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Ephesians 5:1-2

9th Message

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FORMED TO LOVE

SERIES: FORMED INTO CHRIST

In his book *A Glimpse of Jesus*, Brennan Manning tells a story about five computer sales women from Milwaukee who went to a regional sales convention in Chicago:

They assured their husbands that they would return in ample time for dinner. The meeting ran over time, and the women raced to the train station tickets in hand. As they barged through the terminal, one woman inadvertently kicked over a table supporting a basket of apples. A ten-year-old boy was selling apples to pay for his books and clothes for school. Without breaking stride, the group clambered aboard the train with a sign of relief. All but one. She paused, got in touch with her feelings, and experienced a twinge of compunction for the kid whose apple stand had been overturned. She told her companions that she would catch the next train and returned to the terminal. Later she said, "I'm really glad I did, because the ten-year-old boy was blind."

As the woman gathered up the apples scattered about the floor, she noticed that several were bruised. She reached in her pocket and said to the child, "Please accept twenty dollars for the apples I damaged. I hope I didn't spoil your day. God bless you." As she started walking away, the bewildered blind boy called after her, asking, "Are you Jesus?"¹

We began our summer series talking about the inner work of God which forms us into Christ. This transformation is a lifelong process. But inner work is not the end goal. We are not being transformed to sit in a trophy case, adorn a mantle, or be an object for viewing at a museum. We are created in love, formed in love, so that we might love others. We are transformed by love in order to love in a transforming way, to be the presence of Jesus in the world.

Our spiritual journey consists of a journey inward and a journey outward, as Henri Nouwen comments:

Spiritual formation, to use the words of Elizabeth O'Connor, requires both a journey inward and a journey outward. The journey inward is the journey to find the Christ dwelling within us. The journey outward is the journey to find the Christ dwelling among us and in the world.²

Thomas Keating captures the ultimate goal when he says: "To reach deeply toward the love of the Christ within us and to manifest it more fully in the world...constitutes the heart of the spiritual journey."³

As we continue our summer series we notice that our topics are progressing from the inner journey to the outer journey. Today we will focus on loving others.

Exhortations to Love

Most of us are very familiar with the NT emphasis on loving others, but let me remind you of just how pervasive it is by mentioning several texts:

When a lawyer tested Jesus by asking him which command is the greatest, Jesus responded:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. (Mat 22:37-40 ESV)

Jesus really simplifies things. He reduces the entire Torah to two commands based on Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18—love God and love others. If we love God and love others we will live well. However, in Luke's gospel, Jesus followed this statement by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. Therefore, we understand that loving others might involve helping a stranger lying on the side of the road beaten down by life.

In the upper room, Jesus gave the disciples a new commandment: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another." (John 13:34). He then repeats this command twice more in chapter 15.

The apostle Paul mentions loving one another in several of his letters. We have found many of our topics this summer in the book of Ephesians where we read:

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Eph 5:1-2)

In Romans, Paul says that we are to have no debt except to love:

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Rom 13:8-10)

Debt hinders us from loving because we are preoccupied with our financial burdens and lack the resources to love others. This is why our policy at PBCC has been to never have debt. We don't want the congregation under a burden to pay for a building but to feel free to use resources on people.

When Paul talks about freedom from the law in Galatians, he reminds the Galatians that they are not set free from law to sin, but to love:

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Gal 5:13-14)

Peter mentions loving one another twice in his first epistle while John does so six times in his epistles. James labels loving your neighbor as the “royal law,” i.e. the law of the kingdom of God:

“If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well” (James 2:8). The writer of Hebrews encourages us to “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works” (Heb 10:24)

Jesus was right. Paul was right. John was right... Even the Beatles were right. It all comes down to love, or call it compassion if you prefer. Love is the vital connection. A life with God is a life of love. You know God by loving God. You know God by loving others. You know your neighbor, a stranger, or an enemy by loving him or her.⁴

Loving God and loving others is what marks or characterizes believers who are living as new creations in God’s kingdom. The early church took this word seriously and it changed the world. Rodney Stark, in his book, *The Rise of Christianity*, gives some statistics of how rapidly the church grew after the resurrection⁵:

Year	Number of Christians	Percent of Population
A.D. 40	1,000	.0017
A.D. 100	7,530	.0126
A.D. 200	217,195	.36
A.D. 250	1,171,356	1.9
A.D. 300	6,299,832	10.5
A.D. 350	33,882,008	56.5

How did this growth happen? The early church lived as citizens of heaven and members of the kingdom of God. They blessed when they were cursed, they were kind when abused, and loved all people even when they were persecuted. They had a quality of life that was different than the world. They were winsome and attractive and people wanted what they had even if it meant death.

Sadly, the western church often resembles the world more than the kingdom of God. The divorce rate in the church is the same as secular society. Christians are seeking the comforts and pleasures of the world more than following Jesus. Christian parents are more concerned with college choices than spiritual maturity for their children. Churchgoers are more concerned with hot topics than growing in Christ. But believers are called to be different and what makes us different is our ability as new creations in Christ and as transformed human beings to love others, both in the church and in the world. Love, not advertising campaigns, is what will draw people to Jesus.

Robert Mulholland writes:

The world will not believe in Christ because of our sound theology, our correct creed, our well defined dogma, our rigorous religiosity. The world will believe when it sees Christlikeness manifested in our life.⁶

People want to see Jesus not religion.

Essentials for Loving Others Well

When we talk about loving others there is a tendency to vault into action, set up programs, organize committees, and start doing things. But in order to love well, let me mention three essentials that will guide us and keep us centered.

Knowing God’s love, forgiveness, and acceptance deeply

In Luke 7 we read about a woman who cleansed Jesus’ feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. She showed the hospitality that Simon the Pharisee failed to do. Jesus told Simon, “therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.” (Luke 7:47)

The woman did not love much with the goal of being forgiven. She experienced personally God’s forgiveness and as a result loved much. We could also say that the person who experiences God’s love personally, not just as an abstract idea, will also love much. Our love for others is often proportional to the love we receive. If we have a hard time loving others then it may mean that we do not have a deep personal sense of God’s love, forgiveness, and acceptance. However, if we know ourselves as truly loved by God—despite all of our sin and failures—our capacity to love others will grow.

Loving ourselves as well as our neighbors

Some Christians wrap their identity around their sin and unworthiness. They struggle with low self-esteem and a negative self-image. Some Christians think that a negative view of self is more godly and spiritual. As a result people might not care for the “self” or feel they deserve grace from either God or others. They can’t treat themselves with kindness and compassion or receive gifts. But this mindset can hinder our capacity to love others because we tend to treat others the way we treat ourselves.

I grew up in a very modest and thrifty home and therefore did not spend money easily on myself. Consequently, I could not receive gifts or grace myself. When I got married I projected the same value system on my wife and could not grace her with things that I viewed as unnecessary. Over the years I have had to learn to grace myself so that I could be more loving and giving to her.

If we do not receive grace we will have a hard time giving grace. A negative self-image causes us to focus on ourselves instead of others and can be rooted in false humility and pride. While it is true that we do not deserve God’s grace in Christ, we are to wrap our identity around who we are in Christ and humbly see ourselves as precious in God’s eyes. We love ourselves to a high degree so we can love others to the same extent. We love our neighbor as ourselves and we love ourselves as our neighbor. We receive grace so that we can give grace.

Loving from the inside out

The love that we see in Jesus can only come from a transformed heart. As we have been talking about this summer, God is using everything in our life to mold us into Christ. We give ourselves to this inner journey, even and especially in times of suffering and waiting. As we are changed we move back into the world, but in a different way. We begin to live a life of love in same way we begin to live a life of prayer. We don’t need a program or a title or a committee. We simply love because this is who we are. We are being formed into lovers.

Both being and doing are important, but order and balance are also important. If we focus on one extreme or the other, either personal growth or social action, it can lead to becoming self-righteous and insensitive. We run the risk of burning out because we depend on the flesh and not the Spirit. There is a big difference between being in the world for God and being in God for the world. We must abide in Christ so that we will not rely on our own efforts. While we seek to love others we must remember that without Jesus we can do

nothing of eternal value. Of course, we don't have to wait until we are a finished project before we begin loving.

Characteristics of Loving Others

So what does love look like when we love from an inner life being formed into Christ? We know that loving others isn't easy and many times lacks the feelings and emotions that the world associates with love. Adel Ahlberg Calhoun writes: "Loving is not cursory, superficial, easy or conceptual. Love demands all of us: body, mind and soul."⁷ She also writes that "love is not a sweet, dithery feeling; it is a risky, humbling, time-consuming affair."⁸

Let me mention just a few characteristics of loving others that come to mind:

Love is sacrificial

We start with Paul's Ephesians text:

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Eph 5:1-2)

Paul here is talking about the cross. The word "gave up" primarily refers in the NT to delivering up to judgment and death. Jesus is the Lamb of God that was a sacrificial offering for our sin. Paul tells us that the aroma of this offering on the altar of the cross was pleasing to God and therefore efficacious.

Our standard and model for love is Jesus and the cross. If we truly love like Jesus then it will be costly and inconvenient. Loving will involve sacrifice, self-denial, and loss, a giving of self for the benefit of another.

However, sacrifice is okay because we have died with Christ and our life is hidden with Christ in God. The old self seeks to exalt and promote self, making sacrificial love contrary to our inclinations. But the new self is free to sacrifice because we no longer need to promote ourselves and can let go of our attachments to power, prestige, and possessions.. And as we live sacrificially our offerings of love, like the offering of Jesus, give off a pleasing aroma to God.

Love is genuine

Paul writes in Romans 12: "Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good." (Rom 12:9)

"Genuine" means sincere, without hypocrisy or pretending. We love without mixed motives or evil thoughts. We aren't trying to gain anything or impress anyone. Love is to be pure good and for the good of another. Love does no wrong to a neighbor as Paul says in Romans 13. Peter uses this same adjective in his exhortation:

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart . . . (1 Pet 1:22)

And James lists "sincere" as an attribute of the wisdom from above:

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. (Jas 3:17)

"Sincere" reinforces the need for love to flow from a transformed heart because we know the "heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick." (Jer 17:9)

Love is vulnerable

When Paul went to Corinth he was willing to expose his weakness and powerlessness:

And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, (1 Cor 2:3-4)

Loving others can be a risky business because it requires vulnerability and the possibility of getting hurt, taken advantage of, or rejected.

Our old self is protective and guarded. We seek to have power and be in control. We are uncomfortable opening ourselves to others because we don't know what will happen if we let our guard down.

People can be "demanding, messed up and a boatload of harm... in the words of C. S. Lewis, love isn't a 'safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable.'"⁹

However, we are called to not hold back or play it safe. We put ourselves out there and initiate even when people may not be asking or responsive. Our identity in Christ is secure and therefore we can step out in faith without fear. We can open our hearts and trust.

Love is generous

Paul writes in Ephesians how God lavished his grace upon us in Christ: God forgave our trespasses "according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us." (Eph 1:7-8)

God is wealthy and he is generous. As we are formed into Christ we imitate God in offering this grace lavishly, extravagantly on others. We essentially become a conduit for God's generosity. Therefore we are generous with our money, time, talents, and abilities: "remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" (Acts 20:35)

The old self is possessive and finds great value in amassing wealth and property. The lie that the old self believes is that we deserve what we have, we are entitled to spend it on ourselves, or what we can acquire will make us happy and successful. The old self is fearful that there will not be enough, so it hoards and clutches what we have been given.

But in Christ we are freed from holding tightly to our possessions. We know that our possessions, wealth, and talents can't give us what only God can give and so we lay for ourselves treasures in heaven. We realize that everything we have is God's and we are to be stewards of what he has given us for the advancement of his kingdom. God uses our resources to bless people. At the end of our life we won't wish we had saved more or made more. We will wish we had given more away and blessed people with our resources.

This is what I so appreciate about Brian Morgan. Brian is an extravagant giver and many of you have been recipients of his generosity. I also have a good friend who goes to a restaurant, sees someone across the room, and pays their bill. Generous followers of Jesus leave an undeniable impression on others and this is what God calls us to do.

Love is inclusive

Paul hints at this in Colossians: "Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all." (Col 3:11) Barbarians did not speak the language and Scythians were lowly slaves.

We open ourselves to people from all walks of life, not just those we want to spend time with. We throw the net wider not smaller. We associate with the lowly, the disenfranchised, and the weak. We don't focus just on hobnobbing with the rich and famous or folks who can advance our careers or social standing.

Saying yes to God is how we grow a heart that loves billionaires, food-stamp recipients, nerds, Goths, rock stars, jocks, social climbers, workaholics, alcoholics, sex offenders, beauty queens, 911 operators, babysitters, CEOs, janitors, editors, winners, losers, stamp collectors, Democrats and Republicans.¹⁰

The old self makes distinctions between people based on appearance. We label ourselves as inferior or superior to others. We put people in camps of “us” and “them.” But as we are transformed we look beyond the externals and see the hearts of people. We see their hurts and pains. We love all people the same — Christian and non-Christian, men and women, young and old. Transforming love can even allow us to love our enemies, something that Jesus both modeled and called us to do.

Love is hospitable

Paul exhorts the Romans to “seek to show hospitality” (Rom 12:13). The word that Paul uses for hospitality means “lovers of strangers.” Hospitality is much more than just having people over for dinner or in your home. Hospitality is a way of being in the world. We live by welcoming people not just into our home but also into our lives, into our space. We make a place for people to feel welcomed and accepted. This can happen in our homes but also in a restaurant or over coffee or while we are standing in line at the grocery store. We don’t just show hospitality to people we like or people we want to like us. We become aware of whom God is putting in our life and we open ourselves to those relationships. This requires us to be intentional and aware. We treat others as special guests in our home.

Love is encouraging

“Mark Twain once remarked, ‘I can live for two months on a good compliment.’”¹¹

Paul writes that we are to “encourage one another and build one another up.” (1 Th 5:11) The old self tends to be critical and judging. Our tendency is to fix people or whip them into shape. We focus on people’s failures or weaknesses so we can feel better about ourselves. We tend to assess people in a negative light and this is what we communicate through words, body language, and tone of voice. But if we are truly to love others encouragement is a much better way.

Of course we don’t compromise truth or ignore unhealthy behavior. We don’t accept or condone actions that are hurtful or harmful. Love also involves being truthful with people, especially with brothers and sisters in Christ. Our love for fellow believers is intended to help them mature and grow and sometimes that involves a more serious conversation. But if we are encouraging someone we convey that we believe in them, will walk with them, and will pray for them.

Loving others is hard. People can be difficult and challenging. Our immediate reactions might not be to love. But as the people of God this is what makes us different and makes visible God’s kingdom. Most of you know that Liz and I have been dealing with separate health issues and it has been a difficult season for us. But through this season we have received amazing love from people through cards, phone calls, and meals. We are blown away by the kindness. Love has a big impact on people’s lives and this is what Jesus calls us to do.

Hopefully you don’t feel the need to act based on guilt. We live a life of love because this is who we are in Christ. God has designed each of us to be uniquely in the world for him. My encouragement for you is that you don’t have to create opportunities to love others but simply open yourselves to whomever God brings your way. Maybe God has put one person on your heart this morning and you sense a call to love that person. That is the place to start. As Frederick Buchner writes: “the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”¹²

“Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus... make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” (1 Th 3:11–13)

1. Brennan Manning, *A Glimpse of Jesus*, (HarperCollins, San Francisco, 2003), 107.
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3. Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love*, (Continuum, N.Y., 1992), 5.
4. Brian McLaren, *Naked Spirituality*, (HarperCollins, NY, 2011), 239.
5. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, (HarperCollins, San Francisco, 1996), 7.
6. M. Robert Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*, (IVP, Downers Grove, 2006), 16.
7. Adel Ahlberg Calhoun, *Invitations From God*, (IVP, Downers Grove, 2011), 57.
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10. *ibid* 58.
11. James Bryan Smith, *Embracing the Love of God*, (HarperCollins, NY, 1989), 157.
12. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*, (HarperCollins, San Francisco, 1993), 119.

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