

"Extravagant Generosity"  
*The Art of Love: Relationships Are Matters of the Heart*  
**John 13:34-35**  
John Breon

We're continuing to look at matters of the heart. Loving relationships are matters of the heart. They're vital for our well-being. Loving relationships with other people are an important part of our relationship with God. Loving relationships help us understand something about extravagant generosity.

When our children were very young, one day Nancy had to take them to the doctor. Then she had to go to the store. Here she was waiting in line at the pharmacy with an eight year old, a five year old and a baby. She was feeling a little overwhelmed. Then a lady she didn't know stepped up, looked at the kids and asked, "Are these all yours?" Nancy said they were. The woman said, "How wonderful. You are so rich." That helped us with our perspective on life and family.

Last week we looked at responsibilities of those who are rich and discovered that most of us are rich compared to so many others. What about being rich in relationships? Do we invest ourselves in loving relationships with people? Have you made your list of people you love in the church? Today we're celebrating people we love and their positive influence in our lives.

We've read Jesus' words to his disciples, his commandment to "love one another as I have loved you." Before we explore that passage, I want to explore an Old Testament passage. Later, we'll look at how Paul applies this teaching to the church's life.

As Moses reminds the people of Israel about God's commands, he also tells them this:

Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

This passage was Israel's creed. It's called the "Shema" (the Hebrew word for "hear" in verse 4). Many Jews still recite this, along with a couple of other passages, twice a day.

The basic affirmation here is that the Lord is One or the Lord alone is God. Israel's allegiance belonged only to the Lord. They were to worship no other gods. They were the Lord's people and were to worship only him.

This worship and allegiance were expressed in the basic call in these verses: to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength. This call to love God with all we are is based on the affirmation that the Lord alone is God. Loving God here means to give total allegiance to God, to be loyal to the Lord, to be attached to the Lord as our only ruler. Israel was to show love and loyalty to the Lord by doing what God commanded.

Matthew, Mark and Luke each record Jesus' affirmation of this statement as the "Great Commandment." In Matthew and Mark, Jesus responds to a teacher who questions him about the chief commandment. He replies by quoting this verse from Deuteronomy. He also connects loving God with the command in Leviticus to "love your neighbor as yourself" (19:18). One way we show our love for God is through our love for each other.

In Luke, a teacher of the law asks Jesus what to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus replies with a question, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" The teacher answers Jesus by quoting the love commands from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. Jesus commends him and encourages him, "Do this and you will live." But the teacher of the law wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied by telling a story about a man who was beaten and robbed on the road. A priest and a Levite (religious leaders) passed by the man. But a Samaritan (the most unlikely hero for a story in that place and time) stopped and cared for the man and took him to a place where he could recover. Jesus then asked, "Who was the neighbor to the man who had been injured?" The teacher of the law said, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus didn't answer the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Instead, he said to be the neighbor by showing mercy to people in need.

John's Gospel doesn't include these Old Testament love commands. But Jesus does tell his disciples, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

This new commandment relates to the new covenant that God had promised and that Jesus was establishing. God promised to put his law in his people's hearts, to forgive their sins and be in a relationship with the people where they would all know God. The new covenant fulfills what the old covenant aimed for. And it all gets summed up and expressed in love for God and for each other.

The idea that love can be commanded is interesting. If love is just a feeling or emotion, how can we be commanded to feel it? But if love is a choice, a commitment to another or an active desire for someone's well-being, we can hear and obey the command.

The command Jesus gives here is new because of its connection to the new covenant. Also, it's new because Jesus is now the source and the standard of this love. We could understand what Jesus says here as, "I have loved you in order that you also love one another." This is more than a commandment; it's a gift that comes from God the Father through Jesus to people who believe in him. This gift is active in us because of the Holy Spirit (see Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* Anchor Bible).

Jesus shows us what this love is like when he lays down his life for us. We love one another as he loved us when we give ourselves for each other. That kind of love truly fulfills God's law and covers every obligation we have to fellow believers (Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John*). And the emphasis here is on the community of God's people in Jesus. This doesn't mean we don't love people outside the community. Our love for each other is part of our witness to the world. The world knows we are Jesus' followers when we love each other. And, maybe the world will be drawn toward God when they see us living God's love in our fellowship, in our community. What an opportunity and what a challenge! Tom Wright comments on this:

Love is all about the other person. It overflows into service, not in order to show off how hard-working it is, but because that is its natural form.

This is the badge that the Christian community wears before the watching world. As we read verse 35 we are bound to cringe with shame at the way in which professing Christians have treated each other down the years. We have turned the gospel into a weapon of our own various cultures. We have hit each other over the head with it, burnt each other at the stake with it. We have defined "one another" so tightly that it means only "love the people who reinforce your own sense of who you are." (*John for Everyone*).

If for other people to know the love of God they had to depend on how we love each other, would they get it? Loving each other the way Jesus loves us is a vital part of our witness.

I've been on the receiving end of the church's love all my life. I have followed Christ in a conscious way for forty years, but long before that I knew the church was like family. It was a community where I was accepted and included and given a chance to try out my gifts. There were Sunday School teachers, youth leaders, pastors and just regular folks who taught and encouraged me. In my years as a pastor, my family and I have been blessed by the church's love and concern and generosity. I've also seen how the church fails to be loving sometimes. We all have room to grow and to receive more help from God to be the loving community Jesus calls us to be.

Let's look at one more passage of Scripture where the apostle Paul applies this principle to a church:

Therefore as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Colossians 3:12-14)

In Christ we have put off the old way of life and have put on a new life that includes all these virtues Paul lists. To crown them all, we are to put on love. Love is the covering, the cloak that holds together all the other “clothing” of the new life. Maybe love is like overalls. Love is *the* characteristic of new life in Christ and of our life together as the church.

Not long ago, I heard about a group of women in Boston. They were all cancer patients and got to know each other during their treatments. Two of them were in a thrift shop one day and decided to buy an old coat. The more they thought about it, they decided it should be the group’s coat. Whenever one of their group went in for tests or treatment, she would wear the coat as a reminder of the group’s love and support. It would be like being held by the whole group. One woman wore the coat in the MRI machine (<http://hereandnow.wbur.org/2013/10/01/sisterhood-traveling-coat>, accessed 10/2/13).

Hearing that, I immediately thought of this passage in Colossians. Our “coat” is the love of Christ and the love of the Christian community. It wraps us and holds us and reminds us that we are not alone. And a cool thing about Christian love is we can all wear it all the time. This love lets us know that we are blessed, we have received so much from our relationships in the church. Now we can pass along that love and those blessings.

Bishop Schnase writes:

Every sanctuary and chapel in which we have worshiped, every church organ that has lifted our spirit, every pew where we have sat, every Communion rail where we have knelt, every hymnal from which we have sung, every praise band that has touched our hearts, every church classroom where we have gathered with our friends, every church kitchen that has prepared our meals, every church van that has taken us to camp, every church camp cabin where we have slept—all are the fruit of someone’s Extravagant Generosity.

We have been the recipients of grace upon grace. We are the heirs, the beneficiaries of those who came before us who were touched by the generosity of Christ enough to give graciously so that we could experience the truth of Christ for ourselves. We owe the

same to generations to come. We have worshiped in sanctuaries we did not build, so to us falls the privilege of building sanctuaries where we shall never worship. (*Practicing Extravagant Generosity* 41-42)

We're celebrating people we love in the church. How can we express our appreciation for those gifts of grace? Maybe we could send notes to people who have influenced us or give them a call. Or, if they are gone, we can tell their stories so someone else can be blessed by their love. Let's look for ways to express love in our families and in the church.

Next week we'll explore what we would most like to see happen in our church in the coming year. What's your greatest hope and best vision for God's work through this congregation?