

May 26, 2019
Sunday Evening Service
Communion
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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LOVE EARNESTLY
1 Peter 4:8

The other day I heard Jackie DeShannon singing Burt Bacharach's and Hal David's well known song *What the World Needs Now*. You are probably familiar with this song that has been around for over 50 years. As I listened to the words, I thought, "That is so insipid."

*What the world needs now is love, sweet love
It's the only thing that there's just too little of . . .
Lord, we don't need another mountain,
There are mountains and hillsides enough to climb
There are oceans and rivers enough to cross,
Enough to last till the end of time. . . .
Lord, we don't need another meadow
There are cornfields and wheat fields enough to grow
There are sunbeams and moonbeams enough to shine
Oh listen, lord, if you want to know.
What the world needs now is love, sweet love.*

In the first place, the Lord knows what the world needs far better than anyone in the world knows. Our Great Creator who made the mountains, hillsides, oceans, rivers, fields, and sunbeams and moonbeams knows full well what we need. And He said that what we need is more love.

Part of the problem the world struggles with is a lack of understanding of what constitutes true love, God-kind-of love. The world is quite sure that the God described in the Bible is not loving because He is also wise and just. Because God is wise, He knows what is best for His created beings. Because God is just, He will

punish His created beings for not submitting to the wisdom He reveals. That, in the minds of the natural person, is not love. Love to fallen sinners is you giving me whatever I want. Love to fallen sinners is you saying nice things to me, you making me feel good about myself, you allowing me to do whatever I want to do.

The greater problem is that the "Yous" in such equations are not willing or able to make the continual sacrifices required to please the "Mes." But, having said that, notice the word sacrifices. Even genuine, real, God-kind-of love requires sacrifices. We know that because God—who by His nature is love, who through His actions proves love—made the greatest sacrifice in eternity for us who are by nature His enemies. If we are going to love like God loves, we will be required to make sacrifices. And that is why "love is the only thing there is just too little of" even in the Body of Christ.

Peter addressed this letter to Christians, not to the world at large. Peter challenged Christians with God's standard, "Love each other earnestly" or love each other assiduously, or to use the KJV word, love each other fervently. Why do we need to do that? Because there is a bunch of sin in the body of Christ that needs to be covered over. You're kidding me! Does that statement shock you? What modern Christian is willing to believe that? Every Christian who trusts God and obeys Him.

An Important Command.

The command in our text is straightforward and easy enough to understand. *Above all, keep loving one another earnestly.* The two words, *above all*, indicate that love supersedes. Indeed, the command says that love is above all, or in the literal meaning of the Greek, it is *before all*. It is the expression of superiority in comparison. That is rather extreme, isn't it? Why is love so important?

A good answer to that question is found in Jesus' reply to the lawyer who asked about important commands. He asked, "*Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?*" Jesus replied to the lawyer, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the*

Prophets” (Matthew 22:36-40). Of all the commands in Scripture, love God and love others sums them all up. That qualifies as “above all,” doesn’t it?

We find the same evidence or conclusions in the New Testament epistles. Paul wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica, *Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another (1 Thessalonians 4:9)*. Peter wrote earlier in the letter we are studying, *Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart (1 Peter 1:22)*. John wrote, *And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us (1 John 3:23)*.

Throughout its entirety, the Bible reiterates the supremacy of love. But what is love above or more important than? Compared to what other actions or traits is love supreme? Or we might ask, “Love is more important than _____?”

We can fill in the blank by considering the immediate context of the statement. Verses seven through eleven comprise a paragraph or section of thought. *The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies – in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen (1 Peter 4:7-11)*.

From this information we can deduce that love is superior to self-control, which is to keep passions and responses under control (v.7). Love is above, thinking soberly in order not to hinder prayers (v.7). That means that love is superior even to thinking about what is acceptable to God as Paul described such thinking in his letter to the Philippian believers. *Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things (Philippians 4:8)*.

Love is more important than thinking correctly or in line with truth. It is superior to showing hospitality instead of grumbling about what you are expected to do (v.9). Love is superior to preaching and teaching (v.11) and serving (v.11).

If we broaden the scope of our consideration, we realize from the larger context of our text that love is superior to the works of the flesh. That’s a no-brainer. Five verses earlier Peter had drawn that conclusion by writing: *The time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry (1 Peter 4:3)*.

Starting at the beginning of the letter we learn that love exceeds preparing your minds for action (1:13), hoping for eternity (1:13), not being conformed to this world (1:14), and even being holy (v.16). Hold on now! How can showing love exceed trying to live a holy life in importance? Well stop and consider how much work the Pharisees and religionists expended attempting to be holy in their own strength. And Jesus condemned them for not loving their brothers. On the other hand, if we really are loving God and others like we should, we will be progressing in true holiness.

Love is superior to conducting yourselves in fear during your pilgrimage (1:17). Coming to chapter two, we learn that love exceeds in importance, putting away all malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander (2:1). And so the contrast goes through the whole letter. It makes us wonder if this characteristic called love supersedes all Bible requirements? Well think again about the first and second commands. According to Jesus, the whole Bible is summed up in love God, love your neighbor.

Above all, love. But don’t love just on Sundays. Love continually. Love is to be our defining characteristic. The verb translated *having* is a present tense, active voice participle. Though it is a participle (part of speech that can define character), it functions as an imperative, a command in this text. It would be translated then, *keep having love*. Love can be commanded because it is not just a feeling, but a decision. Therefore, making the decision to love is to be the ongoing characteristic of our lives.

If love is the characteristic of our lives, then we will love when it is convenient and when it is not. And let’s not forget that while love is a decision, still it involves our emotions. Paul taught us to *love one*

another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor (respect) (Romans 12:10). Affection is a feeling. In fact, it is such a strong feeling that the natural person will typically love only with emotions. We Christians do feel the love. But we must move beyond feelings, because sometimes we just don't feel like loving others. When that is your feeling, love anyway. By moving past emotions, we realize that we can and should love people we don't even like.

It is going to be common for us to be in a situation where we need to love someone we don't particularly like. That is because God creates us with differing personalities, which do not always mesh well.

Having said all that, we need to come back to the text and acknowledge that the focus here is for Christians to love Christians. Of course it is true that the Bible commands us to love all people. If we love as God loves, will we not love the whole world right (John 3:16)? And if we truly love God, how can we not love His image bearers? But in a most practical sense, it is impossible for us to love everyone in the world because we don't even know all the people in our city or even all the people in our neighborhood. Though that is true, everyone we do know and interact with should be objects of our love.

Sometime stand and observe a crowd of people. What do you think about them? Are they just a crowd of nameless faces? Do you ever wonder if they are hurting? Do you wonder what kind of troubles they face? Do you wonder if they are like you at all? Do you ever consider their eternal state? Questions like that will cause us to love even strangers enough to strike up a conversation with them in order to have a chance to give them the good news, the best news, that in Christ there is hope for eternity. In fact, Jesus clearly stated that His standard for us His people is to love our personal enemies. *"But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27-28).*

Again, it is important for us to love all people. But our text plainly requires that we love fellow Christians. This characteristic is expected among Christians. The simple statement *in yourselves* (or among yourselves) which is translated *one another* is emphatic.

While we love others on some level, we love Christians on a much deeper, more common level. This was Jesus' command to His followers. *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (John 13:34).* He went on to teach that love for other Christians identifies as and distinguishes us from those who are not Christians. *"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).*

In many cases, it is not difficult at all to carry out our Lord's desire in this matter. Some people are just easy to love, especially those Christians who think like we think and act like we act. Those objects of our love are generally western culture, Anglo-Saxon decent, politically conservative, Bible believing, independent minded, somewhat Calvinistic, but dispensational, smart, middle-classed, good looking people. Loving people like that requires no sacrifice or effort at all. It is as easy as falling off a log. But that is a pretty narrow spectrum of the world culture and not even close to what Jesus had in mind by this instruction.

Rather, we are to love fellow Christians even when some people present a challenge. Some people don't make good decisions – love them. Some people are not self-disciplined – love them. Some people have odd personalities – love them. Some people have been wrecked by sin – love them. Some people are very introverted and self-protecting because of hurtful pasts – love them. God does not tell us to like all fellow Christians, but to love them.

And when we love, we are to love exceedingly. Christian love exceeds typical experience. It is not that difficult to love on a level that is higher than the way the unregenerate world loves. The unregenerate world typically loves themselves and only wants or lusts for other people. Natural people are going to be ultimately concerned for how a relationship effects them. Natural people think that like is the same as love. That is not God's standard for us.

The love standard God has set for us stretches us. The word translated *earnestly* means to stretch or to require the extreme measure. A similar Greek word speaks of endurance. The KJV translation *fervent* is a good definition. We are not to love each other conveniently. We are not to love each other lightly. We are not to love each other with partial commitment. We are to love extremely.

When Dabo Sweeny took over the head coaching position of the Clemson Tigers, he coined a phrase that expressed his desire for the team that was recovering from division and dissension. The phrase is “All in.” It stuck. Being all in, everyone giving 100% commitment to the team all the time has led to two national championships in the last three years. “All in” is the only acceptable way for us to love each other – starting in this congregation first.

The Reason for Loving.

Christ desires for us to love each other *since love covers a multitude of sins*. Right away, sincere, God-honoring Christians are going to react to this statement. Is it right to cover sin? Well, let’s answer that question by considering the various objects of sin. In the first place, we all sin against God. We are born in a condition of sin against God. Because sin is our predisposition, we cannot help but transgress God’s law in the way we think, act, and live. We are guilty of offending God and have no excuse.

But we also sin against others. More often than not, our sin against God also involves sin against others. When two or more people who are plagued by the effects of sin try to interact, at some point there is going to be sin. Consider how common and easy these sins are by thinking about the works of the flesh which are *idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions (Galatians 5:20)*. A lot of the sins from that list don’t even make Christians flinch.

Jesus explained, “*What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person*” (Mark 7:20-23). Most of the sins in these lists are quite acceptable among Christians.

But the real issue in our text is sin against me. Why should I love someone who sins against me? What am I supposed to do about a brother’s sin, whether it is against me or against someone else? The prescribed response to sin against ourselves is plain. How does God respond? God covers sin. That does not mean that God winks at sin or sweeps it under the carpet. Rather God convicts of sin so that the

offender will acknowledge it. When the sinner acknowledges his or her sin, God covers it with the blood of Christ. God forgives and refuses to bring up that offense in the future.

If I desire to live like God, I need to cover sin. We also do not sweep sin under the carpet. We strongly hold to Paul’s admonition, *Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them (Ephesians 5:11)*. We expose sin by, praying that God will convict the sinning brother – which He often does. Or we expose sin by talking to our brother about it (Matthew 18). When the sinner confesses his sin, we cover it. We cover it by forgiving if we have been the victim of the sin. We do not bring the matter up again once it has been dealt with.

The wise man Solomon had much to teach on this practice. He taught that *Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses (Proverbs 10:12)*. He said that *Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered (Proverbs 11:13)*. He said that *Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends (Proverbs 17:9)*. Solomon also concluded that *It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out (Proverbs 25:2)*.

Okay, so if we are loving fellow Christians, we will cover their confessed and forgiven sins. How do we or can we do that? First is the fact that the atonement covers the sin. Providing a covering for sin was the purpose of Christ’s blood. So let Christ’s blood do its work.

Also, forgiveness covers the sin. Once the sin is confessed, forgiveness must be granted. Once forgiveness is granted, the sin becomes a mute issue. But what do I do when no confession is made regarding the sin against me? That is the point of our text.

Love covers the sin. We make forgiveness available within our hearts for whenever the offender desires to have it. That is to emulate Jesus’ response on the cross. *And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34)*. That is to respond like Stephen did, *And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep (Acts 7:60)*. Whether they confess their sin against us or not, we love our brothers and sisters. I need to be able to sacrifice my “right” for being “right” by loving the offender.

Love is not easy. If it's easy, it's not love. Love stands on sacrifice and, therefore, will often require us to make a sacrifice of some kind in order to love other Christians.