but guesswork and fantasy; Perhaps an enjoyable diversion but certainly nothing to base your life on.

Turn with me to Romans 8:28 on Page 983 in your Bibles. Since we are inherently incapable of Perceiving Perfection, we are most certainly incapable of achieving it in this world. We would have good reason to despair at the disastrous state that the world is in today if it were not for the fact that we know that God is fully in control and is only allowing this depravity to exist and continue so that His name (and hence we also who are "In Him") will be even more glorified throughout all of eternity.

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Romans 8:28, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his Purpose."

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The earlier King James Version records this verse as, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are called according to his Purpose." The Revised Standard Version more properly makes God (rather than "all things") the subject of the sentence. This is a closer conformance to the original Greek. But then, it goes on to create confusion by seeming to say that we are the clay that he is molding for good rather than molding the events to our good. The closest rendition to the mass of knowledge that we now have available (at least with respect to this verse) seems to me to be provided by the New American Standard Version which reads, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His Purpose." This maintains the reality that it is God who is controlling the events and also the reality that he is controlling them so that they all accrue to the good of those who love him.

The New American Standard Version also corrects one of the less obvious errors of the Revised Standard Version. In the Greek, the beginning of this verse includes the Greek conjunction DE. It can be translated as "and", "but", "moreover" or the like. The King James and the New American Standard translate it as "And" but the Revised Standard leaves it out. The conjunction, however it is translated, must not be left out because it ties the twenty-eighth verse back to the twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh verses which read, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." With the conjunction

Properly retained in the twenty-eighth verse, we thus know that it is the Holy SPIRIT within us who is directing events and believers together according to a definite divine Plan.

God says it is not possible for any man to be at complete rest until he is aware that all things are happening according to this divine Plan. In his Bible, an elderly minister carried a bookmark that was made of silk threads woven into a motto. The back of it was a tangled web of crossed threads that seemed to be without reason or purpose. When he called in some home where there was great trouble, sorrow, or death, he would frequently show this bookmark, presenting the reverse side with all its unintelligible tangle. When the bereaved one had examined it intently, without finding any explanation for the seeming disorder, the minister would ask him to turn the marker over. Immediately, against the white silk background there was the phrase, in colored threads, "God is love." That side made sense. It is thus with all of the tangled patterns of life for the one who has been called according to the divine Plan. When we know this fact we can be at peace with the world around us because we are at peace within our own souls; and we are at peace within our own souls because we are at peace with our Heavenly Father.

Turn with me now to Ephesians 1:3-12 on page 1017 in your Bibles. This passage again affirms that there is a divine Plan and that God is in full control of it.

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Ephesians 1:3-12. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us. For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory.

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God is in full control and what He wants is what is best for us. Is it any wonder that the term "Father" fits him so well? Is it any wonder that we rejoice to call him by the Hebrew "ABBA" which is the endearing term "Daddy" in that language? No loving Daddy could ever care for us more than He! Amen and Amen!

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This morning, we have finally reached the point in our series where we are going to look at the Greek AGAPE; the self-sacrificing love of God. But, in a greater sense, we have already been talking about it for six weeks. Everything we have discussed concerning love as described in I Corinthians chapter thirteen has been about the Greek

AGAPE: AGAPE is the Greek word which is translated as "love" throughout that entire chapter. None of the other Greek words for love appear in this chapter.

And this is PROPER. As awesome and spine-tingling as the natural loves can sometimes be, they pale into insignificance when placed alongside AGAPE, the love of God, the love He wants to shine through our lives to illumine those around us to the wonders He is offering them. EROS, STORGE, and PHILEO can be very special and important in their own realms but they must bow to the greater glory of AGAPE when it arrives.

In Matthew 11:11, Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist;..." But it was John the Baptist who said of Jesus in Matthew 3:11, "...he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry;..." As we've just been talking about this morning, "when the Perfect comes the imperfect will pass away." John the Baptist was a great man, but Jesus is God. EROS, STORGE, and PHILEO are great human loves, but AGAPE is the Love of God. The imperfect must bow before the Perfect.

The natural loves are not self-sufficient. Something else must come to the aid of these loves if these loves are to be kept sweet. That something is AGAPE.

This is not said to belittle or disparage the natural loves at all. It is rather where their true glory lies. By themselves they are insufficient and go sour. But, within the framework of AGAPE love which holds them up and gives them true reason for being, they become the true wonders that God always intended them to be. It is not an insult to a garden to say that it will not fence and weed itself, nor prune its own fruit trees, nor roll and cut its own lawns. A garden is a good thing but that is not the type of good thing that it is. It will remain a garden instead of a wilderness only so long as someone continues to do these things to it. Its real glory is of quite a different kind. The very fact that it DOES need constant weeding and pruning bears witness to that glory. It is overflowing with life of all kinds and descriptions. It glows with color and smells like heaven and is filled with a beauty that man cannot create. Using only his own resources, man could not even imagine such beauty.

If you really want to see the difference between the garden's contribution to its own beauty and the contribution that the Gardener makes, take the Gardener's hoe or spade out and put it next to the ugliest weed you can find in the garden. Look closely. The weed is beautiful in its own way: it is alive and thriving. The hoe or spade is dead and sterile.

For all the work the Gardener puts in, he could do nothing without the life springing from the earth, the rain, or the light and heat from the sun. When the Gardener has finished his work, all he has really done is to have encouraged a bit here and discouraged a bit there, Powers and beauties that have a source outside of himself. But even if what he does is small, it is important and hard work. When God planted the Garden in Eden, He set Adam over it and Adam under Himself. When He planted the Garden of our nature and caused the natural loves to grow there, He set our wills the task of tending them.

I haven't said a great deal in this series about the natural loves being serious rivals to the love of God. They really are just straw men in such a contest. The natural loves openly prove that they are unworthy to take the place of God by the simple and straightforward fact that they can't even remain themselves and do what they promise to without God's help.

Why should you expend great effort to prove that some little Prince is not the lawful King when the Prince can't even keep his own province in order for six months without the King's support.

We have become largely a very unloving generation. Very few still know how to love: the divorce statistics alone will bear that out. In previous centuries, one of the major cautions would have been to watch out and not let the natural loves get in the way of our love for God. The theologians of old saw a possible rival to God in every wife, mother, child, and friend. We today are much more hard-hearted and practical than our forebears and are not likely to fall into THAT trap.

Today, we follow an even more ancient sage, none other than St. Augustine. Augustine, in his CONFESSIONS, describes the desolation in which the death of his friend Nebridius plunged him. Then he draws a moral. This is what comes, he says, of giving one's heart to anything but God. All human beings pass away. Do not let your happiness depend on something you may lose. If love is to be a blessing, not a misery, it must be for the only Beloved who will never pass away. Many people today are able to forsake loving others on the grounds that they may get hurt. But, instead of turning to God, they turn inward and effectively vegetate.

The logic of Augustine's point is inescapable. Don't put your water in a leaky jar. Don't spend a lot of money fixing up an apartment you only rent. It's reasonable. Of all the arguments against love, Augustine's "Careful! This may hurt!" is one of the best.

Safety is great. Isn't it wonderful to curl up in a warm, safe chair in a warm, safe room, far from the trials of the world. But Jesus never taught safe investments and limited liabilities. I would bet that this safe escapism is probably one of the most displeasing things he finds in the world today. Do you begin to love God just because to do so offers security from Hell. I think not! The security is real but there is infinitely more reason to love God than merely that. Would you choose a wife, a friend, or even a dog solely on the basis of improved security for yourself. I think not! We become much too security conscious for our own good.

Never forget: we follow the one who cried out in anguish over the city of Jerusalem; the one who literally wept at the grave of Lazarus. Jesus loves us all. He loved all those who were alive when he was on earth. Yet only a few hundred did he call his followers; only twelve were his close disciples; and John was specially called "the disciple whom Jesus loved". Even if you were to really accept that insurance against heartbreak is the highest wisdom, can you say that God offers such insurance. No! Tragedy befalls every man on this earth at some point in his life. In order to save us by carrying our sins, Jesus

had to himself come to the Point where he cried out, "My God, My God, Why hast thou forsaken me?"

There really is no such safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be broken sooner or later. If you want to be absolutely certain of keeping it intact, you mustn't ever give your heart to anyone, not even a dog, not even a bird. You'll have to surround it with hobbies, luxuries, and other little inconsequentials. Don't get entangled with anyone. Lock your heart up in the coffin of selfishness to keep it safe. But...But...in that casket - safe, dark, motionless, airless - it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to the risk of tragedy is damnation. The only Place outside of Heaven where you can be safe from the dangers of love is in Hell.

It would seem that even the most lawless and inordinate of loves are less contrary to God's will than any self-protective lovelessness. Just as the owner rightly castigated the worthless servant for hiding the talent in the napkin and then Proclaiming, "I knew thee that thou wert a hard man," we can expect Christ not to be Pleased with those who curl-up in a ball and try to protect their own happiness by avoiding love for others. We can't draw nearer to God by trying to avoid the sufferings which are inherent in all loves. We must rather accept those sufferings and offer them to our Lord, throwing away all supposed defensive armor and relying solely upon him. If our hearts need to be broken, and if He chooses this as the way in which they should break, then His will, not ours, be done.

Now, it is of course true that all natural loves can be inordinate. Inordinate does not mean "insufficiently cautious." Nor does it mean "too big." It is not a quantitative term. It is probably impossible to love any human being simply "too much." We may love him too much in proportion to our love for God; but it is the smallness of our love for God, not the greatness of our love for the man, that makes the love inordinate. And, don't be worried if you can't seem to work up as much emotion for God as you do for an earthly beloved. The emotions are not what governs here; it is the will. The question is not which you have the sloppiest, mushiest feelings for; it is which (when the alternative comes) do you put first.

At this Point, it is time to try to build some understanding of the relationship between the natural loves and AGAPE, the Love of God, of Love Himself. This is difficult because we cannot know God directly until we go home to be with Him. We cannot see light, though by light we can see things. Similarly, statements about God are really extrapolations from the knowledge of other things which the divine illumination enables us to know. God is Love. I John 4:10 says, "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins."

We begin at the real beginning, with love as the divine energy. The Primal love is Gift-love. In God there is no Need-love. But, God, as creator of the universe, implants in us both Gift-loves and Need-loves. The Gift-loves are intended to be images of Himself in the natural

realm. The Need-loves are intended to be the opposites of the Gift-loves; not the way that evil is the opposite of good, but rather the way that a Plastic toy is the opposite of the mold in which it was formed or the way that a nut is the opposite of a bolt: opposites that mesh together perfectly at every point.

In addition to the natural Gift-loves, God also endows men with a share of His own Gift-love; AGAPE. AGAPE is different in that it seeks the welfare of the beloved simply and without condition. The natural loves may desire the welfare of the beloved but they are biased so that they desire the beloved to benefit from what they themselves can provide. AGAPE wants the beloved to receive the best, no matter where it comes from. The natural loves are invariably directed to those whom the lover finds intrinsically attractive in some way. But AGAPE is what allows a man to love those who are not naturally loveable.

The ultimate value of AGAPE however is that it is the one means by which God allows men to have a Gift-love towards Himself. Of course, this is somewhat of a major Paradox in human terms. There is nothing we can give to God which is not already His; and if it is already His, how have we actually given Him anything. Thank God that He is not bound by human logic. We ARE capable of withholding ourselves, our wills, and our hearts from God. We can, in that sense, also give them. What is His by right and would not exist for a moment if it ceased to be His (as the song is the singer's). He has nevertheless made ours in such a way that we can freely offer it back to him. And there is another way of giving to God too; every stranger whom we feed or clothe is Christ.

God is our true beloved. Before my wife and I had children, we had a dog that we loved dearly. The dog was seven years old when it developed skin cancer and had to be put away. That hurt and we cried over the loss almost as if the dog HAD been one of our children. My wife's grandmother died; we suffered under that loss. My father died; I still feel the pain of that loss. We live, day-by-day, under God's grace, aware that death may at any moment take other loved-ones, may take us from each other, or may even take our children from us. I'm not going to make light of it; those are very real terrors that tear at my heartstrings repeatedly. It is the knowledge that God is in control and that He does all things well that sustains us despite those fears. Whatever and whoever may be taken from us (and in the end we all die and lose ALL worldly connections) our Lord will NEVER, NEVER leave us. He IS our true beloved. There is none other like Him. Hallelujah!

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We have been looking at AGAPE directly today. As I mentioned, everything we have been examining about the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians these past weeks has also been about AGAPE. We will continue for the next three weeks in that same vein. Also, the applications that we will be talking about in the next three weeks, "Love and Pain" next week, "Love and Small Groups" the following week, and "Love and Biblical Counseling" the final week will all be centered on AGAPE love. AGAPE is the love that counts in heaven. In Heaven, any love that has never embodied Love Himself will be essentially irrelevant.



Nature will have Passed away when eternity is ushered in. All that is not eternal is eternally out of date. And, of the loves, only AGAPE is truly eternal. The other loves can become eternal only insomuch as AGAPE becomes intertwined with and functionally inseparable from them. EROS will have some survival in heaven; We will recognize and continue to love our spouses. STORGE will also be there; we will recognize and continue to love our children and families. PHILEO will survive; we will continue to recognize and love our friends. But these loves will continue to survive only insofar as AGAPE is involved. The spouse whom we rabidly desired to Possess but never really cared for will be irrelevant. The children who we enjoyed only when they didn't misbehave will be irrelevant. Those whom we called friends but were really merely companions in some enterprise will be irrelevant. Only those whom we Placed above our own welfare; only those for whom we had AGAPE love as well as the natural loves will mean anything to us in Heaven. AGAPE love is not something you can work at and develop on your own; it is a gift from God - only He can make it grow and develop within us. And He only does so as we are yielded to Him. We can't make AGAPE work on our own. We can only Pray to God that He will increase it within us and thus use us to serve HIS Purposes.

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Let's spend some time now in Prayer together before we go on to look at some case studies. We are gathered together in His name so we are assured that He is here among us. He has Promised us that if we Pray together and are in agreement together and with His will, He will Perform what we ask. Our Prayers are Potentially more Powerful than all the nuclear weapons in all the arsenals of the world. Let us use this mighty weapon in our Lord's service.

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