

“Because We Are Loved, So Let Us Love”
(A Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

Text: Romans 12:9-21; John 14:23-24, 1 John 4:7-21

Lectionary Texts: Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45b; Matthew 16:21-28; Romans 12:9-21

Subject: God’s Love spurs us to action.

Desired Response: We should love that same way.

How To: Three specific areas named.

How Long: Pick one to concentrate on this coming week.

Sermon in a Sentence: “As God loves us, so we should love others.”

Worship Theme: “God gives His gift of love to His children to enable us to love others.”

Browse through a secular bookstore and you quickly come to the conclusion that books about love are big sellers. In a recent *New York Times* book-review section, the advertisement states, “Intimate secrets never before revealed that will revolutionize your ability to love.”

Anyway, now that I’ve captured your attention, I thought I’d use this time today to give some rather specific tips on sharing Christian love. I promise to be candid, and I truly hope that what I say will prove helpful.

What I’ll be talking about is Christ-like love—not some other kind of love. I intend to underline the fact that God, by nature, is love.

I hardly need to read any supporting Scripture, do I? From the time we were small children in Sunday School we learned to sing:

Praise him, praise Him all ye little children,
God is love, God is love.
Love Him, love Him, all ye little children,
God is love, God is love;
Thank Him, thank Him, all ye little children,
God is love, God is love;

But maybe, we’re like a lot of people. Though everybody talks about love and how beautiful it’s supposed to be, we still have a number of unanswered questions about it. In fact, there may be as much confusion today about this matter of Christian love as there is about other kinds of love.

I've shared with you, on a couple of other occasions, one of the great mysteries of the English language. Do you realize that our nation's principal language has more words than any other language in the world? It does. And yet, when it comes to certain subjects, our words seem quite inadequate compared to, say, the New Testament Greek language, what linguistic scholars call *koiné* or "common language." Based originally on the Greek of Athens, it was circulated throughout Alexander the Great's Macedonian Empire that immediately preceded the great Roman Empire. Languages acquired by many non-native speakers are generally simplified, as was the case with *koiné*.

It is important we recognize that love exists as both a feeling and also as a deep, spiritual connection. We English-speakers have a deficit in trying to express the deepest and fullest meanings when we use the word "love" because we only have one English word. The ancient Greeks devised four separate and beautifully special words for our English word "love": *agápe*, *philéo*, *storgé*, and *eros*.

Agápe (ah-GAH-pay) love is God-breathed love. It comes to us as a spiritual gift from God and touches the very core of our being. *Philéo* (fill-EH-oh) is the feeling of affection that one has for a dear friend, or someone who is an equal, such as a brother or sister. In English, we get the concept of "filial" or "brotherly love." *Storgé* (STOR-gay) is familial love felt between un-equals, such as between parents, and their children, or grandparents and their grandchildren, or between uncles and aunts and their nephews and nieces. It is a protective, caring, nurturing love. *Eros* (AIR-ahz) is intimate sexual love driven by passion. In English, we use the word "erotic" based on the concept contained in this ancient Greek word.

In the New Testament Greek language—the *koiné*, that is the principal language of the New Testament Scriptures—each of these four loves is closely tied to some responsive action. Did you catch that? Each of these four loves is closely tied to some responsive action. In other words, love does not exist in some type of ethereal vacuum. Rather, love always—always—demands or precipitates an active, outward response.

It is no wonder, then, that when, for us Christians, God ties love with obedience, He does so quite appropriately. Take notice of these words of our Lord, recorded in John 14:23-24:

²³ Jesus replied, "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. ²⁴ Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.

In this case, the New Testament Greek word for "love" is *agape*—God-breathed love. For it is God who gives us the gift of His love and enables us to return our love to Him through our obedience. This actually makes the transactional relationship between us believers and God quite one sided. He gives us His love and He enables us to love Him in return through our obedience. It is all His doing.

What is our part, then? It is to submit or bend our selfish human wills to God's perfect and loving will, so that we obey His teachings as revealed in His written Word, the Bible. That's the reasons why we must read, study, and meditate upon God's written Word. And, that is why we should not foolishly pretend that His written Word doesn't matter, insofar as the way we choose to live our lives.

God's love evokes a response of obedience to His will and to His written Word. Truthfully, that is very good news for us this day.

Notice what the Apostle Paul states in Romans 12:9-21:

⁹ Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

In this passage, Paul gives us quite a lot to incorporate into our daily lives. So, I thought we might do well to see Christ's love as modeled by the Master Himself. Granted, the time's too short to get a complete view. We won't come anywhere near to answering Paul's prayer in Ephesians that we might "*comprehend with all the saints what is its breadth and length and height and depth*" of God's love. But, we should get a pretty adequate start on the subject. Okay?

For example, the average person, when sinned against, kind of snorts, "If one of us is going to make a move now, it's going to have to be him or her." Or, "After what my wife did, I'm through trying to relate to her unless she comes crawling." Or, "My husband certainly doesn't seem very loving when he acts that way toward me. I'm going to give him the cold shoulder for sure!" And, onlookers have a tendency to respond, "Unh-huh. I don't blame you!"

In contrast, God, despite repeated personal affronts, still initiates love toward us. At least that's the way I've found Him to be. And, that's in spite of the fact that He would have been justified to have said long ago, "Dean, I've really had it with you!"

How about it, friend? Has God shown Himself this way to you, as well? Time and again you knowingly went against His desires—sometimes to the degree that had your positions been reversed, you would have told God to get lost! But, here He is, saying "I'll forgive" when many times you and I have not even had the decency to confess the wrong we did! Still, God initiates His love toward us.

Here's another illustration of God's love. The average man or woman, having once discovered another's flaws, locks onto them like a determined bulldog. What's so-and-so like? "Oh, he's got an ego as big as a barn. Why, I remember back when..."—and then the stories start. Never mind if what's told took place more than 20 years ago. Keeping the person in that "box of past behavior" produces a certain degree of pleasure. It makes the other person appear smaller and, therefore, supposedly we seem to become a bit bigger.

How different God is. Aware of our many flaws—both open and hidden (and how good it is that only God knows certain things, eh?)—His love is great enough to still keep calling out the good in who we are.

How unusual this love is that He manifests. How fortunate we are that He saw something of value in us. And, He just keeps graciously encouraging us to allow that God-breathed love to find expression.

I'm sure many of us have experienced this in the course of our lives. It didn't matter to God that people had boxed us and slapped on a label: stupid, burned out, mixed up, headstrong, inferior, cocky, homely, selfish,

disobedient, peculiar, loser, arrogant, cheap. God still saw something in us that was beautiful. Like the song says:

Something beautiful, something good.
All our confusion He understood.
All we had to offer Him was brokenness and strife.
But, He made something beautiful of our lives

God looked at us, knowing everything about us, and He just kept calling out the good.

One more matter. Secure enough in who He is, God has always spoken the truth in love. When I faithfully read His written Word, I've seldom struggled trying to figure out what He's wanted me to do. Was He being open with me or was He hiding something? Most of the time, this was not a problem. God's not only been extremely direct—through His written Word, through the words spoken by His choice servants, through His Holy Spirit's use of my conscience, whatever—He reveals quite openly exactly what He's thinking and what He wants me to do.

There's something refreshing about all this. Too many people I know are guarded in what they say. All the time it's as though they're protecting themselves. They think if they tell the truth, maybe people won't like them, or candor might result in the removal of favors of one kind or another. Maybe the unguarded truth seems too hard to deal with; I don't know. But there's something affirming about the truth being spoken in love.

Well, that's enough about how God does it. Where I'm headed, of course, is that we need to love like He does. And now, all of a sudden, the theory—or the theology—becomes very practical.

Who is it you are having trouble loving? Maybe it's a husband or a wife ... a son or daughter ... neighbor, work associate, fellow student, boss, fellow Christian. I think you can come up with the answer faster than I can guess it.

Well: “*As God loves us, so we should love others.*” I could read any of a number of verses that state what I just said. “*As God loves us, so we should love others.*” Do you get it? And, by the way, that's my key sentence for today: “*As God loves us, so we should love others.*”

How does God love us? Let me review once more. For starters, despite repeated affronts on our part, God still initiates love toward us.

So, do we act like the average person? Sinned against, we say, “If a move's going to be made now, it's going to have to be the other party. I'm not budging!” Or, like God, are we the one to reach out—that is, to initiate again?

And, please listen. Don't get hung up on theoretical questions like, “Is there no end then to the abuse I have to take?” Few of us are anywhere near that point anyway. At this stage of the game, concentrate on whether or not you'll do what God says—and again, be the one to initiate.

That person we're having trouble loving, part of our feelings are because we see his or her flaws so plainly. Hear me. God, knowing all that and more about both parties in contention, well, His love is still great enough to keep calling out the good—the good in both individuals.

“As God loves us, so we should love others.” To be real blunt—will you, will I, still seek to look for the good in others? Or will we comfortably hold tightly to the knowledge of the bad and stubbornly refuse to believe in the possibility of any miracle working of the Holy Spirit in that life?

Becoming mature in the area of love—Christian love as displayed toward others—that’s my topic. Secure enough in who He is, God always speaks the truth in love. Not just the “truth,” because the truth alone can be brutal, but the “truth in love.”

And, not just love, either. I’ve seen marriages where for years great love was expressed, but seldom was there the compliment of forcing the recipient to also face the truth, and the arrangement wasn’t healthy.

Can you speak the truth in love to that person you have in mind? Or, as is the accepted way of the world, will you carefully mouth that which is most protective of yourself?

Anyway—we have a start. The distance yet to be traveled regarding loving others as God does is quite far. But, no journey begins without those first steps.

“As God loves us, so we should love others.” Listen to the Apostle John’s words in chapter 4 of his first epistle, that is 1 John 4:7-21:

⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

¹³ This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. ¹⁶ And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. ¹⁷ This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. ²¹ And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

Hard to misunderstand that, right?

We won’t be able to master this God-like love in a day or two. But, we can know improvement in a specific manner this coming week. Let’s determine to choose one of these areas to work in, as I do a quick review.

- Despite repeated personal affronts, God still initiates love toward us. Is that a God-like quality you should work on this week?
- Aware of our many flaws—both open and hidden—God’s love is still great enough to keep calling out the good in who we are. Is that something you could emulate in the next few days?
- Secure enough in who He is, God always speaks the truth in love: Maybe that’s the challenge we all should hear as from the Lord and promptly put it into practice.

"As God loves us, so we should love others." Amen.