

Keeping Erasers Handy

Will True Love Please Stand Up – Part VI

I Corinthians 13:5b

Introduction

Pastor Jason shared some pick-up lines with the students last week. My thirteen-year-old daughter Charity thought it was the best sermon he had ever preached. She picked up some real pointers. Thanks so much Jason.

I thought I would start our session on true love by reading a few of these lines to you.

- Are you okay? Heaven is a long fall from here.
- Baby, if you were words on a page, you'd be the fine print.
- Can I borrow a quarter? I want to call your mother and thank her.
- Is there an airport nearby or is that just my heart taking off?
- You must be Jamaican, because you're Jamaican me crazy.
- Do you have a map? I keep getting lost in your eyes.
- If I could rearrange the alphabet, I would put "U" and "I" together.

Jason actually tried these in high school. One girl felt so sorry for him that she later married him to try to help him make it in life. Karen, with God all things are possible.

How do you go from pick up lines like these – and that early romance and excitement – to where one couple found themselves some time ago?

It seems that two people found a perfect match recently, according to a French press release. They

found their true love in an Internet chat room. They were both married at the time they met online, and they were online because they had decided that their spouses would never provide the happiness they deserved. They went online searching for true love.

The woman's chat room name was "Sweetie" and her new found love was called "Prince of Joy". They corresponded for hours, sharing with one another the troubles they were having in their respective marriages. Sweetie was twenty-seven at the time. She later told the French press that she had finally found a true kindred spirit – her true love; her prince of joy!

Sweetie said, "I was suddenly in love all over again. It was amazing! My prince understood me perfectly – we both knew that we could share a friendship we both deserved. We were both stuck in miserable marriages and wanted out. We were the perfect match."

They decided to meet and have their first date. All the arrangements were made and excuses were presented to their respective spouses as to why they would be away for the evening. Then, at their place of rendezvous, they met – only to discover they were married to one another. Sweetie and Prince of Joy were already husband and wife.

The miserable marriage they had described to each other was the same one. They had believed that the other person was perfect for them – that they were finally in love – only to discover their own self-centeredness and deception had caused them to ignore a relationship they already had and could have been enjoying. They were confronted with the irony of their blindness.

Did the truth sink in? No. According to the report, this couple is now divorcing, accusing each other of being unfaithful.ⁱ

So much for finding true love.

How does something like this happen? How do we chip away at a relationship – marriage or ministry or industry?

How do we go from “I get lost in your eyes” to “Go away”? How do we go from “for better or for worse . . . in sickness and in health . . . for richer or for poorer” to “I despise this person and am willing to abandon them”?

It is actually downright easy! It all begins when a person decides to abandon “agape” and pursue the loves of the world.

Do you remember the types of love from earlier sessions?

“Storge” is the Greek word for love that says, in general terms, “I love you because you’re in my family. I’m supposed to love you, even though I don’t like you. I’ll sing at your funeral, but I’m not about to go on vacation with you – Christmas is hard enough.”

Another common word for love in the Greek world is “philia,” which says, “I love you because you love everything I love. We like the same music; we both like to hike and travel; we both like crossword puzzles and the same design in furniture. Our initials, when put together, spell ‘honey’ or ‘sugar’.”

“Agape” says, “I love you even if we have nothing in common.”

“Eros” says, “I love you because you make my heart beat real fast and you meet my needs.”

“Agape” says, “I love you and commit my heart to meeting your needs.”

- “Agape” is a relationship laced with grace.
- “Agape” is a church body marked by humility and deference.
- “Agape” is a marriage without a back door.

Everyone wants this kind of love. This Internet chat connection seemed to promise it. People are searching for it. People want to be loved by it.

The pursuit of “eros” and “philia” and “storge” is really a longing for “agape”. Why do so few have it?

In the next phrase of I Corinthians 13, Paul will answer that question. In the process, he will deliver an assignment that effectively keeps “agape” alive.

As you are turning to I Corinthians 13, I want to warn that this is one of the toughest assignments in the list. It is only for those willing to surrender to this lifestyle of love – this kind of living which Paul said is the most excellent way to live.

Love Refuses to Keep Score

The assignment to keeping “agape” alive is refusing to keep score. Paul writes, in the very last phrase of I Corinthians 13:5,

. . . [love] does not take into account a wrong suffered.

Now you know why we struggle with loving like this – we naturally keep a running score.

We create a mental file room where we store all offenses and injuries and hurts. We oil the hinges on the file drawers so they slide open easily and often.

The love of this world keeps records of wrongs. Resentment has an amazing memory.

The verb Paul uses in this verse is actually an accounting term used for making entries in a ledger. It literally can mean “to count” or “to impute to an account”. It is one of Paul’s favorite words.ⁱⁱ

We could translate this “agape” assignment, “love does not keep books on evil”.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Agape” refuses to:

- tally points;
- record offenses in a mental file;
- keep a journal of injustices;
- maintain some witness to the wounds of life.

One author wrote, “One of the fine arts in life is to learn what to forget.”

This author goes on to tell the custom of tribal Polynesians in which most of the men are embroiled in either fighting or feasting. It is customary for them to keep certain items to remind them of their enemies and their hatred for them. They literally suspend articles from the interior roofs of their huts to keep alive the memory of their wrongs.^{iv}

We would not do that, would we?

According to the Bible, accepting the assignment not to keep a record of wrongs is actually vital to developing and experiencing true love.

No one is exempt from this assignment because everyone has been hurt by some form of evil or unkindness. Everyone has had to struggle with forgiveness. Everyone has had to let go of bad memories and give up any desire or even the imagination of revenge.^v

However, the truth remains, we enjoy nursing old wounds. We enjoy nursing our wrath to keep it warm.

“Agape” says, “Fire the nurse. Move her out of that room in your heart where you have allowed her to set up shop and do great damage.”

The choice between becoming a loving person and a resentful person is found in this assignment.

We tend to put the slights and injuries and offenses against us in a pot on the stove and let it simmer. Then, whenever we get a chance, we walk over to the stove and stir the pot.

One of the things I love about Christmas time is that my wife pulls out a special recipe for hot chocolate. She got it from a woman in our church who introduced us to it one day in her home. It is the best hot chocolate I have ever tasted. It is kept in a big pot on the stove and it just simmers all day long. The house is filled with the sweet aroma of this hot chocolate. It is made of just the right mixture of evaporated milk, sugar, cocoa, and I do not know what else. I have never watched my wife make it – I just stand there with my mug, like a beggar, waiting for it to get ready. It is sooo good!

If you are interested, Marsha will meet with you after the service and sell you the recipe!

You just walk by the stove every once in a while and stir it.

I am afraid this is what we do with the disappointments of life. Paul would say in this verse, “‘Agape’ refuses to simmer hurts on the stove of the heart; ‘agape’ refuses to walk over and stir the pot.”

Once we re-stir the pot, it all comes quickly to a boil.

- A debt that we cannot seem to pay off that was not ours to begin with;
- a parent or boss or coach that was unfair;
- prejudice or partiality that brought pain;
- a board member that made life miserable;
- a jury that found the innocent guilty or the guilty innocent;
- a business partner failing to act with integrity and smearing our reputation;
- a doctor making the wrong diagnosis;
- the other guy or gal at work that got the credit we deserved;
- a neighbor who treats us rudely;
- a friend who turned on us;

- a child or parent who will not speak to us.^{vi}

True love refuses the heart’s natural desire to write this stuff down for keeps.

This means we are going to have to keep a mental eraser handy – a big one. And we are going to have to be ready to use it often – daily; sometimes moment by moment. Otherwise our ledger will easily fill up over time. Every day, new additions of wrong can be added to the list.

This assignment is not difficult – it is impossible. We are always losing our erasers.

I love the scene when Peter asked the Lord,

. . . **“Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” (Matthew 18:21)**

Now the rabbis of Christ’s day were teaching that people should be willing to forgive someone three times for an offense. For the fourth offense, however, people could refuse to forgive.

Peter is really stepping up to plate and rather impressively suggesting that the disciples of Christ should be willing to double the current tradition and throw one in for good measure. “Lord, I imagine we ought to forgive people seven times.”

To this the Lord responded, “I tell you, forgive that man,

. . . **seventy times seven.” (Matthew 18:22b)**

We can just see Peter doing the math – “Seventy times seven – 490 times?!”

It is no wonder Luke records that all the disciples immediately said to the Lord,

. . . **“Increase our faith!” (Luke 17:5)**

This is the first century way of saying, “You’ve got to be kidding!”

The Lord’s point was not for us to carry a calculator and as soon as it hits 490, think we are free to stop forgiving. His point was to forgive as a way of life and to not hold a grudge as a matter of practice. We are not to add up the account in our hearts as a matter of surrender to the Spirit of God – we are to keep the ledger clear.

The disciples were probably thinking, “How in the world are we going to be able to love anyone with this kind of grace and forgiveness? We don’t make erasers in Galilee that can last that long.”

The Lord will go on and tell them that when we recognize what God has chosen to forget regarding our own account, we should be motivated to forgive others. In fact, following the disciples reaction to the

490 point, the Lord went on to tell them a story to illustrate the utter hypocrisy of being an unforgiving person.

The Lord said to His disciples, further in Matthew's account (Matthew 18:23-35), "Imagine a king settling his accounts with his employees. One day he called one of his employees in who owed him 10,000 talents. Since the man was unable to repay the king, the king ordered that this man and all his family be sold as slaves and the money be given to the king. The man was desperate for mercy and cried to the king, 'Please have patience with me and I will repay you.' The king had compassion and forgave him the entire debt; wiped it off the books."

By the way, one talent was equivalent to fifteen years of labor. Obviously the Lord is exaggerating this man's debt, since no man could have become indebted to his boss for the equivalent of 150,000 years of labor – unless he had stolen the king's own money.

The only hope for this man was this incredible act of love and mercy. And the king gave him mercy.

Jesus continued, "The man got up from his knees and went out. While he was walking home, he bumped into one of his co-workers who owed him 100 denarii (which was the equivalent of three months of labor). The co-worker begged for mercy and promised to pay it back. However, the man refused to forgive his debt and threw him in prison. When the king found out about this, he threw the ungrateful man out of his kingdom and put him in the hands of his torturers until he could repay the debt, which of course he could not do."

This is the point. Are you having trouble erasing the debt of offenses against you? Then you must have forgotten the debt of your offenses against Christ, which He forgave of you!

Have we forgotten the weight of our own sin?

This is the gospel of "agape".

Paul used this same verb ("logizomai") in Romans 4:8. Listen to this amazing erasure of redemption,

Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.

This uses the same word for the action of "agape".

"*BLESSED is the man*" – this is putting it mildly – "*whose sins have been erased from the ledger of God's accounting.*"

Paul used the verb again when he wrote, in II Corinthians 5:19,

... God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them ...

In other words, those who are reconciled to God through Christ have had their files of sin cleared out. Beloved, our records are clean.

In fact, the ledger is not entirely clear. If we take a closer look – in the place of sins which we have committed against God is the deposit of Christ's righteousness. The righteousness of Christ has been imputed, or credited, to our account (the same accounting word is used); entered to our personal account in the ledger of God. (Romans 4:11)

This is like taking your checkbook out and discovering you do not have any money. You do not have to use your imagination on this one! You then go to the bank to ask if they will forgo the charge of overdraft fees because it was three days before you realized you were overdrawn. I am speaking hypothetically, of course! However, the bank manager comes out and shakes your hand and gives you a handful of candy because evidently, Bill Gates got your bank account number and transferred into your empty account all of his wealth. Imagine, looking at your account balance and seeing a billion dollar plus deposit! Ha – you can drive on past the Dollar Store and go directly to Target – you are loaded!

In the same way, Jesus Christ credited to your account the wealth of His righteousness. You did not have any. All you had in that account was sin. He withdrew that and paid all the fees and all the administrative charges against you and then, transferred His righteousness into your account.

This is the same word used in I Corinthians 13.

Now does forgiving mean forgetting? Can anyone truly forget offenses and injustices and hurts and pains? No.

Paul does not say in I Corinthians 13:5, "Don't ever get hurt; don't be offended; ignore the pain."

Paul says, "Keep your eraser moving."

Choosing to love with "agape" means choosing to forget.

How do we forget?

Webster caught the biblical nuance of this as he defined "forget" – listen to this – "to cease to remember; to leave behind; to fail to think of; to

neglect either carelessly or willfully; to cease thinking of something.^{vii}

What a great description of the willing forgetfulness of offenses of “agape”.

We tend to record our blessings in the sand and forget them, but engrave our offenses in granite and never forget them. What a great cost this is to our peace of mind and to the joy of our salvation.

Wayne Grudem wrote, “Where love abounds in a fellowship of Christians, many small offenses, and even some large ones, are overlooked and forgotten. But where love is lacking, every word is viewed with suspicion, every action is liable to misunderstanding, and conflicts abound.”^{viii}

This works in the church, in the home, in the marriage, on the campus, in the shop – everywhere.

Can we learn how to love like this? Yes.

It is no coincidence that the Spirit of God would inspire Peter, of all the apostles, to write,

... keep fervent in your love for one another, because love [“agape”] covers a multitude of sins. (I Peter 4:8)

You might say, “But I just can’t forget. I can’t seem to cover it up.”

You are right – you cannot. “Agape” is impossible. This assignment might be the toughest one in the list for you to surrender to the Spirit to accomplish in your life.

However, God, the great forgetter of our sin, chooses to,

... remember [our] sins no more. (Hebrews 8:12b)

... forgive [our] iniquity, and [our] sin ... remember no more. (Jeremiah 31:34b)

God is choosing to neglect willfully; cease thinking of; leave behind, the record of our sin.

We all know the amazing biography of Joseph, who was offended and hurt and abandoned by his own family – his own brothers, no less. What we often overlook is the fact that when Joseph and his wife had their first baby – a son – Joseph named him Manasseh, which is the Hebrew name meaning “to forget”. The record in Genesis makes sure we understand the significance of this event and that he was able to make such a statement of faith in the sovereign purposes of God, as Genesis 41:51 records,

Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh, “For,” he said, “God has made me forget all my trouble ...”

Do you think Joseph remembered it? Absolutely – but he was choosing to leave it behind.

Ladies and gentlemen, we allow God to do the erasing.

When we refuse to keep score, we always end up winning. Peace is ours; joy is ours; release and freedom are ours. We ultimately win.

The one who keeps his list will only break his own heart over and over again – reliving the offense; feeling again and again the pain of the injury; hearing the insult all over again as the ledger grows longer and longer.

“Agape” is the key to escaping the prison cell of bitterness and resentment. “Agape” is the way out and on and up.

Conclusion

Every week, one author wrote, Kevin Tunell was required to mail a dollar to a family he had hurt deeply. They had sued him for 1.5 million, but settled for 936 dollars – to be paid one dollar at a time. The family was to receive the payments over the course of 18 years. They did not want to forget what he had done. He had gotten drunk, and then drove his car into their daughter’s car, killing her on that first Friday in January. Tunell was convicted of manslaughter and drunken driving. He was seventeen. She was eighteen. Tunell spent time in jail, then seven years campaigning against drunk driving – even though the courts had only required he campaign for one year. But he often forgot to send his dollar to the family. Four times the family took him to court. He insisted he was not defying the order, and even offered to give the family two boxes of checks covering the payments until the year 2001 – an extra year thrown in. The family denied the request. They did not want him to forget – and they did not want to forgive. It was not about money. It was a weekly reminder they wanted to haunt him with – 936 reminders for the next eighteen years of his life and theirs. They wanted it to haunt him wherever he lived and whatever he did that he had taken their daughter’s life. There would be no forgetting and there certainly would be no forgiving.

This author asked, “Few people would question the anger of this family . . . and grief . . . but . . . are 936 payments enough? When they receive the final payment will they be able to put the matter to rest? Is eighteen years worth of restitution sufficient?”^{ix}

This family had sentenced themselves to a life of private haunting. They were the ongoing victims.

Every Friday for eighteen years, they suffered all over again their bitter hatred toward this young man.

Ladies and gentlemen, I praise God that our offenses against Him are not paid back, one dollar at a time; one prayer at a time; one act of penance at a time. No, this is the “agape” of God, whom we have sinned against. This is the forgiveness of Christ, who we put to death.

My sin – oh, the bliss of this glorious thought –

My sin, not in part, but the whole,

Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!^x

The willingness to accept this assignment of “agape” and live with an eraser handy comes only when we stay near the cross of Christ and recognize our own sin which He has chosen to forget. And when we imitate Him.

Without Christ we cannot love like this. We cannot experience true love without experiencing the love of God and a willingness to demonstrate His

love to others through condescending humility and conscious self-sacrifice.

- We are most like wild animals when we devour and kill;
- We are most like men when we criticize and condemn;
- We are most like Christ when we forgive and choose to forget.

Pray:

Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me.

Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me.

Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.

Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me.

He is Lord, He is Lord!

He is risen from the dead, and He is Lord!

Every knee shall bow, every tongue confess,

That Jesus Christ is Lord.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/21/2007 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Agence France-Press (Sept. 18, 2007).

ⁱⁱ Ralph Earle, Word Meanings in the New Testament (Baker, 1974), p. 239.

ⁱⁱⁱ David E. Garland, Baker Exegetical Commentary: 1 Corinthians (Baker, 2003), p. 618.

^{iv} William Barclay, First Corinthians (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 122.

^v Alexander Strauch, Leading With Love (Lewis & Roth, 2006), p. 72.

^{vi} Charles R. Swindoll, “Forgiving & Forgetting,” Insight for Living (1981), p. 3.

^{vii} Random House Webster’s College Dictionary (Random House, 1997).

^{viii} Max Anders and David Wells, Holman New Testament Commentary: I & II Peter, I, II, & III John, Jude (Holman, 1999), p. 73.

^{ix} Max Lucado, “In the Grip of Grace,” 1996, <http://www.preachingtoday.com/forgiveness>, Word.

^x Horatio G. Spafford, “It Is Well With My Soul”.