

“CHRISTIANITY 101 #6: THE HEART OF IT ALL”

Matthew 22:37-40; John 13:35

© 2024 Rev. Dr. Brian E. Germano

**[PROPS NEEDED: “Forrest Gump” Video Clip; 1 Cor. 13 paraphrase on screen]**

[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 2-11-24]

--I--

1. **[SHOW VIDEO CLIP from movie "*Forrest Gump*"... (1:48:34 - 1:49:19 --Total 0:44, from “Will you marry me, Jenny? TO “I’m not a smart man, but I know what love is.”)]**

2. Over the last five weeks of our series "*Christianity 101*," as we've been reminded of some of the basics of our faith, our focus has mainly been on basic Christian *beliefs*.

A--But as we conclude the series today, I want us to talk about something that, according to today's scriptures, is as important (or perhaps even more so) than "right belief."

B--And from today's opening video from the movie "*Forrest Gump*", & from the fact that today is the Sunday before Valentine's Day, you can probably guess what it is... the concept and practice of LOVE.

3. Listen to what Jesus says about this in today's two scriptures:

A--In Matthew 22, a teacher of the religious law (which primarily focuses on correct *belief*) asks him what the greatest commandment is. And Verses 37-40 says...

*"37 He replied, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself. 40 All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.”*

B--In today's second scripture from John 13, Jesus is talking with his Disciples about this "new commandment" of love that would define his followers, and in Vs. 35 he says... *"This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other."*

C--According to Jesus, you see, the practice of LOVE -- even *more* than having "correct belief" -- is to be at the very *heart* of what it means to be a Christian. <sup>1</sup>

D--Yet, in today's world of prejudice, hatred, division, manipulation, and incivility (even in the *church*) I wonder if we've forgotten this. Do we really *know* what love IS?

--II--

4. Well, while our English word “love” can be translated into four *different* Greek terms in the Bible, <sup>2</sup> the one that’s used over 150 times in the New Testament is the Greek term *agape*, <sup>3</sup> which means "*unselfish, benevolent concern for the well-being of another.*"

A--Now notice: It's NOT a feeling or an emotion; NOT romantic or sexual passion; but instead it is self-giving, self-sacrificing concern for the good of *another*.

1--It puts the needs and desires of others *before* even our own needs & desires.

2--It gives and expects nothing in return, and does so for even the most unlovely and unlovable <sup>4</sup> -- this is what the Bible means by *agape* love.

B--Obviously, it's NOT something which comes easily or naturally for any of us, but is only made possible by the power of God's Holy Spirit working in and through us. <sup>5</sup>

C--Even the famous GA Methodist pastor Cecil Myers once said, "*I've never met a person I couldn't love, but I've had some close calls.*" <sup>6</sup>

5. So, if this is what the Bible means by "love" (self-giving, self-sacrificing concern for the well-being of others), then -- in the words of the 1980s rock-star Tina Turner -- "*What's love got to do with it?*" <sup>7</sup>

A--I mean, isn't being a Christian just about believing all the "right things", doing "good things," praying, reading our Bibles, and going to church every Sunday?

B--What DOES *agape* love have to do with the way we live out our daily *personal* lives?

1--This past week, I was on the phone with our insurance company, trying to get a replacement card for our Flexible Spending Account that I'd been trying to get for the last 5 months. This was the sixth time I'd called about this.

2--And I have to confess... after I felt them giving me more of a "run around", I lost my temper with the representative! I didn't cuss him out, but I wasn't nice.

3--And while I did later apologize, by the time we finished our call, I felt like a complete heel! *I did not practice love in that conversation!*

C--So, what about the practice of love in our life *together* as God's church?

1--What does *agape* love have to do with how we conduct our administrative meetings like Church Council, Trustees, and Finance? How should it affect the way we carry out H.R. operations through our S.P.R.Committee?

2--What about the weekly planning we do for our worship services, or the meetings we have for our missions, children's, or youth ministry?

3--Aren't those just "business" meetings? Or should we conduct even those *differently* than a secular business would conduct them? Should even *they* be guided by the value and practice of *love*?

D--Well, we didn't read it earlier, but another famous biblical passage about this is found in the famous "Love Chapter" of 1 Corinthians 13, where (in Verses 1-3) we find the apostle Paul telling the Corinthian Christians:

*"1 If I speak in tongues of human beings and of angels but I don't have love, I'm a clanging gong or a clashing cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and I know all the mysteries and everything else, and if I have such complete faith that I can move mountains but I don't have love, I'm nothing. 3 If I give away everything that I have and hand over my own body to feel good about what I've done but I don't have love, I receive no benefit whatsoever."*

E--In other words, it's not enough to be "super spiritual", super knowledgeable about the Bible, or super-generous in our giving. No. All of these avail us *nothing* if we don't PRACTICE love in the *doing* of them.

6. You see, both of today's two scriptures *and* these verses from Paul remind us that self-giving, self-sacrificing concern for the well-being of *others* is the very *heart* of what it means to be both a Christian *person* and a Christian *church*. <sup>8</sup>

A--I once heard it said that for a Christian, agape Love is to...

- 1--...inform what we BELIEVE,
- 2--...mold what we SAY,
- 3--...motivate what we DO,
- 4--...and shape who we ARE.

B--Yes, there are many, many ways that you and I can believe and practice our faith as Christians -- that's why there's so many denominations and churches... because each person and group believes & practices their faith slightly differently. And that's okay.

C--But no matter the church, the beliefs, or our practice, the Bible is clear that if we do these in such a way that we run over those who we disagree with, neglect the guests in our midst, hold on to grudges from the past, or ignore the needs of the poor, then we may very well *disqualify* ourselves from Christian discipleship. <sup>9</sup>

D--You see, Jesus cares as much about HOW we live out our beliefs and our faith as he does about WHAT we believe and do. And WE'RE to do the same!

--III--

7. To conclude, I want to invite us all (in-person and online) to **read together** a version of 1 Corinthians 13 that I wrote, hoping to challenge us in considering exactly what it means to practice biblical love in our individual and church lives. You'll see it **ON SCREEN...**

*"If I worship God in a certain style that I know to be the 'appropriate' one, but look down my nose at others who worship differently, or have different skin color; politics, or cultural heritage, then I'm nothing more than a loud, ringing, obnoxious cell phone in a quiet, romantic restaurant."*

*If while at church, I speak to all my closest friends each and every week, but fail to go out of my way to welcome the stranger and the guest, then I'm like a tourist at the Grand Canyon who's only concern is that there's no WiFi in my hotel room.*

*If I do things 'by the book' in my church committee or ministry meeting, but ignore the spirit of love that that book represents, then I'm no better than a freight train intentionally running over an innocent bystander.*

*If I'm convinced that I'm theologically 'correct' about what the Bible says, but don't manifest those beliefs through my respect and love for others with whom I disagree, then in the eyes of God all my 'correct' beliefs count for precisely nothing.*

*The heart of Christianity is love and humility in all things. Acting in love is more important than being 'right.' Sharing Christ's love is more important than whether or not we always get our way. Love will never fail -- it's to be the primary motivation for all we say and do in God's church.*

*In the past, when we were young Christians and a young church, we took pride in being gatekeepers of tradition; in not allowing new ideas, new ways of thinking, and new, different people from affecting us too much. But now that we're growing up and maturing in our faith, we know we can't continue to act the way we used to. Love requires that we give up our old, immature ways.*

*So now these three remain: FAITH to trust God through changes and new things and new people; HOPE that we don't have to be who we used to be; and LOVE which enables us to live and act more Christlike along our life's journeys. But the greatest of these is self-giving, self-sacrificing, God-like LOVE."*

8. [PRAYER]

9. [CLOSING SONG: #409 -- "The Gift of Love"]

### **ENDNOTES:**

<sup>1</sup> Love, you see, is the very essence and nature of God Himself -- the Bible says that "*God is love*" (Read 1 John 4:8 & 16), and so when we love others the way God loves us, it honors God himself.

<sup>2</sup> There was *storgé*, which referred to the cherishing of one's family/kindred, especially in reference to the love between parents and children. There was *philia* (*phileo*), which is sometimes translated as "brotherly love" (Greek *philadelphia*), and it means to have a friendship, affection, or fondness for someone or something (such as to *like/love* ice cream or your dog, or your friend). And there was also the Greek word *eros*, which is often thought of as sexual desire (hence the English word "erotic"), but which literally refers to one's desire for something that they do not possess -- it's selfish desire = desire for our own well-being. However, although these three words were in cultural use during biblical times, neither *storgé* nor *eros* are used anywhere in the Bible, and *philia* is used only six times.

<sup>3</sup> Most often this is translated "Love." However, in some translations (i.e., KJV) it is often translated as "charity."

<sup>4</sup> Notice that biblical *agape* love is more than simply a specific act/action; it is a way of living in the world -- an attitude / a perspective on life.

<sup>5</sup> Read Galatians 5:22.

<sup>6</sup> Told by retired North Georgia United Methodist Pastor Rev. Gary Parrish in one of his sermons, Fall 1994.

<sup>7</sup> This was the title to one of her hit songs back in 1984.

<sup>8</sup> Early in Christian history, this was acknowledged, as well. For example, living in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century AD, the unbelieving Greek writer Lucian noticed how love seemed to be the hallmark of the early Christians. He once wrote that *"It is incredible to see the fervor with which the people of that religion help each other in their wants. They spare nothing. Their first legislator [one Jesus] has put it in their heads that they are brothers [and sisters]."* Writing in the same century, the famous Christian apologist Tertullian wrote that *"It is our care for the helpless, our practice of lovingkindness, that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. 'Look!' they say, 'How they love one another! Look how they are prepared to die for one another!'"*

How unfortunate, though, that there are many of us as Christians (including sometimes those of us in church leadership) who are so caught up in having to be "right" and "correct" about things that we don't know how to *practice LOVE* along the way. We too often seem more concerned with "doctrinal purity" (which IS important) than with "loving our neighbor." Or, perhaps we're more concerned with demanding "social justice" (which also IS important) than with doing it in a way that models how we *"love the Lord our God with our heart, soul, and mind,... and our neighbor as ourself."* And many of us often seem more concerned with getting OUR views heard and adopted than about a PROCESS of love which *shares together* and *learns from* views or people who we don't particularly like or agree with.

<sup>9</sup> Those of our church's leadership have heard me say before, *"Jesus cares as much about HOW we make decisions as he does about the actual decision themselves."* He's as concerned about our process as he is about the end result -- as cares as much about much about our JOURNEY as about our DESTINATION. And according to today's scriptures, it's a journey that is to be characterized by *agape* love for God and neighbor. Agape love is the "heart of it all" -- it's why we exist as a church, and it's to be our primary motivation for all we say and do, both as a church and as individual Christians.