

PRAISE GOD. GOD LOVED ME FIRST
1 John 4:19

March 29, 2024

During the first pre-marital counseling session, I will ask the couple, “Who fell first?” That is, which of the two was the first one to declare openly their love to the other person, which subsequently, laid the foundation for the necessity of pre-marital counseling. It is amusing as they will both point their fingers to the other person, as if it is a negative thing to be the first one to acknowledge one’s love to another person.

If I were to ask God, “Who fell first?” God would boldly, confidently and joyfully reply, “I did.” Yes, God was the first one to declare openly his love for humanity. The love God had for us subsequently laid the foundation for our entering into a relationship with him. Can you imagine what our relationship with God would be like if God waited for us to declare our love first? To be honest, we would not have a relationship with God. We would have no idea of what love looks like nor what love is. Even if we used the word, love, it would simply just be the word, love.

Praise God for our God who declares openly his love for us. Although shamed and embarrassed, God declares his love for us. Although abandoned and dismissed, God declares his love for us. No matter what we say or do, God declares openly and boldly his love for us. Why do I love God? I love God because God first loved me.

PAY YOUR DEBTS
Romans 13:8-10

March 30, 2024

My dad had a saying that he regularly said to us when he was encouraging us to live a life that was free from all types of indebtedness to someone else, knowing that indebtedness to them could destroy the relationship with them. In those moments, he would say, “Pay your debts. If you pay your debts, you are in a position to borrow again if you need to.” For my dad, paying your debt was a liberating exercise that set both the borrower and the lender free.

I am sure that Paul would concur with my dad that we should live our lives free from the encumbrance of unnecessary indebtedness to others. On the other hand, Paul acknowledged that there is one debt that should remain outstanding. That debt is the continuing debt of love that we owe each other. This debt can never be payed off or payed up. Can you imagine how different our communities would be if everyone lived the principle, “I owe you my love.”? Can you imagine how many relationships could be restored if both persons said, “You cannot stop me from loving you because my love for you is a debt that I must pay.”?

May we understand, appreciate, then apply Paul’s teaching to our lives. “Pay your debts.” Stop focusing on who they are and what they did. “Pay your debts.” Stop remembering how long this has gone on. “Pay your debts.” Release the person from their actions and attitudes towards you. “Pay your debts.” Our love for others has nothing to do with them. No matter who or how they are, “Pay your debts.”

The graphic consists of a black pyramid with white text inside, set against a white background with a black border. The pyramid's layers from top to bottom are: LOVE, Brotherly Kindness, GODLINESS, PATIENCE, SELF-CONTROL, KNOWLEDGE, VIRTUE, and FAITH. To the right of the pyramid, the text reads: PILGRIM REST BAPTIST CHURCH, 2024, LENTEN DEVOTIONAL, ADDING TO YOUR FAITH TO PRODUCE AN EFFECTIVE AND FRUITFUL KNOWLEDGE OF JESUS, and March 24 – March 30, 2024.

ADD TO YOUR BROTHERLY/SISTERLY – LOVE

**ADD TO YOUR BROTHERLY/SISTERLY
KINDNESS – LOVE**
2 Peter 1:7

March 24, 2024

Love is, perhaps, the most overstated and underrated words in the English language. It is common to hear people say, “I love your fried chicken.” “I love those shoes.” “I love the way that you did that.” “I love...” With a genuine understanding of love, can anyone actually love and inanimate object? I think not. Yes, you can enjoy eating their fried chicken. Yes, you can affirm the uniqueness of the style of those shoes. Yes, you can appreciate the way they did that. However, can you really love it? No. Not in the genuine understanding of what it means to love.

To have a genuine understanding of what it means to love, we must look to the one who is love. John wrote in 1 John 4:8, “*Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.*” One cannot truly understand and appreciate what it means to love without knowing God. It is not until we experience the love of God, personally and intimately, that we will be able to know and appreciate genuine love.

I know that God loves animals because God is love. However, I cannot find a verse where God specifically said, “I love you.” to animals. The Bible does say that God feeds them, provides for them, protects them, is kind to them, knows them and owns every one of them.

Additionally, I know that God loves what God created because God is love. However, I cannot find a verse where God specifically said, “I love you.” To creation. The Bible does say that God rejoices in it, delights in it, has compassion for it, is revealed in it and after creating it, said, “It is good.”

What does this mean? God’s love is reserved for humans – those created a little lower than angels – those for whom Jesus died. Therefore, our love should be reserved for and given to all humans. Let us add to all of these, love.

GOD LOVES YOU: ALWAYS HAS, ALWAYS WILL March 25, 2024
Jeremiah 31:3

Often, when I am speaking with someone who has gone or is going through a difficult time in their marriage, they will say, “I have fallen out of love with him/her?” That, many times, is the problem. We have a concept of falling in love with another person. Falling in love is generally based upon what a person does or what they have or how they treat us or how they look or... If we fall in love for those reasons, what happens when they cease to do, be, have and/or look the way that we previously expected? We fall out of love.

Jeremiah acknowledged that God’s love is much different. God said to Israel long ago, “*I have loved you with an everlasting love; Therefore, with lovingkindness I have drawn you.*” Those beautiful words imply that from long ago God loved Israel. Having read the stories of Israel in the Old Testament, we know how they dishonored and disbelieved, backslid and betrayed God. Through all of the things that Israel said and did, God continued to love them, would never stop loving them and would continue to draw them. Out of all of Israel’s spiritual infidelity, God never fell out of love with them.

Pause to consider the things you did that broke God’s heart. Consider the things you said that offended God. Consider the places you went that shamed God. Nevertheless, God never stopped loving you. God loves you because God loves you. Independent of everything you have said and done, God loves you – always has and always will.

A PRICE I WILL GLADLY PAY
Matthew 5:43-48

March 26, 2024

In his book, *Strength to Love*, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, “An even more basic reason why we are commanded to love is expressed explicitly in Jesus’ words, ‘Love your enemies...*that you may be children of your Father which is in heaven.*’ We are called to this difficult task in order to realize a unique relationship with God. We are potential sons of God. Through love that potentially becomes actuality. We must love our enemies, because only by loving them can we know God and experience the beauty of his holiness.”

Yes, Jesus said, “*Love your enemies.*” Prior to Jesus’ command, it was said, “*You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.*” Imagine how easy this was for people. You are my enemy. Therefore, I can justify hating you, mistreating you and disrespecting you. I do not have to be loving and kind to you. However, living this way, as Dr. King revealed, does not put me in the position to realize and actualize a relationship with God as a child of God.

It can be easy to justify treating someone the same ugly way that they treat us. Nevertheless, Jesus has called us to a higher level of living. Our calling is to, “*love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.*” Why? “*that you may be sons [daughters] of your Father in heaven.*” If the cost of being a child of God is loving my enemy, that is a price I will gladly pay.

THE MAIN INGREDIENT IS LOVE
John 13:34, 35

March 27, 2024

My Aunt Mary was a very good cook. In fact, no one in the family would doubt that my aunt was the best. I asked her daughter, my cousin, how her cooking rated compared to her mom’s. She shared that she would follow her mom’s recipes exactly, using the same brands and even cooking on the same stove, however, the dishes were not as delicious. One day she asked her mom, “Why does my food not taste as delicious as your?” My aunt told her, “You are missing the main ingredient.” She replied, “I follow your recipes exactly and do everything the way that you do it. What ingredient am I missing?” My aunt answered, “The main ingredient is love.”

Jesus shared with his disciples that the evidence that they are his disciples is not discovered in how they dress, is not found in their finances nor is it revealed in their relationships. The evidence is in the love that they have for one another. The main ingredient is love. For that reason, Jesus gave them a new commandment. By following the new commandment, they would have the capacity to love one another in a way that would undeniably prove their discipleship with Jesus. Jesus said, “*love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.*”

Yes, the main ingredient is love. We can have all of the things in place that others use to determine who is a disciple of Jesus. Although we may look like, sound like and act like a disciple of Jesus, without love, the main ingredient, we will never be known as a true disciple of Jesus.

LOVE IS DOING MORE DOING THAN TALKING March 28, 2024
1 John 3:16-18

“Do not tell me what you are going to do. Tell me what you did.” Several of the guys and I used this phrase when I was in college when one of us began talking about what we were going to do. We used the phrase to encourage each other to do more doing than talking. It is easy to talk about it. More than talking, however, we have to be about it.

In expressing the doing associated with love, John used Jesus as an example as he wrote, “*This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.*” Jesus did not just talk about love; Jesus “did love.” Jesus put his love into action and humans are the beneficiaries. After receiving love from Jesus, we are obligated to do more than talk about the love of Jesus, we must do the love of Jesus.

Every day, all around us, there are people and families with legitimate needs: young, working mothers with children, seniors with limited resources, and people with disabilities who do not have support systems to name a few. It is easy to say to them, “I love you.” Genuine love is more than just saying we love each other; it is actually loving each other. Genuine love is more than words; it is actions. John asked, “*How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?*” Do not tell them you love them; love them. Do more doing than talking.