

Studies in Practical Christian Living

Love

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Background

So far in our studies we have taken a brief look at faith, and hope. Unless we examine the basics of our faith, we will never be able to build beyond that. Aspects of faith, hope and love are interwoven throughout Scripture, and a good understanding of these aspects is fundamental to our growth as Christians.

The Message

Biblical love is like a many faceted gem of great value. To study every facet would take a very long time, but the rewards would be priceless. We want to bring out some truths to look at and meditate on.

The statement 'God is love' is at the very heart of the Gospel, often the first verse that children learn at Sunday School. Yet have we really got to grips with the context? This love should so overwhelmingly possess us as people, transforming our lives (1 John 4:7-21). We cannot say that we love God unless we love one another. We cannot love others unless we can love (respect) ourselves. Without love we are nothing.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures we have a revelation of God's love for mankind through His interaction with individual people, the nation of Israel and ultimately mankind as a whole. **"God saw all that he had made and it was very good"** (Genesis 1:31). Adam and Eve were of course God's final creative act; the icing on the cake! In fact, they were so good that God wanted to see them **"Be fruitful and multiply, filling the earth"** (Genesis 1:28).

Even after Adam and Eve had been banished from the garden of Eden, destroying that intimacy of relationship where God could walk with them, God did not abandon them but continued to help them (Genesis 4:1) and expect a response from them which was wholehearted and intimate, (Genesis 4:4-5). This sets the context in which God's love was continually grappling with the barrier which our rebellion created. God's ultimate act of love came in the person of Jesus (John 3:16-25). This is not some simple formula, but is basic to an understanding and appreciation of how much God loves you and me. We need to meditate on this passage, and learn what our response should be in the light of the New Testament.

Let's turn to Genesis 32:22-32. Jacob is in the midst of a personal crisis. Since running away from Esau life has not been easy. He had to learn many hard lessons in his service to Laban. Despite that, he had vision from God revealing divine protection, he has married Leah and Rachel and also matured considerably in his relationship with God and as a person. He has come to a point in his life where he wants to put past wrongs to rights so restoring his relationship with Esau and like us all is scared. In Genesis 32:9-12 we can see that Jacob has already prayed about meeting Esau again. This prayer looks at Jacob's obedience to God, his awareness of his sin, his personal fear of rejection from Esau and his resting on the promises that God has made for him. A perfect prayer and yet it was not enough. He needed to get to a place where he was alone with God, somewhere that he could wrestle with those parts of his character that he was still clinging to that he hadn't allowed to be shaped and moulded by God. Jacob thought the issue was his relationship with Esau, it actually concerned his relationship with God. During the struggle he was physically wounded but spiritually great healing took place. To see what happened when he met Esau read the rest of the account in Genesis.

Through the two passages that we have chosen from Genesis we wanted to show the complexity of our response to God's love. The fact that our response is extremely individual as God created us uniquely different should not stop us from recognising that loving one another and loving God is not necessarily easy, and like Jacob we are quite likely to come away with scars. Scars that might be beautiful to God but are still quite painful. We must all take up our cross (Matthew 16:24). So often today people make light of the true meaning of words. How often have you heard people say "I love chocolate", or "I hate cabbage"? People have forgotten how to love each other. Love is taken to be a fleeting emotion that waxes and wanes as the mood takes. Our final point about love was that a fundamental part of Biblical love is servanthood (John 15:9-17). Christian character and servanthood are modelled on Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:5-18). Biblical love is constancy, perseverance, commitment and grace (Jeremiah 31:3) - a covenant love.

The Church needs to be an environment where people have space to make mistakes, space to learn, without being condemned by narrow minded legalistic attitudes. Servanthood is not a response to new rules and regulations. It's an outworking of a new life in love. The character of Christian servanthood is not religious. It's relational. When we look at breaking bread together, we shall deal more with this relational aspect. Church needs to be a place where people can truly be themselves rather than what they think other people want them to be. To be used by God we must learn to be real, to be ourselves. Sometimes people think from our outside appearance we are burning for God, but inside we are hurting and hoping that someone - anyone - will notice. We need an environment of love, where we are nurtured and can relax and let God deal with any hurt and problems in their lives. It is only in our humbleness and weakness that we can see the strength and grace of Jesus.

To walk side by side with Jesus, living a self-sacrificial love, we can expect persecution. Jesus taught his disciples to follow this path (Mark 10:21). We have already spoken about the need for us to take up our cross. We are called to walk in His footsteps, relying solely on God in whom we are a new creation (Ephesians 4:22-24). This has very practical consequences on our lives (Ephesians 4:25 - 5:5).

We need to ask ourselves "Have Christians forgotten how to speak the truth in love? Have we got the balance wrong?".

Questions

1. Why does 'servanthood' often appear threatening to both the server and the served?
2. How can we learn to speak the truth in love?
3. How can we begin to develop an environment where people can truly grow?
4. When a tramp walks into Church on a Sunday morning, what should our reaction be?
5. How are we to respond to people who have aids?
6. How are we to respond to homosexuality?