

What's Love Got to Do With It?

M. W. Bassford, 2009

Introduction.

I know what you're thinking right now. At least, I know what I would be thinking if I were sitting in the congregation right now. I would be thinking, "Here we go again." Just as you have, I've been on the receiving end of sermons where the preacher gets up and rants about what bad Christians we are because we aren't teaching the lost. I've gone home feeling guilty about it. I've joined in with the flavor-of-the-month program. I've seen it last about two weeks, and, at the end of those two weeks, I've seen churches that despite all the ranting and all the guilt, still aren't evangelistic.

Brethren, this is going to be different. This is going to be different because rather than coming up with some little program that reflects the wisdom of men, we're going to go back to the word of God and focus on what God says is important. We're going to rely on a time-tested method that dozens of Christians in this room right now have successfully used, often without realizing that they were using it. We're going to rescue that method from the shadows, shine a spotlight on it, and make it the conscious focus of all that we do to reach out to the lost.

To emphasize this, I'm going to ask for a show of hands. How many in this room obeyed the gospel because of a poster program? How many became disciples because of a correspondence course? How many obeyed because of a door-knocking crusade? Now, how many Christians in this room obeyed because somebody who loved you taught you about Jesus? It could be a parent who taught you, some other relative, a spouse, a boyfriend or girlfriend, or just a friend. How many people here came to the Lord because of someone who loved you and wanted the best for you? I think the key is obvious. It's love. When love is the centerpiece of our evangelistic efforts, we succeed. When it's not, we fail. Let's consider the Biblical underpinnings of this truth this morning. Let's ask, "What's love got to do with it?"

The Big Disconnect.

Let's begin by examining the big disconnect that has grown up, whether we realize it or not, between our conception of Biblical love and our efforts to teach outsiders. This starts with an extremely familiar passage, Jesus' discussion of love in Matthew 22:37-40. The Greek word that the original uses here is *agape*. *Agape* is the noble, self-sacrificing love that desires nothing more than the good of its object. When a firefighter dashes back into a burning building to rescue a child, he is motivated by *agape*. Jesus here says that this kind of love isn't just the first-ranked commandment. It is the absolutely central commandment. All the other commandments depend on love. They hang down from it like a necklace from a peg, and if you take love away, all the other commandments fall.

An equally familiar passage is Matthew 28:19-20. We looked at this one two weeks ago, in fact. Logically speaking, if every other commandment depends on love, this one depends on love too. However, that's not the way we typically think about it or preach it. In all of my life, I can never remember hearing a sermon where I heard evangelism explicitly connected to love. I've talked to other Christians about it, brethren in their 70's, elders in the church, and they say the same thing. We just don't think about teaching the lost as an expression of love. Instead, we march out of the church building, grimly determined to cram the gospel down somebody's throat, whether he likes it or not, and if we're able to overcome our very natural fear of such an encounter, we fail, and we think evangelism is hopeless.

The truth is, it's not evangelism that's hopeless. It's loveless evangelism that's hopeless. Here's why: Imagine love like a peg, with two other commandments depending on it or hanging down from it: the command not to steal, and the commandment not to commit adultery. What happens when we sever the connection between not stealing and love? We get people like the Pharisees, who kept the letter of the law but trampled all over its spirit. They said, "We don't steal," but they went out and cheated widows out of their houses. Without love, the commandment not to steal fails.

Likewise, the commandment not to commit adultery. If we don't connect it back to love, it falls too. Remember, if you will, a certain ex-president of ours. He didn't have *agape* in his heart, so he started weaseling with the definition of adultery. He got to the point where he could do what he wanted to do, but still technically claim that he was being faithful. Was that what God had in mind? Absolutely not! Without love, the concept of faithfulness falls apart too.

Now let's take that obvious truth and apply it to evangelism. I don't mean to imply that most Christians approach evangelism with the evil mindset of the Pharisees or Bill Clinton, but the result is the same. Love ought to be both the motivation for our personal work and the main tool we use. When we don't think about love, or we forget about love, we are abandoning any chance we have for success. Without love, the commandment to evangelize also fails.

Imitating God.

We find an even greater stress on love in evangelism when we consider the topic of imitating God. We all know that God is love, but we see that way that God has proven His love defined in Ephesians 2:4-5. Corpses are not lovable

things, and when we were dead in our trespasses, we were spiritual corpses. Despite that, God's love is so great that He *agape'd* us anyway. Even though we were dead, He made us alive through His Son. Because of His love, He saved us when we did not deserve to be saved, and His love for the lost is the greatest of all the loves of God.

We see this same love expressed in the life of Christ. Look at Romans 5:6-8. The crucial point in this context is the way that Paul narrows the category of those for whom Christ died. Christ didn't come to earth and suffer and die for the righteous. He didn't even endure the agony of the cross for the merely good. He went through all of those things for us, while we were still sinners. He died not for the good, but for the wicked. He died for those who had no claim on His love at all, but He loved them anyway and gave everything He had for them. The most magnificent example of love in action that the world will ever see was the love that moved Christ to sacrifice Himself for the sinner.

We learn how this connects back to us in Ephesians 5:1-2. God's example of love isn't something we just get to shrug off. It's something that we must imitate. Likewise, we don't get to walk however we want to. We have to walk in love, the love with which Christ loved us. There are two obvious earthly directions in which this love is pointed. The first is toward other Christians, just as Jesus commanded in John 15, that we must love one another as He has loved us. We understand that one pretty well, I think, even if we don't always follow through on it. The second direction in which the love of God leads us, though, is to love the lost. Think about it. The highest expression of God's love was love for those who were dead in their trespasses. That love led God to save sinners from their sins. If we are truly imitators of God, we will also love the sinner, and our love will lead us too to work to save them. In similar fashion, Christ was moved by His love for sinners to sacrifice Himself on the cross, because that was necessary to save them. If we are true disciples of Christ, we will also be filled with love for the lost, and that love will compel us to reach out to save them too.

Here's what this looks like in real life. It means that as we're sitting at a red light, watching all the people on the cross street driving by, we're thinking to ourselves, "Every one of those drivers is lost, and I'm not OK with that." It means that as we greet our co-worker in the morning, the thought that's going through our mind is, "I love him, and it makes me sick to my stomach to think of him suffering in the torments of hell. From here on out, I'm going to take every opportunity I can to show him my love for him and lead him to the Lord." When we love, we're no longer able to look on our neighbor in an impersonal, detached way. Instead, his highest good has become our highest good too.

Of course, learning to love in this way, learning to love like Christ did, is not something that comes quickly and easily. However, despite its difficulty, it needs to be the center of our lives, just as Paul expresses in his prayer in Ephesians 3:17-19. Here's the way this works. We give control of our lives to Jesus, and from that baseline of love, we start to understand more and more what love is. At some point along that process, we hit a moment where we encounter the love of Jesus in a way we can't fully intellectually understand. Then, that love fills us up and transforms us so that we become like God. This isn't something we hit in a week or two, brethren. It's something we struggle to attain for a lifetime, and none of us ever fully get there. However, because the love of Christ is so amazing and compelling, we give it the best effort that we can. If this is truly our attitude, it can't help but transform our evangelism too.

Love for All.

If we truly have a handle on the love of God, it will express itself in our love for all. James makes an important point about the objects of our love in James 2:8-9. A love that is partial isn't really the love of God. Sometimes, I think Christians get in trouble here. I know that there are many brethren here who, just like I do, have close friends and family members who are either not Christians or not faithful to Christ. Just like I do, I'm sure that many here have labored to save those loved ones for years or decades, and that's what God wants us to do. However, those people can also be a trap. They can become the focus of our evangelistic efforts to the exclusion of everybody else. We get so caught up in saving our husband or our sister or our whoever that we don't think at all about the next-door neighbor or the admin at work. In cases like that, our partiality can be a serious hindrance to the gospel. It's good to try to teach our families, but we need to cast our nets wider than that. We need to love everyone and seek to save everyone.

Furthermore, this love doesn't just express itself in warm fuzzy feelings or even just words. It is a love of action. Jesus tells us what He expects in Luke 6:35. First of all, this isn't a verse just about our enemies. Jesus isn't saying, "Love your enemies, but if somebody's just indifferent toward you, you can ignore them." Instead, the point is that we are to love everyone, up to and including our enemies. This love involves doing good and giving, which of course is what lending and expecting nothing in return ends up being. Evangelism isn't separate from this command. Instead, it is the most important part of it. When we reach the lost, we are doing good for them in the most profound way possible. We are giving them the most important gift that they will ever receive. We are expressing our love for them in the most meaningful way that we can. However, it is not the only way that we show *agape*, and it cannot be. When a salesman shows up at my door trying to convince me to buy something, I don't think he has my best interests at heart. I think he's trying to use me and make money off of me. In just the same way, when we try to reach an outsider without having built a loving relationship first, he'll treat us just like the salesman. Evangelism is love, but love is more than evangelism.