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LOVE IS THE GREATEST

The greatest. . . is love. I Corinthians 13:13

Some time ago, a violent husband and father living near my home made the front page of the Chicago papers when he killed his two year old son, and then barged into the office where his wife was working and held her hostage for several hours. For a long time, he faced the police in a stand-off. They did not dare move in on him for fear of what he might do to his wife, and he was immobilized, too, because of his fear of the police. During the course of this hideous confrontation, the distraught man begged the police to kill him. They did not, and finally he surrendered meekly. Not long afterward they discovered the body of the couple's young son whom the father had slain.

I would hesitate mentioning this because, unfortunately, in the times in which we are now living, this murderous escapade is not especially extraordinary, but I would like to ask you a question about it. Do you think that a man who would do what this man did was insane? I suppose that psychiatrists will examine him, and most likely those who defend him in court will attempt to establish this man's mental incompetence. What they will decide, I don't know. But what do you think, would a man who did what this man did necessarily have to be insane?

Wouldn't you agree that a person would not have to be insane to do what this man did? Obviously people don't do things like this, unless they have been provoked. But people are easily provoked these days. To be provoked is not to be insane. To be sure the incident I reported is extreme, but human behavior often approaches these extremities even when it never goes this far.

Take the destruction of children, for example. A

series of special programs called "All the Broken Children" has documented the growing modern problem of child abuse. What parent, if he is honest, would not have to admit that there were times when he lost control of himself as he punished his children and then breathed a prayer of thankfulness later that he had not broken his child's arm or his jaw? Think of all the dislocated shoulders that have resulted from the rough way mothers have handled their children.

I overheard a conversation in which a couple of men were talking about gun control. One of them said he wanted a handgun in his home for self-defense, and he wanted it for his wife's sake when he was away from home. The other replied that he would never want a handgun in his home because he was afraid that in a moment of rage someone in his family might use it on someone else in his family.

No, a person doesn't have to be insane to do something terrifying. Normal people do ugly things to one another. That one primary ingredient in human relationships that alone is able to make our lives beautiful is in very short supply. Do you know what that is? If love means love for others, love for ourselves—there's plenty of that. "You first, after me." But love for others is dwindling—the kind of love that is expressed in this moving description: "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (I Corinthians 13:4-7).

That kind of love is missing, isn't it? And you know, some people are even saying, "That's okay. That's the way it should be. If we try to be loving we destroy ourselves." Dr. Hans Selye, director of

the University of Montreal's Institute of Experimental Medicine and Surgery says: "[As a child] I was taught that I must love my neighbor as I do myself and that I must never be selfish. But I never could accept that..." Dr. Selye warns that trying to be loving sets up stress patterns that cause heart attacks, ulcers, and insomnia. He calls for egotism. He says: "Egotism is a law of nature which none of us can disobey. All living things must be egocentric in order to survive."

Maybe, Dr. Selye. But are you willing to buy that? If we finally give up loving one another, won't we all be living in even more of a jungle than we are living in? Think of what is happening now, even when most people ~~stare~~ agree that they should love one another more than themselves. The problem is that once we abandon trying to be more loving, we ourselves are plunged into an environment that is totally unsatisfactory. When people do not love one another, the human relationships that result are destructive for all involved.

In his play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Edward Albee has captured the reciprocal torture a husband and wife who do not love one another inflict on each other. Often the dialogue deteriorates to wretched insults and unintelligible screams as Martha shrieks at her drink-sodden husband. Here are two people trying to demolish one another at the very same time they need one another a great deal. But that's the way it goes; there is a good chance that you know about this very well yourself.

Now then, what can be done about such domestic ugliness? I think we must begin by admitting that we are in the deep trouble that we are in for religious reasons. We are in trouble collectively, and individual people, married couples, and families are in trouble because of religious reasons. A

few moments ago, quoted a beautiful description of love that said among other things that love is kind and it's not jealous and it's not irritable. Well, that definition is, as you noticed, from the Bible. And the Bible describes love in I Corinthians 13 where those words are found as the greatest religious virtue. In fact (and this is very frightening for people who like to be known as Christians), I Corinthians 13 says that if a person calls himself a Christian, but he doesn't have love, he is not really a Christian. I Corinthians 13 says: "If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal... If I give away all that I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing" (vv. 1, 3).

This chapter concludes by saying: 'love never ends; as for prophecy it will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ... So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love' (vv. 8, 13).

Love is the greatest of the Christian virtues according to I Corinthians 13. This means, doesn't it, that if a person does not express love, his Christianity is deficient or non-existent, if a married couple does not, their Christianity must be deficient or non-existent, and if society does not, it must be non-Christian. The doctor who said, as we saw a few moments ago, that we should forget about expressing love and should be concerned only for ourselves, is expressing a non-Christian point of view when he talks that way, isn't he?

The reason the Bible insists that love is the most important expression of our humanity is that the great revelation that we have in the Bible is the revelation of divine love that is absolutely overwhelming in its magnitude. The reason love is in such short supply in our world, the reason many of us don't work at it, the reason many of us don't

want to think about it, and the reason some are even willing to forget about it is that so many of us have lost our religion. Maybe some of us never had proper religion. The great message of the gospel no longer grips and astonishes most of us. If the reality of God's great love revealed in Jesus Christ were believed and understood by more people, the softening, correcting, and renewal of our marriages, homes, and society would be immense.

According to the Bible, God's love was revealed first of all when He brought the universe into existence. God is a being who is fully complete in Himself and before our universe was created, He existed in the perfection of the love that was expressed between the three persons of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But God called created beings into existence whom He could love and who were able to return His love with theirs. Man became the crown of this creation, and man was able to love God his maker. And he did ... for a time. And then he began to love himself more than God, and man invited sin into his heart, into his life, and into the universe. Man did this. And as a result, everything became corrupt.

Man, who had been called to live in obedience to God, became a rebel instead. The beautiful universe became disfigured and the seeds of its destruction began to germinate and grow. And God had every right to destroy it all just as you would have the right to destroy something which you had made that had become spoiled, insulting, and rotten. But more than that, God *had* to destroy it all, for God's creation had become the seat of rebellion against heaven. In its existence it expressed insult and affront to God's magnificent holiness. The reality of His own being demanded that the sinful reality of rebellious creation be destroyed. And if God had simply done what was demanded by this impossible situation, every man,

woman, and child would have faced the sure experience of God's indescribable wrath.

But the God of creation became the God of salvation. And He became that because of His nature which can best be described with the word *love*. And you know, He did not bring salvation and restoration for His creation by setting up a committee of angels to get the job done. He did not set up a corporation to repair the damage. But He entered our doomed universe Himself in the person of His only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now look at Jesus Christ. What did He do? Did He barnstorm the earth and say, "Attention! You should be better people, for then my Father will love you"? Oh no. One cannot go into a veterans' hospital and tell a ward full of amputees that they should learn how to walk better so they can run faster and win more races. One cannot tell dead people to breathe more deeply. Well, neither can one put a world that is under the pervasive influence of sin back together by preaching a message of moral improvement alone. Look what Jesus did.

Number one: He brought to His Father in heaven a sacrifice of full obedience. Jesus expressed all the loving obedience to the will of God that God had created man to express. Number two: Jesus received all of the punishment that mankind and his world deserved. Jesus, the second person of the Holy Trinity, expressed the love of God perfectly when He, in obedience to the will of His Father in heaven, died on Calvary's cross and the wrath of God against the sin of the world broke over His magnificent person. He absorbed that wrath, and He survived to live forever.

This is the love of God expressed in Jesus Christ, God's Son, who was given for the salvation of sinful men. And those who believe in this Jesus are restored and saved and overwhelmed by this revelation of God's love. One of the great Christian

hymns express the emotions of a person who is thunderstruck as he sees what God has done for him through Jesus:

"And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Savior's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love, how can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

'Tis mystery all! Th' Immortal dies!
Who can explore His strange design?
In vain the first-born seraph tries
To sound the depths of love Divine!
'Tis mercy all! let earth adore,
Let angel minds inquire no more.

He left His Father's throne above
So free, so infinite His grace;
Emptied Himself of all but love
And bled for Adam's helpless race;
'Tis mercy all, immense and free,
For, O my God, it found out me.

No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him is mine!
Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousress Divine,
Bold I approach th' eternal throne
And claim the crown, thru Christ my own."

You see, we have lost this vision of the love of God in our society. No amount of sweet talk about a love of God that falls like sugar coating over the dismal elements of our lives can make up for the truth about the real love of God that we find in the Bible. And when people don't know anything about the love of God that was revealed on Calvary, they cannot be expected to express much love

themselves. Most of the time, the fact that we are not able to express love as we should does not cause explosions of hatred and violence. Usually we can contain our selfishness, or there are arrangements set up in our society by convention and law that enable us to live with our lovelessness. But there are times when hatred boils over and sometimes it causes outright crime. Sometimes it makes people shriek at one another. Often it causes the destruction of marriages and homes. Our lack of love lays a film of despair over everything.

We must talk about the love of God, therefore, frequently, and we must believe in it all the time. It is not enough to decry the symptoms of our lack of love and try to apply the bandages of psychology and sociology and any other branch of practical human science that can offer short term relief. We must go to the root of our problem and confess that people who do not believe the gospel we have just been talking about, reject God, and when they reject God, they reject God's love, and when they reject God's love they reject love itself, for God is love.

The repair that love can bring into your life must begin by your recognition of the need you have to receive the love of God in your life. You must begin by believing that you are worthy of eternal death because of your sin. And you must believe that when Jesus died, He paid for your sin. Nothing that you do can ever save you, but Jesus' blood and righteousness can. You must believe that. And when you believe that, you can begin to express love yourself.

How does faith in the love of God revealed at Calvary's cross enable a person to begin to express love in his own life?

Well, first of all, the reality of the love of God revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ is an overpowering example of love supreme that is bound to influence

the way believers think about themselves and others. One of the reasons people are not more loving than they are is that they don't think love is that important. Some consider love an expression of weakness. But a person who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ knows that love is the most important thing in the universe, for he understands that if God had not been a God of love, all of us would have been doomed. And when such a person reads in the Bible that love is the greatest, as 1 Corinthians 13 says, he agrees. He can understand that if a person has faith, but he doesn't have love there is something wrong. If a person has all kinds of great hopes for a future with God, but he has no love, something is wrong—he can believe that.

And secondly, those who believe in the love of God revealed at Calvary receive the power of Jesus' Holy Spirit that enables them to express love. The main reason people do not express love more effectively is that they are so under the influence of sin they are unable to. That's why, when they do try to express love they get ulcers and heart attacks. Their system cannot take it. They are naturally selfish, indeed, as Dr. Selye said.

The Bible reveals that as the love of God comes into the life of those who believe in Jesus, these people are remade and they become a part of the new creation that is gradually throwing off the chains of selfishness. Colossians 3 puts it this way: "You have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. . . . Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Colossians 3:10, 12-14).

You'll see, Jesus Christ died on the cross in order to earn the right to send His Holy Spirit into the hearts of His people so that they could be remade in the image of the God of love who made them.

Do you wonder what would happen if you would begin to believe the gospel of the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ?

Well, I wouldn't want to make any rash promises. I don't suppose you could expect that your life would change over night, especially if you have been living where no one believes in the love of God, especially if you have rejected this gospel for a long time and you have been very bitter and selfish for years and years. You cannot expect that all the habits of the past and the ways of looking at things in the past will change immediately. But they can *begin to change* right now. You can make a new beginning. And in the power of Christ's Spirit you can begin to change and become more loving.

And who knows what that would do to the people who know you? Your wife? Or husband? The people you work with? Your friends? Who knows how your world might change if you would become one of those people who are absolutely amazed at the love of God and who receive the power of Christ that enables them to be loving, too? If only the love of God would come into your life and you would believe..

It has come into your life. It has come right now. God arranged that you would be brought to this point in your life, and He arranged that you would read this message of His love. Now you have no excuse to doubt Him.

In ourselves, we cannot love as we should. The love of God, all love excelling, has come into your life. Love is the greatest. If you believe in Jesus Christ, He will show you how true that is.

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