

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Love- Discipleship's Leading Indicator

(1 Corinthians 13; the life of Jesus)

Study #7

Sermon Series: Life-Changing Relationships

(Nurturing relationships that help us follow Jesus)

Introduction: The ties that bind...

My fascination with ropes and knots dates back to my youth as a Boy Scout when I learned the difference between a granny and a square knot, and how to tie a clove hitch, a half hitch, two half hitches, and a bowline knot.

Over the years, knot-tying has proven helpful when I've had to tie down loads in the back of my truck, secure limbs when cutting down trees, and, most especially, on camping trips.

The right knot is important when tying off tent stakes, strapping down gear to packs, or when hanging a food bag from a tree to protect the food from critters.¹

But, as important as these uses of ropes and knots are, they don't begin to compare to the critical use mountaineers have for them as they climb up a glacier or across a sheer rock face.

In mountaineering, knot-tying expertise is not a convenience. It is a matter of life and death.

¹ Such bags are called bear bags and are to be hung at least ten feet off the ground. Some of my "bear bags" have been hung at a height that would have only prevented a raid from the extremely rare Rocky Mountain dwarf grizzly.

After all, if a climber falls, the only thing protecting him or her from death is the rope and the knot.

On large-scale expeditions, several climbers will be roped together, and the group will move up the mountain as a team. Each one knows that his life depends on the others.

If one person slips, his or her weight will be supported by their climbing buddies. The lives of all the climbers depend on the ties that bind them together.

As this past week in San Antonio has amply demonstrated, life and health and safety are fragile and easily lost. Lots of people have stayed afloat during the last few days by the ropes of shelter, blankets, water, and food provided by friends, family, first responders, and even strangers.

In life, generally, and especially in times of crisis, we need a rope strong enough to bind us together. We need to have a knot that will enable us to keep each other from falling through the cracks, and that can draw others back from the brink.

God has given us that rope and that knot. It is love. Love is the high-water mark of all the Christian graces and it is the leading indicator of serious discipleship.

And the most obvious of the possible messages we could give about life-changing relationships is a message about love. (Duh.) It is to the theme of love that we turn our attention this morning.

We'll start off by listening to what the Apostle Paul had to say about love.

Some people have wrongly thought of Paul as a cold technician who sat in an ivory tower writing out theological treatises. No!

Of course, Paul was brilliant. But, without doubt, he knew the beauty and the importance of love.

Last Sunday, Jeff turned to 1 Corinthians 13 during his message, and we'll turn there now, too, as I shamelessly plagiarize Jeff - who, by the way, was himself just plagiarizing the Bible.

1 Corinthians 13 is all about love, but it is an interruption of his train of thought. Paul was telling his Corinthian friends of the ins and outs of spiritual gifts when, mid-thought, he broke in with comments about love.

It was a smart interruption. That's because, while spiritual gifts are very important (check out Jeff's messages from late December and early January), it is possible that spiritual gifts may be misused, and they can become matters of pride and jealousy.

So, Paul took a spiritual gifts break to sing the praises of love, which is the oil that lubricates all the relationships in life we will ever enjoy.

Love. Considered (1 Corinthians 13)

Love is Supremely Important (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

[1] If I speak with the tongues of me and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. [2] If I have the gift of prophecy and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. [3] And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

Paul was a "word" person who gave careful thought to how he communicated. That care is seen in all his letters and in the speeches he gave that are recorded in the book of Acts.

And, while not on Paul's level, of course, I happen to be something of a word person, too. I think it's important to be accurate in what we say and even in how we say what we say.

So, I take it to heart when Paul writes that eloquence, for all its importance, is nothing if not used lovingly. Ecstatic speech, while exciting, counts for nothing if spoken lovelessly.

Taken together, these three verses force us to think of all the good things we might do.

We might give money to charity, tell the truth, honestly fill out tax returns, be a faithful husband or wife, obey parents, and lots more.

Paul says that love is better than all these things put together. Without love, all these obediences are meaningless. Eloquence + prophecy + knowledge + faith - LOVE = 0.

So, love is supremely important. It is also uniquely beautiful. Just listen to Paul's description of love.

Love is Uniquely Beautiful (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

[4] Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, [5] does not act unbecomingly, it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, [6] does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; [7] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

That's a love sandwich.

The first piece of bread is a short list of two things that are always true about love and the second piece is a longer list of four things that love always does. The middle of the sandwich is made up of seven things that love never does.

He is describing what you can expect to see and hear from someone who loves. The one who loves takes these kinds of actions.

But I would want to add a layer to our understanding of what it means to love that goes beyond behavior. Love is more than acting in a certain way. It involves more than making a decision to act patiently and kindly.

Of necessity, love involves the heart. To love someone is to have a heart that is turned toward them. It isn't love if we're only gritting

our teeth doing what we think is patient and kind. It is to want to be patient with that person and to want to be kind to that person.

As Paul describes it here, love is an inner drive and passion to bless the other with patience and kindness and all the rest. This is the love we see Jesus giving to people throughout His life. He doled out this love to people He didn't know.

Love, Personified (in the life of Jesus)

Jesus Loved People Who Could Offer Him Nothing

[Matthew 9:35] Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. [36] Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited, like sheep without a shepherd.

Clearly, Jesus loved them. He healed them of their sicknesses, so He acted lovingly. But He also felt compassion for them. He was all torn up inside as He saw their need. Hands and heart.

But, while these people were fellow Jews, they weren't friends and they weren't family. They had no hold on Him, relationally, and they had nothing to offer Him.

They were poor, "***distressed and dispirited***", diseased people, and helping them wouldn't enrich Him in any ways. Yet, He loved them. Talk about "***not seeking its own.***" That's Jesus' love for you.

He also loved people who had been beaten up by life.

Jesus Loved People Who Had Been Beaten Up by Life

We watch Jesus interact with a woman at Jacob's well in Samaria. She had lived hard and bad. None of that seemed to matter to Jesus. He simply loved her.

He was confronted by a man who broke chains, ran through and lived in graveyards, and was compelled by demons to gash himself with stones. He reeked of evil. Jesus lavished love on that man.

He was approached by a leper whose open sores reeked of physical rot. He was society's cast-off. He did the unthinkable. He touched that man and poured out love on him, too.

He loved the sincere, seeking Pharisee, Nicodemus, and the tax-collectors, Matthew and Zacchaeus. He loved Jairus, the desperate synagogue official, and raised his daughter from the dead.

He seemed to be especially drawn to loving the least and the last and the lost of His day. He didn't consider them hopeless. He dealt with them redemptively. That's what "***believes all things, hopes all things***" is all about.

He even loved those who hated Him.

Jesus Loved People Who Hated and Opposed Him

For the three years of His active ministry, Jesus was actively opposed by the rulers of the Jews: Sadducees, Pharisees, chief priests and scribes.

They were curious about Him at first, quickly grew suspicious, and soon became vicious.

After numerous failed attempts to trip Him up and to trap Him in a mistake, they plotted to kill Him and succeeded in carrying out a plan that got Him arrested, convicted, beaten, and crucified.

While hanging from a Roman cross, and as these who hated Him walked by that cross, hurling insults, He prayed for them, ***[Luke 23:34] "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."***

That's what Paul meant by "***not keeping an account of a wrong suffered.***"

Jesus spent the last three years of His life loving those around Him and the last six hours of His life loving us all when He died on the cross. He believed in the redemptive, life-changing power of love.

He didn't simply love the people who were lovely and lovable. He didn't only love those who were good for Him or who helped Him.

He loved the needy and the troubled and the beat up, the down and out, the rebels and the rejecters.

And we may be tempted to think, *"Well, that was easy for Jesus. After all, He was God."* To which Stephen, the first Christian martyr, might say, *"Not so fast..."*

Stephen had been preaching to a group in Jerusalem shortly after Jesus had been crucified and raised from the dead. This group of men rejected the message and began stoning Stephen.

We read in Acts, chapter 7 that Stephen fell to his knees, and crying out with a loud voice, prayed, **[Acts 7:60]... "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!"** before he died. Just like Jesus.

Or remember Richard Wurmbrand, the Romanian pastor who suffered such unspeakable persecution by the Soviet Union for his faithful witness for Christ.²

Wurmbrand's life passion was to take the Good News of God's love in Christ to everyone - including those who persecuted him.

In his book, Tortured for Christ, he writes, *"God will judge us not according to how much we could endure, but how much we could love."*

In that same book, he tells how that love worked itself out in his imprisonment.

"It was strictly forbidden to preach to other prisoners. It was understood that whoever was caught doing this received a severe beating."

² Pastor Wurmbrand was also the founder of the Voice of the Martyrs ministry, originally named "Jesus to the communist world".

"A number of us [Christians] decided to pay the price for the privilege of preaching, so we accepted [the communists'] terms. It was a deal; we preached and they beat us. We were happy preaching. They were happy beating us, so everyone was happy."

It is only hands-and-heart love that prompts behavior like that.

So, it is possible. It's possible that we who believe in Jesus might follow in His steps and love the way He did.

Which is exactly what the God who has showered His love on us in Jesus is calling us to do. He calls us to a life devoted to love.

Love, Embraced

Leading an "out of this world" Life of Love

Love - the leading indicator of discipleship

For a Christian, LOVE is a very big deal. It's not one of the eight or ten things we are to do. It is what we are to do. Love for others is central to what life in Jesus is all about.

A lack of love shows that there is a shallowness in our relationship with God. It is fair to say that there is a correlation between how well we know God and how fervently we love.

In fact, to the extent that we don't love, to that extent we have not entered into the depths of a life-changing relationship with God.

We could even say, *"He doesn't love very well; he doesn't know God very well."*

It is central to the heart of God that we who know Jesus learn to love well. And love, as the Bible describes it and as Jesus lived it, is best seen when it is given to those who have wronged us.

You and I are called to love the one who is hard to love.

Love - given to the one who is hard to love

Being nice to those who are nice to us is sort of par for the course for the human race.

As Jesus pointed out, **[Luke 6:32] “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. [33] “If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.”**

Most everybody lives “*nice for nice.*” You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours. You be nice to me and I’ll be nice to you.

For those who would follow Jesus, though, the bar is raised high.

[Luke 6:27] “But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, [28] “bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you...[35] “But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. [36] “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

We put a lot of different spins on these words of Jesus. And I’ll freely admit that there is a need for some wisdom from God to know how to practically apply these words in certain extreme situations.

But there is no question that Jesus was calling His listeners then, and He is calling us now, to become sacrificial, counter-cultural, over-the-top loving people.

It is *pleasant* to love those who are nice to us. It is *powerful* when we love those who are not.

It’s like what we see in His parable about the Good Samaritan.

You and I will never enter into the power of that parable until we reckon with the status of a Samaritan in first-century Israel and with what a Samaritan was in the eyes of a first-century Jew.

A Samaritan would have had lots of reasons to despise a Jew and very few reasons to cross the road to lend aid to a wounded Jew who was lying in a ditch.
(Have you ever wondered if following Jesus into powerful, effective witness in our day is as simple as being really good, loving neighbors?)

Jesus told this story of one Samaritan who did care and who did help (hands-and-heart) because He needed to impress us with the radical version of love to which He is calling us.

If you tell me to love without sacrificing time, energy, prayers, money, I will sign up in a heartbeat. But if you tell me that love, by definition, involves sacrifice, that it is going to cost, that love equals giving. Well, I’ll do it, but I’ll have to get some help in knowing how.

How do I make the jump from distancing myself from the person I see as unlovely to drawing near to him, to her? How do I move from contempt for the one I believe is unlovable to compassion?

When I am most challenged to love, when I am most drawn to NOT love, I turn to two key ideas that I believe are central to life in Christ *and* to loving as Jesus calls me to love.

These truths “center” me and point me forward. I hope they help you.

First, I believe that you and I must be convinced of and live in light of the goodness of God.

Jumping into a Life of Love Requires That We Embrace...

...the goodness of God

We believe that God is great and that He is powerful. I wonder if we sometimes question His essential goodness.

There are a lot of bad things happening in the world today. Lots of suffering and lots of injustice. There are lots of terrible things happening in our some of our lives.

We wonder, *“Would a good God allow this? Despite all the evil in the world, is there reason to believe that the God we worship is, at His core, good? That He is gracious?”*

I believe there is. The reason I believe God is good is because of what we learn about Him when we look at the life and death of Jesus.

Think about a giant Texas live oak. The rings of that tree run from the base all the way through the trunk. But the rings are hidden as long as the tree is standing.

Once a saw does its work, though, and the tree is down, we can see what was true all along. The rings were always there.

In the same way, the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus reveal what has been true all along about God. He is good. He is for us. He loves us.

Ancient history and current events are riddled with tragedy. In light of these tragedies, we might be tempted to believe that God is not real or that He doesn't care.

The tragedies seem to obscure His goodness - but then we look at Jesus, crucified and raised from the dead for us.

The rings of His life and death are there to assure us of God's presence and goodness. It's all there for everyone to see.

Here's what the Apostle Paul has to say about God's goodness: ***[Romans 8:32] He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?***

In other words, since God gave us Jesus - the best gift ever! - He'll surely give us everything and only the things that are good for us.

And among the things this good God who gave us Jesus has given us is the command to love.

The only commands a good God would give are the commands that are good for us who obey them. He is the One who told us to love.

The One who commands that we love is the One who loves us best. It is in our best interest and for our own flourishing that we embrace the way of love.

God telling us to love isn't a cruel taskmaster consigning us to suffering. He's inviting us to life.

God's command to love that person we find it most difficult to love is a "good news" command. The One who gave the command is a "good news" God.³

A second truth that will help us learn to love is that we have been forgiven a debt that we could have never repaid.

...the enormity of the debt we could have never repaid.

Sometimes, we are like the Apostle Peter, who wondered how often he needed to forgive someone who wronged him. We don't love because we've been wronged.

(Maybe, we've been wronged, and we wall off ourselves from ever loving anybody. Maybe we've been wronged and withhold love from that person who wronged us.)

Jesus answered Peter's question with a devastating parable about a slave who was forgiven by his king a debt of millions of dollars (in today's currency). (Matthew 18:23-35)

The forgiven slave was, of course, delighted by the grace that had been lavished on him. But he went out and immediately demanded that one of his fellow slaves pay him back a debt of hundreds of dollars.

When that slave wasn't able to repay, the first slave had the second slave thrown into jail.

³ Christian counselor Larry Crabb has written that the indispensable basis for an enduring, unwavering, and joyful commitment to obey God's commands is implicit faith in the goodness of God.

Jesus told the slave He had forgiven the enormous debt, ***[Matthew 18:33] "Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?"***

The next time you are tempted to withhold grace and love from someone because they have wronged you, remember the great debt you have been forgiven by God.

When you weigh the sin you've been forgiven against the sin you must forgive, you'll find the scales completely out of balance.

If there is one practice I could recommend to grow an ability to love, it would be to remember, whenever tempted to not love or forgive, *"My sin was great. God's grace was greater."*

Conclusion:

Different groups have their own symbols and signs. Democrats have their donkey and Republicans their elephant. The Buddhist has his lotus flower, the Muslim a crescent moon, and the Jew the star of David.

The unmistakable, essential indicator that you are a follower of Jesus is that you love, and that you love as He loved.

It isn't church attendance and it's not giving. It's not being an elder or a pastor or a deacon. It isn't serving on the Missions Committee or on the Praise Team.

It is love.

Jesus, the One who has saved us and the One we aim to follow, was the most loving Person who has ever lived.

Both by His life and His death, He showed us that love gives.

Over and over again in life, He placed His most precious assets at the disposal of others in need as He loved them. At the end, He poured out His love for us all.

That's love. Now, for the devastating punch line: In the same way that Jesus loved us, so we are to love.

The assignment to love is not given to a select band of super saints. No, all who name the name of Jesus are called to love. I am. You are.

Nothing will have as much impact as your love will have on your friends and family, your church, and a watching world.