

No: Four

Subject: Tender Love

Headline: Is Love Crippling the Church? Part 1. By Pastor Jim Butler

I remember it like it happened yesterday. Just as I finished my sermon, a couple who was visiting quickly walked to the front.

After the initial pleasantries, they shared that they were looking for a new church home since the worship pastor in their previous church was caught sleeping with the secretary -- and both were married!

When I asked how the Pastor was dealing with it, they were told that Christians should forgive one another the way Jesus forgives us. The motto of that church was "it's all about grace."

Maybe you've experienced something like that; it's obvious that something is wrong, but the spirit of the age demands that we be tolerant, loving, and non-judgmental.

You know, like Jesus was.

Most people believe that love is self-giving, kind, gracious, and forgiving. But is that what Jesus meant when He says "love one another as I have loved you?" (John 13:34) What did He mean when He told His disciples "they (the world) will know us by our love." This raises a very important question for us: What does Christ-like love look like?

If we took the time to do a thorough search in the Scriptures, we would find that God-like love has a tender side as well as a tough side. We might call them tender and tough mercies. Scripture reveals a side of love that most believe is unloving, close-minded and judgmental. Like always, we have to let the whole counsel of God shape our beliefs rather than cherry-picking the parts we find favorable. So to help us gain a more complete perspective, let's consider seven ways genuine God-like love is defined by God's Word:

1. Love is unmerited, gracious and seeks the benefit of others.

To best understand the meaning of the Bible, it's important to consult the original text. There are a number of Greek words for love, but the most common word in the New Testament is agape. This is a spiritual love, not the kind of heart-warming love we find in Hallmark cards. Agape is not an abstract, emotional, sentimental kind of love. It's God's love that is given to all believers at the moment of salvation. (Romans 5:5) When Christians express this kind of love, it will demonstrate the same nature and pattern as God's love for us.

Ephesians 2:4-5 captures the essence of His love like this: "God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved." Did we deserve such love? No way. We did not deserve such a sacrifice. God's love is displayed most clearly at the cross "but God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8)

We are to love others whether they are fellow believers (John 13:34) or bitter enemies. (Matthew 5:44) Jesus gave us the parable of the Good Samaritan as an example of sacrifice for the sake of others, even for those who may even hate us. Agape love as modelled by Christ is not based on a emotions or feelings. Rather, it's a determined act of the will—a joyful resolve to put the welfare of others above our own.

God-like love does not come naturally to us, but it can be done. We can love by putting our own needs, desires and wants aside to focus on other people's needs and wants. This can be as simple as allowing someone to go ahead of us in line, choosing not to argue with someone's opinion or spending time helping someone in need. Loving like Christ can also be as simple as praying for those who mistreat us. Jesus instructs us to love those who insult us by turning the other cheek. (Matthew 5:39)

Most of us would agree with the above expressions, but what about the other side of love? What we might call the unpleasant side of love. Did you know in today's tolerant, non-judging culture that a majority of our Lord's recorded life might be construed as hateful, accusatory, harsh and unkind? And yet in all those situations, Jesus was expressing perfect love. The truth is He was not always the soft-spoken pacifist that so many make Him out to be. What would Jesus say to the worship

leader and secretary who are sleeping together? Would He simply say “it’s all about grace?” Is not dealing with sin an act of love or is that kind of love crippling the church?

In the next two columns, we will examine the other side of the coin: the tough side of love.