

Love, Actually
By Jason Huff
Leviticus 19:15-18, Romans 12:14-20a, Luke 6:27-38

This week's third Scripture passage comes from Luke 6:27-38. Last week, we found Jesus choosing His disciples and beginning the Sermon on the Plain. We heard about Jesus preaching blessing and woes as part of the coming Kingdom of God. And this week, He tells us how we should act as members of that Kingdom. Here's what Luke writes... "But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners,' expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

Is love a feeling? Western society sure seems to think so. This morning's sermon title is **Love Actually**, which is also the name of a rather popular romantic comedy released a few years ago. It's long by romantic comedy standards – two hours and fifteen minutes – and it needs all of that time to squeeze in stories about eight couples around London. One minute, it's about the new Prime Minister who can't express his feelings about his new personal assistant. The next minute, we're following a widower whose eleven-year-old son is asking for advice about girls for the first time. Then we're off on a tangent about a burned out rock star, a couple of movie stand-ins, and a half-dozen other couples in and out of love. It's an enjoyable enough movie, but it leaves you a bit dazed in the whirlwind of all they've thrown in. It's a kitchen sink kind of film that tries to capture all these different romantic experiences. But at the end, you wonder... is that what love really is? Just a bunch of people acting on whatever they are or aren't feeling at the moment?

There's another kind of love that our society respects, which is the love of family. It's not necessarily a love that you feel all the time, but it's that kind of loyalty and concern and affection that grows among people who have a life together. Sometimes we're lucky to have the type of friend that the Bible talks about, a friend who is closer than a brother, and that kind of love withstands the day-to-day realities of life too. It's not based on emotions but a bond that's been made between two people.

It's these kind of relationships that come to mind when we hear the word love. And that's why today's passage for us is one of the hardest to face. Last week, we said that Jesus' teachings turned the world upside down. This week, Jesus' kind of love knocks us off our feet.

Jesus' first statement is one we may have heard before, but it's worth hearing again. Love your enemies, he says. The word he uses as "love" is *agape*. About 6 months ago now, we talked about how there are different thoughts of love in the Greek language. *Eros* is the kind of love we see on the big screen...romantic love. *Phileo* is brotherly love and affection that would be shared among family members. But *agape* is a self-sacrificing love, a love that is all-encompassing, a love that is beyond measure. It was a really rare word in the Greek culture until Jesus started using it, and it became the core word to explain Christian love. When Jesus calls us to love our enemies, he's not saying that we should feel all warm and fuzzy about them, and he's not telling us to love them like a family member. He's actually asking us to love them more deeply than that. This is a love that says that I care about you no matter what.

Well, then, who are our enemies? The word is used all over the Greek translation of the Old Testament and throughout the New Testament, and it means exactly what you think it means. These are the ones who Jesus is saying hate you and curse you and mistreat you. Now this may not sound like anyone you know. Most of us try to live pretty quiet lives, and we'd like to think that we don't have any enemies. But just go out on the Internet and you can find that's not the case! There are people who call themselves the enemies of Christians. Take, for example, Richard Dawkins, the author of the book *The God Delusion*. In it, he attacks all forms of religion, but particularly faithful believers of all types, including Christians. His book has sold more than 1.5 million copies. Christopher Hitchens' book, *God Is Not Great*, is a New York Times #1 bestseller and Amazon.com's top-ranked book in their Philosophy of Religion section. These books are the forefront of a movement that would like to see the death of religion. This kind of thinking exists in our schools and communities. But it's not just an intellectual argument in many parts of the world. Head over to nations like China or Iran and you'll see Christians persecuted, even murdered for their beliefs. Violence against Christians is common in the Middle East and parts of India. As Christians, we do have enemies. And some of us have come up against enemies of a very personal sort that aren't our enemies because of Christianity at all. For those who have experienced abuse, for those who have been victims of crime, for those who have seen life's darker side, we know we have enemies.

But Jesus starts describing for us what *agape* love is by telling us how to practice it...we should do good to these people...bless them...and pray for them. This is a tough assignment. No, scratch that...it is an impossible assignment. If we really think about it, we have a hard time getting along with the neighbors who play their music too loud or the annoying guy at work who talks all day about himself. Praying for someone who really dislikes us...that boss who always puts down our work or that coach who never puts us into the game...we just don't do that. Not on our own. Jesus is setting down a new set of rules for those who are a part of God's Kingdom, and we need to be God's children in order to play by those rules. We need the blood of Jesus covering us and we need the Holy Spirit guiding us, because otherwise, we just can't do these things. For us to actually reach out and do nice things for the bully who trips us in the lunchroom, to make cookies for the colleague who hates everybody, we need God's divine strength. To ask God to make someone prosper who curses you? We can't do it without God. But let's also be straight with each other – if we have given our lives to Christ and been forgiven all our sins, if Jesus says to do it, we will be given the power to do it. The thing we have to remember with *agape* love is that it is love that expects nothing in return. We may only receive our reward from God for doing what He asks here, but that will be enough.

How else does Jesus see us living this out? He says, if somebody strikes you on one cheek, turn the other one to him. Now this verse is often seen as a call to total nonviolence, to get rid of the military. Others think that it's an invitation to abuse. Neither one is what this passage is about. What it is talking about here is rejection and vengeance. According to authorities on the subject, a slap on the face like this was how you were put out of the temple or the synagogue. If you had uttered a blasphemy against God, you were no longer welcome and no longer a part of the community. That was symbolized by a slap from the rabbi across the face. What this was saying was that, if someone insults you or ridicules you because of Christ, don't insult them back but accept it. Many believers were forced out of the synagogues and persecuted within just a short time after Christ's death. This was something they would face right away. It was important and vital to them to understand. Christ teaches us here that His Kingdom spreads through love, not through force.

The same is true of taking vengeance. We often want not just to punish someone who has harmed us, but we want to get even. We've heard about the Old Testament principle of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." That law sounds vengeful to us, but back in the ancient world, when someone wronged you, it was expected that you would take far more in revenge than what was taken from you. The Old Testament law stopped the cycle of vengeance. But Christ's teachings go further and say, don't seek vengeance at all. Romans 12:19 says, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord."

Then Jesus tells us more about love. If somebody takes your coat, don't keep him from taking your tunic too! Give to all who ask, and don't demand back what someone has taken from you. Jesus doesn't say if the one taking the coat might be owed a debt or someone who is simply stealing from you, or whether or not the person who has taken something from you deserves it. A similar saying in Matthew includes the idea that if someone sues you for your coat, offer him your tunic too. Now this isn't what we want to hear. But in 1 Corinthians 6:7, Paul confirms it. He's talking to believers who've taken each other to court because they feel they've been wronged. But Paul says, "The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?" Now neither Jesus nor Paul are talking about being naïve. They aren't suggesting that we are simply suckers being taken for a ride. They are saying that it's a conscious choice to let possessions go for the name of Christ. It's one thing to be deceived. It's another thing to consciously say, "Let me give more than what you're asking for because I want to represent Christ to you." It's not that we encourage sin; it's not for us to suggest that someone rob our homes of everything we have. And when we give to those who ask us, we also have the responsibility of making sure our gift is helpful and not harmful. It's why we don't write blank checks to people, but we have a food pantry instead. But the point that Jesus is making is this...things are only things. If you hold those things lightly, you can give them up for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Our lives are no longer about the things we own but the love God has shown us. The way we deal with our possessions will speak volumes to others about who we are and why Christ is the real deal.

But Jesus takes it a step farther and says, “Do unto others as you would have done to you.” Now this wasn’t exactly a new concept when Jesus said it. Many religions around the world incorporate the negative form of this into their teachings. They teach, “Since you don’t want to be harmed, don’t harm others.” But Jesus requires us to go far beyond that. Jesus’ statement is a command. He’s telling us, go and do for somebody else what you’d like done for you. If you’d like to be well-fed, go buy somebody else a meal. Want a good house? Maybe you should help on a Habitat project to build someone a home. Want to have friends? Befriend somebody who seems down. Jesus requires us to act. We can’t expect that the world is going to come to Jesus Christ just because we leave other people alone. The world will know we are serious when we go out and intentionally act in ways that make others realize we are serious about loving others.

And Jesus makes it clear that we are supposed to do this for our enemies! Anybody can help a friend. Anybody can lend a buddy \$50 bucks in hard times. You don’t have to know Christ to do that. But to give food to the guy you don’t know, to buy a cup of coffee for the guy at work who swears at everybody and puts down his co-workers, even letting someone take more from you than what they have a right to ask, Jesus wants these things to happen. The point of our lives isn’t being responsible, not from the world’s perspective, anyway. Sadly enough, because of our sinful nature, sometimes we use “responsibility” as an excuse to be selfish with what we have. The point of our lives is to glorify God, and that means showing compassion and mercy and grace even to those who don’t deserve it. And Christ says just that. By loving those people who aren’t deserving, we prove we are God’s children because we act like Him. Our Heavenly Father is kind to those who show no appreciation or thanks in return, and we’re just acting the same way.

This hit me about a month or so ago when I was helping a man with our food pantry. He came three times for help in the month of February. You know, one time, two times, I didn’t think anything of it. But the third time, I started thinking in my head, “You know, we don’t have a policy to deal with somebody abusing the system. Maybe we should say that everybody can only get a box a month from the food pantry, or maybe two. Maybe we should set some limits. Maybe I’m being taken advantage of here.” But then several days later it hit me. Does God set limits on His love for us? Does God say, “I’m only going to give you a week’s worth of food this month – you’ve have to find the rest?” This is the same God who turned water into wine at a wedding so that the guests could continue the feast. This is the God who promises that we will be a part of the wedding *feast* of the Lamb, who is creating a home for us in His Kingdom, who has decorated His Kingdom in splendor for us the world has never seen. He is not a stingy god! And we have to remember that the God who has been so generous to us to even come and live among us and die for us so we might live with him forever...He wants us to be His representatives. And to do it, we’ve got to be generous to a fault, seeking nothing in return. So people keep coming back to our food pantry. So some might take advantage. So what? God pours out His blessings on us so that we can be a blessing to others.

And that's what Christ says. Have mercy and forgiveness on others. He says do not judge and do not condemn. Now again, these verses have been used by some to try and say that Christians should not condemn sin and shouldn't warn others of the consequences of sin. This is wrong. Not only is it wrong, it's a sinful interpretation. What Jesus is saying is, don't act like the Pharisees who see someone sinning and condemn their whole lives because they missed the mark in one area. Don't think that you are better than they are, because we all sin. We all fail. We are all equal in that we all need the blood of Jesus to wash away our sins, no matter what they are. No one is too far gone that they cannot be saved by Jesus' love! In fact, as Christians, we *must* be certain to speak out, both to make it clear what sin is and to make it clear that in Jesus Christ, God has provided the cure.

What is Jesus' promise to us for loving our neighbor? He says that as we measure, so shall it be returned to us. Now there are many people out there who've heard this verse misused before. It's called the Prosperity Gospel – that's their name for it – and it says that God wants to bless every believer materially and the only way you're going to release God's blessing is to give to the church. Sounds like a great idea, doesn't it? And popular folks like Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyer preach it. But it misses the whole point. God never promises us tons of good things on this earth. Last week, we read Jesus saying, "Woe to the rich, for they have received their comfort." God knows what we give, and He knows what we need. He knows that earthly things can hold us back from knowing Him and following after Him. The rewards Jesus promises may sometimes come in earthly ways, but the key thing with Christianity is that we expect eternity. We expect that this world isn't all there is. If we are to be rewarded, it doesn't have to happen here, especially if that reward draws us away from God! Instead, we know that God is saving up our good measure for us. If some of it comes now, we know how to handle it, to use it to care for others and show them that self-sacrificing *agape* love Jesus taught.

It's easy to read these passages and think that Jesus must be talking to somebody else, in a different era and time, somewhere where this kind of love works. It's so contradictory to what we think of as love that we can hardly wrap our heads around it. But this kind of love is not Jesus' suggestion for a good life. It's a command for His followers to obey. And it's one that we have to simply do. The Holy Spirit makes it possible. We can't *try* to do it; if we try on our own, we'll never get it. But the Holy Spirit makes it a reality. We can live this life of love that sacrifices for the undeserving and returns good in the face of evil.

Much has been said about the Amish community in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. That community was rocked three years ago by a school shooting that left five of their children and the shooter dead. The world was shocked at their response to the widow of the man responsible. They hired no lawyers and sought no retribution. They not only offered forgiveness, they brought tangible proof...food and flowers and gifts. Some of the parents of those young children attended the man's funeral, and they donated money to a fund to take care of his three young children. Some people were worried that their example would somehow short-circuit their recovery from grief at the loss. The community has shown over the years that they did have to grieve, but forgiveness came first.

How could they forgive so quickly? The Amish take this whole concept of love seriously. Not all their theology is perfect, they have quirks we would question, but they believe Jesus' words that one must forgive to be forgiven. It's not an option but something that flows from being a believer. The idea is that through forgiveness, an enemy may become a friend...but if not, it still falls on us to forgive, to show that kind of overwhelming love that forgets ourselves in the process of caring for others.

It's not impossible. We can love like this. We can forgive like this. We can give like this. We can. Because of Jesus' love, we know that we can become like Him. We can become like the One who said on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they do." We can become like the One who showed so much love for sinners that He gave His life for them and made them His apostles and disciples and friends. And we can know that when we become like Him, we can live joyfully knowing we are forgiven and loved by our Heavenly Father, who so loved the world that He gave us His only Son, so that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. *And that is love, actually.* Let's pray.