

The Greatest Power in the Universe

Week 1: Who Knew?

Sunday, July 24, 2022

✠ A word about the next few messages

- *My goal is always to speak out of scripture, into our lives, within the backdrop of OUR CHURCH- our relationships- not abstract. I hope to do that over these next few weeks.*
- *That said, part of my motivation for what we will be talking about is my own observations, reflections, on some of the larger trends, forces at play in our country and culture around us- particularly within what I loosely refer to as Christian Culture.*
- *I may push a few buttons over the coming weeks- you may not agree with everything I say, and I hope that's okay. If so, I encourage you to test my words against the scripture we will explore, and even if we agree, that there is something that can be learned.*

✠ Who knew?

- *One of my favorite PIXAR movies when my kids were growing up was MONSTERS INC. Basic plot... in Monsterland, the powerplant runs on screams- on scares- and so every day the 'Scarers' go through a door, encounter a sleeping child, scare them, and as they run back through the door collect the power from the kid's screams.*
- *By the end of the movie, they discover- against all odds- the children's laughter contained more power than a scream.*
- *BASICALLY- when it came to the power for their world- JOY was more powerful than FEAR. WHO KNEW?*
- *If we look across the history of Christian culture- today as well- there are lots of places we look for POWER- power to live, to motivate people.*
- *Sources such as GUILT. ANGER. REWARD. But the biggie is FEAR.*
- *And YET, if we look even cursorily at SCRIPTURE, we will see that the greatest power in the universe- the greatest SOURCE of power in the universe, is LOVE. I mean, WHO KNEW?*
- *Well, the obvious answer is WE KNEW. WE SHOULD KNOW. The truth and calling of God's love is the great narrative theme of ALL SCRIPTURE.*
- *When I was a kid, we used to sing an old hymn—"Of the themes that men have known"...*

Of the themes that men have known, One supremely stands alone;
Through the ages it has shown, 'Tis His wonderful, wonderful love.
Love is the theme, love is supreme; Sweeter it grows, glory bestows;
Bright as the sun ever it glows! Love is the theme, eternal theme!

- *THIS IS TRUTH, and it is a bigger, and more practical, truth than we know.*

✠ God is...

- *In 1st John 4 we read a statement echoed by all of scripture...*

1 John 4:15-6 *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*

- *GOD. IS. LOVE.*
- *Noteworthy that these statements do not say "GOD IS LOVING"- although He is. Love is not just one of God's attributes. LOVE is the totality of God's nature, character, presence, and essence.*

- *Everything that God has ever done, said, or will ever do- His countenance toward all of creation and ALL of humanity, FOR ALL ETERNITY, IS LOVE.*
- *Sometimes people will say... YES, God is love, BUT.. he is also JUST.*
- *In saying this, the thinking at times is that God's justice OFFSETS, balances, mediates, or stands apart from God's Love- as if God's Love and God's justice are competing forces.*
- *THIS IS FALSE THINKING. God IS JUST, but God's justice in NO WAY tempers or reduces his love. If this were the case, scripture could not say that God IS LOVE. RATHER, God's justice is a subset, an attribute of His Love- as there are many other attributes....*

† Why talk about this?

- *Pause here... WHY AM I BRINGING THIS UP? I mean, we know this, right?*
- *IN ALL HUMILITY, if we look around at our world, including the world of the church and Christian culture- and I include myself in this- we aren't doing a really good job of loving.*
- *If we take an honest assessment of much dialog and expression within the church in America, we will see lots of fear, anger, confusion, and fatalism.*
- *And friends, this is NOT HEALTHY- not for us, and not for the world around us. (NOTE- if you are prone to talking about how the world is falling apart...not helpful)*
- *But even more importantly, THIS OUTLOOK IS NOT NECESSARY. IT'S NOT CONSISTENT with WHO WE ARE IN CHRIST, and the HOPE we possess in Christ.*
- *I'm not saying there aren't concerning things in our world. THERE ARE. MANY.*
- *What I AM saying is that there is a source of power available to us that is FAR GREATER than any fear we may think is justifiable to possess. THAT POWER IS LOVE. The power of God's love TO US, and the power of God's love when it is lived out THROUGH US.*
- *Pause again- I hear myself saying this... WHAT DOES THIS EVEN MEAN?*

† Love and law

- *Tell you a story. A number of years ago I had preached a sermon in some way dealing with the Love of God as the principle motivating force in our lives.*
 - *Need to be careful.... Love is squishy- If you just say "Love God and Love people", then people can do anything with that. NO, what you have to preach- what people NEED TO HEAR and continually be confronted with, is the reality of their SIN. People need to know, in no uncertain terms, what is right and wrong.*
- *In other words... if you really get to the essence of what he was saying... LOVE ISN'T ENOUGH. JUST AS IMPORTANTLY, maybe more, YOU NEED LAW.*
- *Boil this perspective down even more... LAW (moral rules and consequences, both punishments and rewards), is more powerful than love.*
- *When it comes to how we bring moral change to our country, this is the approach being embraced by much of Christian culture.*
- *Based in large part on our 2 year journey through Acts, I humbly, but deeply, disagree.*

- **DON'T HEAR WHAT I'M NOT SAYING. WE NEED GOD'S TRUTH!** Our world is lost apart from God's Truth, and part of this truth is the reality of sin, and God's call into a life that increasingly expresses- **GENUINELY SO**, as a reflection of who we are inside- the character and nature of God.
- **BUT**, when we think and behave based on the notion that religious and moral rules are the most effective way to overcome sin, or to bring about change in our culture, some real problems emerge.
- **ONE**, we can be selective in how we put together our lists of what is sinful and righteous, moral and immoral. We can be tempted to focus on the sin of others, and de-emphasize our own sin, moral compromises, lack of understanding, and failures to love.
- **BUT THE BIG PROBLEM** is that **LAW** has **NO POWER** to change a person's heart. Thus, it has little power to change a person or societies behavior. The **NT IS ABUNDANTLY** clear on this point.
- The writer of Hebrews said that the Law- the system of the Old Covenant- has been set aside because it was weak and useless.
- **THE RESULT** is that we- in the human condition and in our flesh- can find endless ways to hide and rationalize inside the law.
- A few years ago Andy Stanley did several messages where he described the old covenant as being summed up in the system of the **TEMPLE**- he called this approach to life the **TEMPLE MODEL**, and rightly pointed out that there are **LOTS** of places you can hide in a temple.

† No place to hide

- **BUT FRIENDS-** there is **NO PLACE** to hide if our lens and focus is the Love of God. In John 13 Jesus said- **LOVE** others with the **SAME LOVE** I have for you.

John 13:34-35 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

- **Friends-** if we have the courage and surrender to place our thoughts, words, and actions toward people- **ANYONE-** next to the Love of God for all humanity- **THERE IS NO PLACE TO HIDE. THIS WILL CHANGE HOW WE THINK** about, speak about, relate to, and engage with the people around us.

† One another or every one?

- **NOW- SOME WILL ASSERT-** "Jesus didn't say love **EVERYONE** as I have loved you." He just said "Love **ONE OTHER** as I have loved you."
- Therefore, God isn't teaching us to love everyone- to be willing and expectant to be the presence of God's love to **ALL PEOPLE-** he is only teaching us to do this in relationship to **EACH OTHER**, meaning to other believers, within the community of faith.
- **HEAR-** it is true that **NT DOES** emphasize our calling to love other believers. We see the phrase '**EACH OTHER**' in most scriptures calling us to live out the love of God. In **Galatians 6:10** Paul says...

Galatians 6:10 as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

- **But note the 'all people'.** My point is that if we honestly examine the full testimony of the **NT**, the call to **BE THE LOVE OF GOD** does not stop with the walls of the church.

✠ What Love looks like

- **Consider this: If we ask scripture, WHAT DOES LOVE LOOK LIKE... The ultimate answer is the LIVED LIFE OF JESUS CHRIST, with the cross as the ultimate expression.**
- **THEREFORE- any understanding or teaching from scripture that would seek to place a limitation on the love of God- AND OUR CALLING TO LOVE OTHERS WITH THE LOVE OF GOD- must be evaluated and understood through the lens of God's love for all people that we see lived out in Jesus Christ.**
- **TWO EXAMPLES:**
- **From Matthew 22:34-40. Famous passage I have referenced a LOT...**

Matthew 22:34-40 Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵ One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶ "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" ³⁷ Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

- **Let's expand on that just a bit. In Luke 10, we see a similar story, but here the question is "how do I inherit eternal life", and Jesus puts the question back to the expert in the law.**

Luke 10:25-29 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" ²⁷ He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" ²⁸ "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

²⁹ But he wanted to justify himself,

- **He wanted to justify his desire to place a limit on who he must love so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"**
- **What was Jesus' answer? The parable of the Good Samaritan.**
- **FRIENDS- if we are wrestling with putting limitations on who we would look to with the Love of Christ, we need to go and read the parable of the Good Samaritan.**
- **ONE MORE LOOK- THIS IS THE BIG ONE- When we consider God's call to love, this is what it all comes down to... Philippians 2.**

✠ What it all comes down to

Philippians 2:1-8 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. ⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

- **Friends, LOVE OF GOD TO ALL HUMANITY is seen in the fullest expression of its radiance and majesty- in the sacrificial, humble Love of Jesus Christ on the cross.**
- **And so Paul says- in how we relate to the people around us, what is our first and foremost mindset?**

- *The mindset of Jesus Christ as his love and joy for humanity took him to the cross. THAT'S the answer. That's how we are to love other people.*
- *WHEW. Deep breath. Few honest thoughts.*

✠ A few honest thoughts

- *THIS IS HARD. Of course it is. In fact, it's impossible, apart from complete dependence upon Christ.*
- *ARE THERE TIMES when the Spirit will lead us to have boundaries in how we relate to people. OF COURSE.*
- *Are there situations where we must seek Spirit led wisdom and discernment about the nature of our relationships. YES! OF COURSE!*
- *ARE THERE TIMES when, in order to be healthy ourselves, or to lovingly protect a person from harm or unhealth, we must take actions another person might perceive as being unloving? YES!*
- *HEAR! A person caught in an abusive relationship is not bound by a distorted sense of love to remain in that abusive relationship, as is often demanded by the abuser.*
- *LIKEWISE, it is not unloving to make decisions beneficial for your own spiritual, emotional, and mental health.*
- *When we wrestle with God's high calling to LOVE, DETAILS MATTER. Situations can be nuanced. Wisdom and thoughtfulness are always important. Things in life are rarely as black and white, or as certain, as we would like them to be.*
- *AND YET... HEAR ME HERE... when we are living out of our union with Christ, increasingly experiencing and expressing the love of CHRIST IN US- OUR FIRST INCLINATION... OUR IMPULSE... our GREATEST DESIRE that we will work toward if at ALL possible...*
- *...WILL BE TO show people, engage with people, talk about people, make decisions about how we relate to people- OUT OF THE greater love of Jesus Christ.*
- *This is the Love of God the father- fully revealed in Christ the son- and now being made manifest to the broken and hurting people of this world- THROUGH US.*
- *That is a HUGE thought to wrestle with, and it brings up a huge question- HOW? What does this LOOK LIKE.*
- *My friends, the NT answers that question, in a way that is incredibly practical.*
- *But before we can really wrestle with what it LOOKS LIKE to LOVE the people of this world, we FIRST must begin to comprehend the scope and magnitude of the FATHERS LOVE for the people of this world.*
- *THAT'S where we are going next week*