

This Must Be the Place of Love

Blueprints of a Healthy Church – Part VIII

Selected Scripture

Introduction

In 1928, an interesting case came before the courts in the state of Massachusetts. It concerned a man who had been walking on a boat dock when suddenly, he tripped over a rope and fell into the cold, deep ocean bay. He came up sputtering and yelling for help and then sank again, obviously unable to swim. His friends, who were on a nearby dock, were too far away to get to him, although they were running as fast as they could. However, only a few yards away, was a young man sprawled on a deck chair, sunbathing. He heard the drowning man's cries for help, but this young man, whom they would later find out was an excellent swimmer, had only turned his head to watch the drowning man finally sink and disappear beneath the water's surface.

The family of the drowned man was so upset by this incredible display of apathy and indifference that they sued the sunbather. They lost. Although reluctant, the court ruled that the man on the dock had no legal responsibility whatever to try and save the other man's life.

This ruling fits well within the framework of a society that thrives on individuality. Each individual works hard for themselves and makes it by themselves. It answers Cain's question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" with a resounding, unanimous, "No!" The motto is, "Every man for himself."

In a society like this, the golden rule is not "treat others as you would have them treat you," but "stand up for your rights and make sure everyone treats you like you want to be treated."

According to current statistics, one out of every four Americans will be involved in a lawsuit of some sort during their lifetime.

For example, a Princeton University student climbed to the roof of one of the campus buildings and was electrically shocked by a piece of equipment. He sued Princeton for damages, saying that it was their fault that the equipment was not properly marked for nighttime prowlers! His rights were violated and the court sided with him.

How about the seventeen year old Maryland girl who tried out for her high school football team? If school authorities had prevented her from playing, her rights would have been violated and she could have sued. They let her play. In the very first scrimmage, she was hurt. She immediately sued the school district for 1.5 million dollars on the grounds that no one told her of the "potential risks of serious injury inherent in the sport."

Look at your television guide and note the proliferation of shows built around the courtroom. People are shallow and selfish; immersed in their own gratification and infuriated if anyone or anything should get in their way.

The new golden rule is, "Look out for number one."

What does this mean for the Christian? What does this mean for the church?

It means unbelievable opportunity. In fact, this is one of the reasons the church must not only be a place of faith and hope, but a place of love.

I happen to believe that we live in an absolutely fantastic era in the history of the church because now, at this particular point in time, in this culture, at this moment in history, the primary distinctive of being a disciple of Jesus Christ can be revealed with unmistakable, undeniable clarity. At the very point in history when a man can sit on a dock and watch another man drown; when someone can live their life totally and unashamedly for themselves, the Christian has the opportunity to become a billboard, announcing a remarkably different way of life.

Today, let me show, from the word of God, what this different way of life is.

The Church Must Be the Place of Love

In John's gospel, chapter 13, our Lord Jesus Christ told His disciples, and every Christian from that moment on, these powerful words,

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35)

The supreme evidence in which Christ is pleased with a church is that of love for one another.

While the world system fights and scraps and pulls and tears down anyone who stands in the way of its personal desires or progress, the church is a body of believers who put each other first.

The early church was given instructions concerning this by the apostles.

- In Galatians 6:2a, they were told to, ***Bear one another's burdens . . .***
- In Ephesians 4:2-3, the early church was told by Paul to be patient with one another, when he wrote, ***with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.***
- They were also told to forgive one another, when Paul wrote further, in Ephesians 4:32, ***Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.***

The Greek word for "forgiven" in this verse, has within it the word "charis," from which we get our word "grace". In other words, when we forgive a brother or sister in Christ, we are giving them the same kind of grace that God gave to us through Jesus Christ. To put it another way, we are to treat other people not only like we want to be treated, but in the way we want God to treat us – with all grace through Christ.

- In addition, the church was told, in Colossians 3:16, to, ***. . . admonish one another . . .***
- Furthermore, the believers are, according to I Thessalonians 4:18, to, ***. . . comfort one another . . .***
- The believers are also told by Paul, in I Thessalonians 5:11, to, ***. . . encourage one another . . .***

This word "encourage" is the Greek word "parakaleo," which means, "to come alongside". It is a word that is used in reference to the Holy Spirit Himself. So, once again, we are told to treat people in the same way that God treats people.

- James 5:16 tells believers to, ***. . . pray for one another . . .***
- Hebrews 10:24-25 tells the church, ***. . . let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together . . .***

In other words, we are to meet together in order to stimulate or provoke, as one translation reads, one another.

Now this is one that comes easy. We intuitively know how to provoke each other, do we not?! This word could actually be translated "irritate".

There are some Christians who think this is their spiritual gift. They believe they have the gift of irritation. Nearly every Sunday they exercise their gift.

This word means, "to incite; to stir up; to stimulate". The writer goes on to say that we are, "to provoke one another to love and good deeds".

Every believer has a tremendous responsibility to minister for the sake of others within the body. Do not think we have performed our ministry to the body by simply showing up.

When each member takes to heart Paul's description of the church as a living, breathing body with each member serving as a hand or a foot or an ear or an eye and each contributing to the advancement and health of the whole body, then we become a testimony to the world. Only people who love each other would ever care to serve each other's needs.

Minucius Felix, a Roman lawyer who lived in the second century, wrote of Christians saying, "They love each other even without being acquainted with each other."

Is that not the case in this church, as in Jerusalem centuries ago? We are serving people out of love and concern for their well-being, even though we do not know their names. Although we do not know their names, we know that if they are a Christian, they are part of our family and we are members of the same body.

I Corinthians 12 is where Paul explained,

. . . all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body . . . For the body is not one member, but many. . . . But God has so composed the body . . . that the members may have the same care for one another. (I Corinthians 12:12-25)

I usually give an illustration to each GreenHouse Class (our church class for prospective members), of the way the body is supposed to care for each other through their spiritual gifts. I call this illustration, "The Scenario of Spilled Soup". I will share this because we need a reminder of what the church is all about and because now, we have more ministry needs than ever before.

Imagine that our entire church body, after church today, goes out to eat lunch at the same restaurant. I said imagine! And, we all get a steaming bowl of potato soup. Keep imagining! On the way to her table, one woman accidentally stumbles and falls, spilling her soup on her clothes and on the floor around her. This is the scenario of the way some of the gifts would go into operation.

- The person who is a *gifted teacher* would immediately say, "May I have everyone's attention? Our sister has spilled her soup. There are several reasons why she spilled her soup; in fact, there are three reasons. Everyone write these down on your napkin..."

- The person with the *gift of shepherding* would say, "Listen, let's form a line so no one trips. Okay, follow me."
- The person with the *gift of exhortation* would have, by this time, come over and said to the woman, "Ma'am, if you'd just be more careful carrying your soup, that won't happen again. Let me show you how to hold it for the next time."
- The person with the *gift of hospitality* would interrupt and say to the woman, "Listen, after this is all finished, you come over to my home and I'll fix you whatever you want to eat."
- The person with the *gift of mercy* has arrived with a handful of napkins. She sits down in the puddle next to the woman, puts her arm around her, and says, "I'm so sorry you have to go through this."
- The person with the *gift of giving* comes over and says, "Here, you can have my bowl."
- Meanwhile, the person with the *gift of serving* has already found a mop and a pail and is patiently waiting until everyone leaves so he can clean up the mess.

The church becomes like the world when it gathers with the attitude, "I'm only here to eat soup. I'll come if the soup is my favorite, and if it's served on my favorite china."

This is another way of saying, "This church is my church:

- if the music is nice and the climate is controlled,
- and the children's programs interest my children,
- and the parking lot is paved,
- and the sermon is short and interesting,
- and if they never ask me to do anything,
- and if they never make an issue of the offering plate or my sinful heart.

If all of this happens to be true, then this is where I'll go for soup."

If you ask the average churchgoer where they go to church and then ask them why, 99 times out of 100 you will receive one of the answers I just mentioned. Maybe 1 out of 100 would say, "This is where I go because it is where God wants me to be and He has

gifted me to serve here as if this church is my own family.”

Two standards of measurement

Notice Jesus’ words again,

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35)

Two standards of measurement emerge from this text. Let us take a look at them.

1. First, the Lord has given the world something by which it can measure spiritual authenticity.

Jesus Christ said, “The world will know you are My disciples, not by how many times you pray, or how often you fast, or how spiritual you sound, or how many verses you can quote, or how many times you go to church – they really won’t hang around long enough to find out – but they will know that you are My disciples by your love for one another.”

The world will certainly notice the love of those who are Jesus’ disciples for one another. They will sense it. They will be drawn by how different we are from them.

The scoffer and unbeliever Julian, the Roman Emperor, wrote in the fourth century of Christians, “Their teacher has implanted the belief in them that they are all related.”

Whether we like it or not, the Lord gave the world something by which they can measure the spiritual authenticity of this church.

2. Secondly, the Lord not only gave the world something by which it can measure the authenticity of the church, but He gave the church something by which it can measure spiritual maturity.

Jesus Christ said,

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another . . . (John 13:34a)

Understand that spiritual maturity is not related to our intellect – it is related to our will. Spiritual maturity is always an issue of obedience to the word of God.

Notice that Jesus did not say, “What I’d like you to do, as My disciples, is try this for a while...”

No, Jesus issued a command.

He also did not say, “Listen, here are a few steps to happier living, if you’d like to add them to your busy schedule.”

No, Jesus gave the disciples, what we could call, the 11th commandment. More correctly, we could call it the commandment of the new dispensation – the new covenant; the commandment for the New Testament church.

Jesus said,

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you . . . By this all men know that you are My disciples . . . (John 13:34-35)

He said this again in John 15:12,

This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.

Now it was already hard enough for us that Jesus said we are to love one another. However, notice that He added the little phrase, “even as I have loved you.”

It is important, at this point in our study, to understand which Greek word for “love” our Lord selected to use in this new covenant command. The Lord did not use the word φιλια (“phileo”) for brotherly love, or στοργη (“storge”) for the love of a parent to their child, or ερος (“eros”) for erotic or sensual attraction/physical love. The word the Lord chose was the word αγαπη (“agape”).

This is a word that was considered too cold and heartless by the early Greek philosophers and writers. They rarely used αγαπη (“agape”). It was a word that related to a matter of the will; a matter of choice.

This Greek word is the most common word used in the New Testament for love. For example:

For God so loved the world . . . (John 3:16)

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (I John 4:10)

Why did the Lord choose “agape”? Because God’s love for us is not based on pleasure or passion or physical attraction or a natural relationship. His love for us is not based on what He can get from us or because we are so attractive to Him. God’s love, “agape,” is based on God’s own character – and He has chosen to love us.

So when Jesus Christ said, “Love each other as I love you,” He was saying, “Don’t love people because

they can give you something, or because they like you, or because they are like you – love them with a love that originates in the character of God and then flows through you.”

It is this word “agape,” by the way, that is used of the love between a husband and wife in the New Testament. For example:

. . . *husbands ought also to love their wives* . . . (*Ephesians 5:28*)

. . . [*wives are to learn*] *to love their husbands* . . . (*Titus 2:4*).

It is not a matter of “eros,” or “storge,” or “phileo,” but a matter of “agape”. “Agape” is the love that makes up its mind.

When I officiate weddings, I usually tell the bride and groom, “I have some shocking news for you. According to the Bible, you did not fall in love – you chose to love.”

You might say, “Wait a second! What was it then? I remember falling head over heels in love.”

I remember too!

I can remember, as a college student, taking a required English Literature class. I thought, “What a waste of time,” and I sat in the back corner by the door. However, in that class, I noticed someone – someone who now, twenty-five years later, still causes me to thank God for *Beowulf* and Chaucer’s, *Canterbury Tales*.

I can remember one day, getting a note from Marsha in my college mail box. I was reading that note while walking down the sidewalk, and was so intent on the content of that extremely interesting note that I walked smack-dab into a telephone pole. I skinned the hair off my forehead. She married me anyway!

In reality, I did not fall in love with her – I made up my mind to love her – and she made up her mind to love me.

This is a critical point to understand about “agape,” dear friends – if you did not fall in love, “agape,” then there is no such thing as falling out of

love. “Agape” is not something that hits you and you just cannot help it, and then disappears and you cannot help that either! “Agape” is a choice that is independent of any circumstance or condition in life; it is a choice that is based, not upon emotion, but upon the will.

Jesus Christ, in effect, said, “By this shall all the world know that you are My disciples, because you have chosen to love one another.”

This means that we love the one who is hard to love; we love the unforgiving one; we love the unappreciative one; we love the unkind one; we love the sinful and fallen one; we love the immature one; we love the despairing one.

Ladies and gentlemen, “agape” is impossible, unless we, as individuals and as a church family, walk closely with our God from whom comes the grace and courage and commitment to love each other like He loves us.

Conclusion

The church must be:

- the place where faith is defined and defended and demonstrated and decided;
- the place of hope, which is the confidence or assurance of our faith in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ;
- the place of love.

Paul commended the Thessalonian believers for the same three things when he wrote of how thankful to God he was for this church because of their,

. . . *work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope* . . . (*I Thessalonians 1:3*)

What could be written of us as a church? What will we be known for?

Now I want to be transparent enough to tell you that every living pastor who is honest, likes to hear people say, “At that church, the soup is really good!”

However, what people must say is, “At that church, they are a people of faith . . . hope . . . love.”

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 5/6/2001 by Stephen Davey.

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