

The Power of Love

I John 3:17-18

Introduction

It was the Christmas season when a reporter for the Chicago Tribune was asked to do a story on the poor people who lived in the Chicago area

He found one family named the Delgado's that would do for his article

He described their situation:

“Sixty-year-old Perfecta and her grand-daughters, Lydia and Jenny had suffered a fire in their previous rental and were now living in a tiny two room apartment on the West Side. As I walked in, I couldn't believe how empty it was. There was no furniture, no rugs, nothing on the walls – only a small kitchen table and one handful of rice. That's it. They were virtually devoid of possessions.”

In fact, eleven-year-old Lydia and thirteen-year-old Jenny owned only one short sleeved dress each plus one thin gray sweater between them. When they walked the half mile to school through the biting cold, Lydia would wear the sweater for part of the distance and then hand it to her shivering sister who would wear it the rest of the way.

But despite their poverty and the painful arthritis that kept Perfecta from working, she still talked confidently about her faith in Jesus. She was convinced he had not abandoned them. I never sensed despair or self-pity in her home; instead there was a gentle feeling of hope and peace.

Several days passed – the reporter – Lee Strobel: ‘But as I sat at my desk on Christmas Eve, I continued to wrestle with the irony of the situation: here was a family that had nothing but faith and yet seemed happy, while I had everything I needed materially but lacked faith – and inside I felt as empty and barren as their apartment.

He later decided to drive over to West Homer Street and see how the Delgados were doing.

‘When Jenny opened the door, I couldn't believe my eyes. Tribune readers had responded to my article by showering the Delgados with a treasure trove of gifts – roomfuls of furniture, appliances, and rugs, a lavish Christmas tree with piles of wrapped presents underneath; carton upon bulging carton of food; and a dazzling selection of clothing, including dozens of warm winter coats, scarves and gloves. On top of that they donated thousands of dollars in cash.

But as surprised as I was by this outpouring, I was even more astonished by what my visit was interrupting. Perfecta and her granddaughters were getting ready to give away much of their newfound wealth. When I asked Perfecta why, she replied simply: ‘Our neighbors are still in need. We cannot have plenty while they have nothing. This is what Jesus would want us to do.’

I asked Perfecta what she thought about the generosity of the people who had sent all of these goodies, and again her response amazed me.

“This is wonderful; this is very good,” she said, gesturing toward the gifts. “We did nothing to deserve this – it’s a gift from God. But,” she added, “it is not his greatest gift, no we celebrate that tomorrow. That is Jesus.” [The Case for Christmas, pp. 7-9]

Strobel – who was an unbeliever at the time marveled at her faith

There is something we can all appreciate in a story like that

Dirt poor grandmother – with two grand-daughters – nothing but faith - - - We see the generosity of some people in Chicago

As John has begun talking about the topic of love he brings up the issue of charity or benevolence - - - as a corollary or practical expression of love in tangible ways

If we love our neighbor as ourself / love our brother - - - we will not be indifferent to their needs

I John 3:17 - 'But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?'

Jesus is the perfect example of love and service on behalf of others

He gave His own life

John 15:13 - 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.' [kjv]

There are other forms of love – that involve lesser sacrifices - - - such as giving of our time, or earthly possessions to meet the needs of another

John is giving us a picture of Christian character - - - what the ‘born-again’ person is to look like

Among the wicked / those under the sway of the devil – hatred reigns [example of Cain]

Among the redeemed – love becomes the major chord in their lives

I. Charitable Love - v. 17

Love becomes a test of one’s Christian faith and obedience to Christ

Love involves compassion – having a heart that is open towards others / not closed

John refers to a practical way in which love is expressed - - - simply helping out someone in need

2 of the most well-known parables of Jesus are probably the Prodigal Son and The Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25-29

Here comes a lawyer – wanting to test Jesus

Jesus points Him to the essential elements of the law – love of God / love of neighbor

Now – if the man had been honest - - - he should have said - - - but Jesus - - - we all fall short - - - this is our great problem

The great problem in our world is that people don't love their neighbor as themselves - - - and they do not love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength

That is of the essence of sin

If we perfectly obeyed these two commandments - - - we would be sinless

Instead – of being honest about his own lack of righteousness - - - the man seeks to justify himself

And he says: 'who is my neighbor?'

R.C. Sproul: 'Jesus could have answered it very plainly by saying: "Everyone in the world is your neighbor. Each human being with whom you have contact, you are to love as much as you love yourself." That could have been the end of the discussion. Instead, Jesus said, "Let me tell you a story."

Luke 10:30-37

Jesus presents a story of a man in great need – he's been robbed by bandits and left half dead

The Jericho road was notorious for being plagued with bandits and robbers – it was about a 17 mile journey [from Jerusalem to Jericho] - - - winding down from 2400 feet above sea level to 825 feet below sea level – with lots of caves along the way

Most people would not attempt the journey alone

This was like saying – a man in East LA – wandered into a dark alley

We know where the story goes

This guy has been robbed and left at the side of the road - - - but good news - - - here comes somebody - - - it's a priest - he'll stop and help

But - - - no – he passes by on the other side

Jesus doesn't tell us why he passed by on the other side

Was he busy? / Did he say – 'I don't have time for this'

Did he not care? Did he say – 'not my problem' – 'let somebody else deal with it

Did he think the robbers were still nearby and they might get him – so better to not get involved?

Either way – he does not help

Then a Levite

Again - he cannot be bothered with this man's need – somebody else will have to help him

The hero of the story is not a Jew at all – it's a Samaritan

The Samaritan is the last person a Jew would expect to stop [A Palestinian!]

The Samaritan's love was practical - - - he treated the man's wounds / took him to an inn – where he could recover - - his aid was sacrificial / he pulled money out of his own pocket to help

Jesus shows the lawyer that the point is not to ask who my neighbor is - - - but to be like the Good Samaritan

Jesus finishes his teaching with: 'Go and do the same.'

This is how God intends for us to live

God wants us to love and care for one another
Satan wants us to hate

One reflects spiritual life / the other reflects spiritual barrenness – death

II. Love in Action - v. 18

Love has to be put into action in some way – go beyond mere words or sentiment

Christian love in one's deeds becomes proper evidence of Christian faith in the heart

*** Why live this way? [Why should we care about those around us?]

Why should you give some of your hard-earned money to another in need?

Why let your life be interrupted or inconvenienced by the needs of others?

Those are good questions that need asking

The Bible also recognizes that some people are lazy and should not be given money [drug addicts] - - but perhaps helped in other ways

Christian Miller seeks to give some answers to the 'why' question in a book titled – 'The Character Gap'

He points to acts of benevolence as being something virtuous / inspiring

Acts 20:35 - ' . . . remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

There is a blessing in being a giver - - - a blessing the closed heart and the tightened fist will never experience

Miller tells the story of some Jews in Poland during WW II - - - who took refuge in the sewer underneath the city - - while above – Nazi's were shooting Jews in the streets – or sending them off to concentration camps

There was a group of 20 Jews who had taken refuge in the sewer underneath the city of Lvov

Leopold Socha – a Polish sewer worker – discovered the group – but instead of turning them over to the Nazi's - - - he care for them - began bringing them food and provisions.

The group would not have survived without his provisions - - - and he had to take enormous risks in the process. If he had been discovered - - - he and his family would have been immediately killed along with the Jews.

Even when the group ran out of money to pay for food - - - Socha did not abandon them – but kept the provisions coming. They went down into the sewers on June 1, 1943 – and they came back up on July 28, 1944 – when the Russians liberated the town – essentially 14 months later - - - but ten out of the original 20 people survived

In a book titled 'In The Sewers of Lvov' – Robert Marshall writes

Robert Marshall: 'One by one these creatures of the underworld clambered out into the sunlight, blind and helplessly weak. Tears streaked down their faces . . . everywhere staring faces, stunned, disbelieving, silently shaking their heads. And there in the midst of all the chaos, Socha stood proudly, staring his fellow countrymen in the eye. "This is my work. All my work. These are my Jews."

Miller shares that story to illustrate the truth that works of compassion / generosity are admirable and inspiring – something a person feels good about

Benevolence leads to good feelings – love is its own reward

One person put it – ‘That’s when I feel most alive - - - when I am helping others.’

Do something good for another – it feels good

John Bunyan: ‘You have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you.’

Elvis – for all his flaws – was a person who liked to be generous with what he had been given – it felt good

He grew up in poverty in Memphis Tennessee – and thru his music and movies he became ridiculously wealthy

On one occasion – He was at a Cadillac dealership – buying some cars for some of his inner circle - - - he noticed a couple there who were African American – and he saw the lady looking at the Cadillac - - - so he struck up a conversation with her and asked her: ‘Do you like this car?’ She replied: ‘Oh yes – it’s very nice.’ Elvis said: ‘Fine, pick one out. I’m going to buy one for you.’ Red West – his bodyguard said that the lady looked like she was going to faint – but she did pick one out and he bought it for her.’

The story of Elvis buying a car for a complete stranger hit the wire services – a radio DJ in Vail Colorado reported the story. He signed off the news report with a one-liner: ‘Elvis – if you’re listening – I could use a car myself.’ Elvis got Red to call the announcer and get him on the phone. Elvis asked: ‘What color do you like?’

The announcer thought this was a gag – some of his friends were putting him on. ‘Aw – come on – who is this?’ – he said. “No – I’m serious – this is Elvis Presley. I want to buy you a car.’ The next day the announcer was driving a new Cadillac, paid for by Elvis.

For Elvis – a new car was nothing - - - Jesus once indicated the far greater value of a sacrifice when it came to the widow’s mite – she gave all she had to live on

We recognize a kind of virtue in giving – it’s a good way to live

Miller – gives a 2nd incentive / motive

He argues that works of compassion / love make the world a better place

Christians are called to be salt and light in the midst of a dark and corrupt world

Corrie Ten Boom – practiced love – in a concentration camp

She recalls one night - - - she saw a Russian woman looking hopelessly about for a place to sleep. Everyone turned her away unkindly – and a hunted look came into her eyes. How awful to be in prison and not to have a place to sleep!

Corrie Ten Boom: 'Betsie's place beside me was vacant. I motioned to the woman and threw back the blanket for her. She crept in gratefully . . . as she laid her head - I felt a desire to speak to her. But I did not know her language. So I said: "Jesoes Christoes?" And at once she made the sign of the cross, threw her arms about me and kissed me.'

In a concentration camp – you don't have much to give - - - but that amazing woman saw a need she could meet – and she met it

Miller asks: 'What kind of world do we want to live in?'

Christian Miller: 'Think of all the good that compassionate people have done in the world, and contrast this with all the harm caused by those full of cruelty and hate. What world would you rather live in? And what kind of people do you want your children to become - people who grow up to make the world a better or a worse place?'

His 3rd reason: 'God wants us to become good people'

God commands us to love

John 13:34 - 'A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.'

When we choose love – we are choosing the path that God Himself prescribes for us / and that gives Him glory – [We are here to give God glory – this is one way we do that]

Anne Lamott would add a 4th motive: gratitude

When we are grateful for what we have been given - - - that leads to more generous or compassionate behavior towards our fellow human beings

Anne Lamott: 'Gratitude begins in our hearts and then dovetails into behavior. It almost always makes you willing to be of service, which is where the joy resides. It means you are willing to stop being such a jerk. When you are aware of all that has been given to you, in your lifetime, and in the past few days, it is hard not to be humbled and pleased to give back.'

When we go around singing: 'I'm so blessed' - over all that God has done for us - - - we see the wisdom of giving out from our bounty to those less fortunate

We can give a 5th reason for love: the character of God is to love

Ephesians 5:1, 2 - 'Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.'

Jesus paid the price for our sins - - - why? [the reason Scripture gives: love]

Some of the early church fathers - - - were quite enamored with finding allegorical interpretations to some of the stories in Scripture - - - they said there are multiple layers of truth in Scripture: 'literal, moral, allegorical, anagogical] - - -

So the allegorical school looked at the Good Samaritan

They said - - - we are the wounded man / Satan left us by the roadside ½ dead

Jesus came along - - - and fixes us up - - - the oil and the wine – are the Holy Spirit – and the sacraments

The priest / the Levite – show us the Law's inability to help anyone

Jesus – the Savior – reached into His own pocket and paid the price for our rescue – by His shed blood

Jesus paid it all – all to Him I owe
Sin had left a crimson stain – He washed it white as snow

Not a bad allegory - - - it seems to fit – with perhaps a little bit of stretching

The danger of the allegorical school [they ran to extremes] always seeking for the hidden meaning - - - failing to give due weight to the literal teaching of Jesus of Scripture

Jesus' point in the Good Samaritan parable is not hard to discern

Luke 10:37 - 'Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same."

'go and do likewise' – this is the way to live – to love one's neighbor

Conclusion

Albert Tomei was a justice of the New York State Supreme Court. A young defendant was convicted in his court of gunning down another person in a drive by shooting. The murderer, was no stranger to the system, and only stared in anger as the jury returned its guilty verdict.

The victim's family had attended every day of the two-week trial. On the day of sentencing, the victim's mother and grandmother both addressed the court. When they spoke, neither addressed the jury. Both spoke directly to the murderer. They both said they forgave him.

"You broke the Golden Rule--loving God with all your heart, soul, and mind. You broke the law--loving your neighbor as yourself. I am your neighbor," said the grandmother, "so you have my address. If you want to write, I'll write you back. I sat in this trial for two weeks, and for the last sixteen months I tried to hate you. But you know what? I could not hate you. I feel sorry for you because you made a wrong choice."

Judge Tomei writes: "For the first time since the trial began, the defendant's eyes lost their laser force and appeared to surrender to a life force that only a mother can generate: nurturing, unconditional love. After the grandmother finished, I looked at the defendant. His head was hanging low. There was no more swagger, no more stare. The destructive and evil forces within him collapsed helplessly before this remarkable display of humaneness."

The power of love

I John 3:14 - 'We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death.'

Love is evidence of being born-again / having the Spirit

Hatred - - - points to one still being in the realm of death

When we trust in the Savior - - - we are transferred out of death unto life