

## **“Love Actually”**

*Series: Love Comes to Town Week 2. Sacrificial Love*

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I was working on this sermon at a small round table in a public library in Boston this week when a lady approached my table, stared at me and asked, “Do you need that table.” “Well yes,” I replied, “but I’ll share it with you.” I picked up some of my stuff to make room for her. She then pulled out an alcohol pad and wiped down where my stuff used to be, put down her laptop and logged in. “This library scares me,” she admitted. “All these homeless people.” “Well don’t worry I won’t trouble you. You’re safe here.” After a while she said, “You look like you can figure this out.” Then she proceeded to tell me a problem with her bank and credit card company. I offered what suggestions I could. She thanked me. When she packed up to leave, she asked, “Why are you here?” “Well, my wife is attending a conference in Boston and I came along. We’re from the Philadelphia area.” “I could tell you’re not from around here.” “How?” I asked. “You seem like a friendly person.” I guess Love needs to come to town in Boston.

We are in week two of our series Love Comes to Town! This is a church-wide series for Growth Groups so our entire church is going through this together. I hope you will get into a Growth Group so you can dive deeper into what we cover on Sunday. Last week we started with a baseline self-assessment to see how well we currently love people in our lives. One type of relationship on that list is Difficult People. Though I didn’t think so, some might consider the woman in the Boston library a difficult person. People who are hard to love can be quite draining. You might even consider them to be VDP: Very Draining People. They wear you out. They rub you the wrong way. They are abrasive like sandpaper.

Does someone in your life rub you the wrong way? (Don’t point). A family member, coworker, an Ex? If you look in your bulletin, you’ll find a small square of sandpaper. Please take it out and hold onto it. In a moment, I’ll ask you to do something with it. But first, let me describe 4 types of VDP’S you may recognize in your life:

1) **DIFFICULT** people. They’re hard to love. Nothing pleases them. They are rude! Constant complainer. At Thanksgiving you take out the Turkey and they say: “It’s too dry! Cranberry sauce from a can?” During the meal, they are convinced everyone would benefit from their political views. After a while it just becomes **DIFFICULT**.

2) **DEMANDING** people. We all know someone who is pushy. Aggressive. You can never meet their expectations. It might be your supervisor at work. It may be someone who visits and demands your kids be quiet because he can’t stand the noise. She must have certain sheets on the bed. Demanding people are draining. They take away all the joy. After the visit you’re exhausted.

3) DISAPPOINTING people. These are the people that let you down. Maybe it's a parent who constantly disappoints and fails you each year. A single mom has an ex who's an alcoholic. He promises to pick up their sons and spend time with them, only to not show up and give no reason, leaving the boys devastated and broken. She says, "He's totally unreliable, but he's the only Dad they have." He causes hurt and pain and she must deal with the aftermath.

4) DESTRUCTIVE people. How do you love people who intentionally hurt you, people who are mean, hateful, manipulative? These are folks who cause pain in your life. It may be a son or daughter who makes poor choices and your heart is breaking. Maybe it is a neglectful, hurtful, even abusive spouse or parent. Even if you are able to move on from the relationship it has a destructive hold on your life. Their actions still make you feel broken.

These four types of VDPs are abrasive, irritating and even damaging. Can you identify one of the Very Draining People (VDP) in your life? [Difficult-Demanding-Disappointing-Destructive] Go ahead and hold up that piece of sandpaper. You're going to write their initials on the back of your paper. If it's the person next to you, write the initials backwards so they can't figure it out. Take that sandpaper to your group this week and, without naming names, share one experience with this person and how you try to relate to them. Keep your person in mind as we explore Scripture for a prescription on how to deal with these Very Draining People. How do you show the love of Christ to a VDP in your life without getting hurt?

The focus of this series is the Love Chapter – I Corinthians 13. Let's look at its center.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. I Corinthians 13:4-6 (NRSV)

Here, at the heart of 1 Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul gives us the definition of Love. He uses a specific Greek word for love. Greek has several words for love: Philos which is love between friends (as in Philadelphia – Brotherly love), Eros which is passion between lovers, and Storge - love between family. These are good types of love, but they are earthly and sometimes worldly.

What Paul defines here is not human love. Humans cannot naturally express this love on their own. Paul only uses the Greek word AGAPE which describes God's unconditional love. He is not attempting to define the other types of love. He describes the Love God has for us and the Love God wants to pour through us to others. This is important because in our culture when we hear the word "love" we often think of human love which focuses on feelings – romance, attraction, affection, warmth, butterflies in your stomach. Paul is not putting any of that down. Instead, he lifts up love that goes beyond feelings, love that lasts even when you feel nothing. And while there are some feeling words mixed in here, his focus is on action: not what love feels but what love does. In fact, he spends more time defining what love does not do. You can summarize these verses

by saying Love is not selfish and self-centered. Love focuses on another. In this passage we'll look at 4 insights for loving VDPs. These principles will help sand away the rough parts of our relationships with VDPs and refine our souls in the process.

Let's look at the first group of VDPs: **Difficult People**. Scripture tells us: "Love is not arrogant or rude" (I Corinthians 13:5). Have you noticed there are a lot of rude people in Philly? If Love is not rude then: **I must be Tactful, not just Truthful!** Love is tactful. When a Difficult person is rude to you—love doesn't return their rudeness. You don't delight in evil but overcome evil with good. You don't respond in kind. And that's hard for those of us with the spiritual gift of criticism. We're often rude when we're in a rush and judge them for their incompetence. I think it was George Carlin who said "When you drive on the highway, everyone who goes faster than you is a maniac and everyone going slower than you is a moron." Tact takes time. Speaking the truth with love opens lines of communication in difficult situations.

A wise, mature person is known for his understanding. The more pleasant his words, the more persuasive he is. Proverbs 16:2

The more pleasant you are, the more persuasive you are. You might jot down: "I'm never persuasive when I'm abrasive." Turn to the person next to you; and take out your sandpaper and go ahead and rub them the wrong way. When I'm abrasive with my spouse, my kids, with store clerks, I'm never persuasive. Nagging doesn't work. If it doesn't work on you, it doesn't work on anybody. This may be hard for some of you to hear, but if you're rude or angry or critical, nobody's going to care what you have to say. They'll get defensive and hit the mute button! So do it in a gentle, loving tone. Not with harsh or judgmental words. Love is not rude. I must be Tactful, not just Truthful with Difficult people in your life.

The second group are **Demanding People**. Scripture says: "Love does not insist on its own way." I Corinthians 13:5. In relating to Demanding people **I must be Understanding not Demanding!** When a Demanding person rubs you the wrong way, Rick Warren suggests you take time to consider their 3 B's: Their Background, Battles and Burdens. Before you react, ask yourself: Do I know their Background? They may have been raised in a dysfunctional home. Do I know the Battles they're going through right now? Maybe they're facing chemo or a family breakup. Do I know the burdens they are carrying? They may be deep in debt, raising a challenging child or caring for aging parents. Take time to understand someone's story. Understand their burdens. What problems are they carrying? They may be sick, afflicted with a chronic condition, facing an upcoming surgery, going through a divorce, looking for work, battling depression.

Now take a moment and look at the initials you wrote on your paper. Do you know their background? Their battles? What's going on beneath the surface? Do you know the burdens they carry around? The more time you take to understand the more compassion you'll have for them.

The third group are **Disappointing People**. At some point, everyone will let you down. Your parents will disappoint you; your children, your spouse, siblings will disappoint you. I, your pastor, will disappoint you too. Why? Because no one is perfect. How do you respond? 1 Corinthians 13:5 says “Love is not irritable.” If I choose to walk the path of Christ-like love then **I must be Gentle, not Judgmental**. Disappointment often results from mismatched expectations. We expect our spouse to always be thoughtful, our parents to always provide what we want, our co-workers to do their part; and when they fail to meet our expectations it can be easy to judge them as unreliable and useless. But that is not the way of love.

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. Galatians 6:1(NIV)

That word gently is great advice for your small group, your family and even your co-workers. The Scriptures tell us sometimes we must have hard conversations in a gentle way. When we confront other people, we do it gently, not harshly. When we jump to judgment rather than gentleness we refuse to listen and make the wrong judgments. Gentleness doesn't mean we approve what others do or don't do. It does mean we risk having hard conversations with our VDPs in kind and gentle ways. Now you may say, “I can't be gentle to this person. They almost destroyed my life.”

That's the last group: **Destructive People**. How do you love people who hurt or wound you? We usually react in two ways: we remember it and then we retaliate. First we remember it. We stockpile it in our mind. We draw up a grievance list. I'll never forget what he did. I'm never letting her off the hook. I remember it and rehearse it repeatedly. Second, we retaliate. We want them to know the pain they caused, so we try to hurt them or imagine getting back at them. But that's not what the Bible says. 1 Corinthians 13:6 says: “Love keeps no record of wrongs.” So our response to Destructive people is **I don't REPEAT it, I DELETE it!**

Now that probably sounds trite. Some of you are holding the name of a person in your heart that abused you. And this can sound like a cheap soundbite; I just delete it and it goes away. Just forgive and forget! That's not what Jesus says. Yes, Jesus calls us to forgive. He doesn't mention the forgetting part. You may always remember what they've done to you. But you don't have to be imprisoned in the endless cycle of remembering, rehearsing, retaliating. When we keep repeating and reviewing it in our minds, we nurse a grudge, fixate on the offense and grow bitter and resentful. The original meaning of the word “Resentment” is “to feel all over again.” You are condemning yourself to reliving the event. Resentment is emotional suicide, it will destroy you. Self-pity and self-justification initially feel good, but they ultimately destroy you.

Forgiveness and Trust are two different things. Many Christians think if I forgive then I need to let the other person walk all over me. No! Forgiveness is letting the person off the hook of your anger. It comes by grace. Trust is earned and it takes time. Forgiveness is a decision.

Reconciliation, rebuilding a relationship, is a longer process. It may take months or years to rebuild trust. Don't confuse the two.

Let's say you have a family member or friend who is an alcoholic. One night, they borrow your car, go out partying, get into a car accident, and get a DUI. The next day they come to you and say, "I'm so sorry! Will you forgive me?" Should you forgive them? It will be hard, but as followers of Jesus, we are called to forgive the way Christ forgives us. To protect yourself from bitterness; you forgive.

But what if they say, "Thanks for forgiving me. Can I borrow the car to go to a party next week? NO! That's a different matter! That's a question of trust. If you've wrecked my car because of your abuse of alcohol; it's going to take time for me to trust you. I need to see you seeking after sobriety and recovery day-by-day and month-by-month before I let you use my car again. Forgiveness is offered by grace; trust is earned through action over time. When there's behavior in a family or workplace that is destructive or dysfunctional, there are consequences. Restoration of the relationship doesn't happen overnight. Trust takes time to rebuild. Forgiveness can keep a relationship together but trust is earned or re-earned through action. It's a process.

Please think very long and hard about the initials on your sandpaper. The Lord wants to do something in your heart. Will you allow His love to begin sanding off the rough spots in your relationship? Maybe healing can move you toward forgiveness. Tom Holladay says:

Our relationship with others is molded not merely by what I want, but by the examples Jesus provides. I'm not only going to think about how I want to be treated (the golden rule), I am going to look at how Jesus treats people. If I am going to live out of sacrificial love, it's not going to happen accidentally. It's going to take a step—a conscious decision to act towards others the way Jesus acts towards me.

The very draining people in your life can either make you bitter or better.

Why should you show God's love to your very draining person whose initials are on the sandpaper in your hand? God has a piece of sandpaper in his hand; whose initials are on it? Yours and Mine. In God's eyes, we can be difficult, demanding, disappointing and even destructive. Yet Jesus says, "Come to me!" This is why He went to the cross. It's been said that you can replace every instance of Agape Love in I Corinthians 13 with the name Jesus.

Jesus is patient; Jesus is kind; Jesus is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Jesus does not insist on its own way; Jesus is not irritable; Jesus keeps no record of wrongs; Jesus does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. Jesus always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Jesus never fails.

Jesus says “I want you to love others just as I love you. When you receive that power, it’s the power to be: Tactful and Truthful, Understanding, Not Demanding, Gentle, Not Judgmental, and Not Repeat but Delete. You can’t do any of those on your own. You need the power of God! Look to Christ for the strength and power to LOVE those who seem difficult to LOVE.