

THE SHAPE OF LOVE

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IMPLICATIONS OF GOD'S LOVE FOR OUR

HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

Yesterday I talked about that love is not an ideal and it is not a potential. Love is the reality of the triune relationship and it already exists and it has already eternally been going on and continues to go on, and what we've been drawn up into is participation in that reality.

The essence of God is loving relationships. And we are created for, in fact, we are hard wired for relationships. That's why our deepest longings and hopes are connected to relationships and our deepest anguish, our deepest disappointments our deepest fears are also connected to our relationships. So it is kind of serious to try to talk to you about it but I've been through so many things in my life in terms of relationships that I felt like this is the best I could try to offer you today.

As I was saying yesterday, we tend to work from unexamined assumptions about love. My daughter and I were talking about this last night and I thought she did a good job of generalizing on love. She said.....

The world thinks of love primarily as a feeling.

The church primarily thinks of love as doing.

I think that was a very helpful way to put it. We think of love as a command. Something we are supposed to do. "Love your neighbor as yourself." We don't always know how to do that, but unfortunately we tend to do it according to what we **assume** about love.

Is love never saying "No" to somebody? Is love always going the extra mile? Because we're not always sure about what love is so a lot of times we just encourage each other to try to be more loving. Whatever that is! (laughter)

I think that what we've done in the church is created a lot of "How To" books in order to try to help us do this. But, as I said yesterday, I think one of the biggest problems in the church today is that we've made our "How To" books the reality and we end up relying more on them than on the real presence of God to be at work in us and in our relationships.

I think some of the problem in relying on the "How To's" is that it can lead us to believe that the goal for us is primarily external to ourselves. In other words, that I am a successful Christian or a mature Christian if I have perfect relationships. Does anybody fit into that category? (laughter) But in the work you are in that's what's expected.

The second problem is I think, that it tends to make us believe that relationships are fairly simple, and that we can really solve any problem in our relationships with the right technique. But when the technique doesn't work it tends to make us feel disappointed and disillusioned.

I also think that one of the problems I've noticed with people is that the "How To's" can often make us very naïve about ways that we can sin against people and ways that they can sin against us. In the end we end up being un-loving in our attempt to be loving (by using these "techniques" from the "How To" books).

Before I consider God's work in our relationships, I want us to consider a passage that I think is a good description of fallen relationships and that is **Mark 10:35-45**.

In this story Jesus is going to Jerusalem for the last time with his disciples. And he has just, for the third time, told his disciples about the fact that he is about to be delivered into the hands of the gentiles and he is about to be killed and he will rise again.

James and John decide that this is a good time to ask Jesus if he would do for them whatever they ask. (laughter) Sort of like what kids do, right? (laughter) And, Jesus, instead of saying "OK" asks them what it is that they want him to do. And it's a small thing. (louder laughter) And they say, "Grant us to sit at your right hand and left hand in your glory." And Jesus says in effect, "Well actually those two places are not mine to

grant.” And then what happens? The other ten hear what’s going on right at that time and they become indignant, because they didn’t think of it first. (loud laughter)

So Jesus decides this is the time to do some teaching. So he calls all of them together and he talks about the relationships among the gentiles. And the way that he primarily describes them is in terms of “Lording It Over.” Now we tend to think of Lording It Over primarily in terms of position. We think that teachers can Lord it over students, parents over children, rulers over subjects. And we often times think that if you are in the lower position that you can’t Lord it over. But if you think about it, why did Jesus teach that here? Because James and John tried to Lord It Over him. They tried to get Jesus to do something for them. They are attempting to manipulate Jesus.

So the way I really want us to define Lording It Over is, any time that we attempt to gain some control over our relationships so that the ends that ***we want*** are met. And there’s lots of different ways that we do it. There’s lots of different ways that I do it.

I think that we tend to Lord It Over other people because we have goals, expectations that we want to see happen in those relationships. I don’t think that we’re always consciously aware of what our goals and expectations are. In fact, I would say, that probably we are more often not conscious of why we are doing what we are doing. We may become aware of our expectations when they are not met, and we feel disappointment or resentment. Even then sometimes we don’t really say what we are trying to do in the relationship. So I wanted to ***list some of the possible expectations we can have*** to get a better grasp on what I’m trying to talk about.

We may be trying to get others to do what we want. That’s probably the most simple and obvious (expectation).

Or we may always want to appear in a certain way. We want to look like we are always thoughtful and sensitive.

We try to maneuver our relationships so we always come out looking good, right?

We may be just attempting to be less alone, that may be what we are mainly trying to do within a relationship.

Or we may be trying to keep from getting hurt like somebody else.

We may be trying primarily to gain sympathy and attention, so we say things with a slight shade on them. So that we make sure people give us the attention we want.

We may be trying to get back at somebody who has hurt us.

Or we may be just simply enjoying the pleasure of having control over somebody else, because it's kind of fun.

We may be trying just simply to be liked, or if you're a mom, I think this is one we can all have; you may primarily be concerned about keeping everybody happy.

You may be trying to avoid blame or just simply make sure that nobody is ever mad at you or disappointed with you.

Or you may simply be trying to get your agenda going any way you can.

What are some of the ways that we Lord It Over one another?

Sheer force, but most of us don't use that.

Indirect comments or hinting. In other words, not being straight, not coming out with exactly what I want you to do. So that when you don't do it, I can let you have it.

Guilt trips, that's another very popular one.

Sulking

Teasing, now teasing works very well, because if the person gets hurt, you can always say, "I was just kidding." So you can get them twice that

way. First you get them by teasing them, than you get them by making them feel guilty because you were “just kidding.” Right?

Or we can expose them to the teasing of others. When we don’t feel that it’s right for us to tease. We could try to expose them to others who do tease, that’s another one that will work.

Belittling people.

Sarcasm, that was one that I have struggled a lot with. I didn’t realize how sarcastic I was (you’ve probably figured out that one about me— (laughter) until I had my kids, and I would say sarcastic things to them and they would get angry at me and say, “What are you really trying to say.“ And then I would realize I had been sarcastic.

Or we can withhold affection or other things (laughter). I don’t know about you guys. I was not thinking about that (laughter). I am really ruining my reputation. I really did not think this.

Threats also will work usually.

Flirting, you may not think of flirting as Lording It Over, but it really is, for those of us who can do it.

Gossiping is also another way that we can Lord It Over others.

And then my favorite is...PITY... being the victim. I think this one is a really big one that we need to watch out for. Our using pity against others or they’re using pity against us. Always being the victim, never responsible for anything that we do.

Now I’m not speaking about right uses of discipline in terms of our kids. I know there are times that you have to do that, so I’m not talking about that.

But Lording It Over happens whenever we act out of distrust in God. We start trying to exercise control over the situation. We may fear or believe that ultimately we are in charge of taking care of ourselves and others, and this can lead us to Lording it over others, even for their own good.

You notice that even Jesus does not resort to these tactics. He instead goes on with the story in Mark 10 and he says “It is not to be so among you.” You notice he doesn’t say, “I don’t want you doing that anymore,” he says “It’s not so.” Why not? Because the relationship that he brought to us to be involved in, the triune relationship, does not have Lording it over, **it does not exist there**. The Father does not Lord it over the Son, the Son does not Lord it over the Father, and Jesus, out of that relationship, never Lord’s it over us, **never!**

The reality that Jesus is bringing us into includes all our relationships (all of them). I think sometimes that we believe that we are redeemed as independent individuals but (after) that the relationships are up to us. They are not. They also belong in Christ, and are being renewed in him. They are not a potential that we have to actualize. In **Ephesians 2:14-16**, Paul is talking about Christ’s work of redemption between the Jews and the Gentiles, and he says this, “For he is our peace, who has made the two one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in the place of two, thus making peace and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end.”

God’s intentions for our relationships is that we enter into the reality he has given us, he has truly united himself to us at the level of our being, and he unites each and every other (relationship) in him as well. **Therefore our relationships will find their true meaning and fulfillment only in Christ**. Our relationships, like us, will only be perfected and glorified in the new heaven and earth. And I just want to mention that when that happens, **it will be so much better than anything we settle for here**.

I don’t know if you know C.S. Lewis’s quote about mud pies, but he says, “The problem so often for Christians, is that we think that God is taking us away from something good to have us follow him.” But if we consider what he is doing for us, what he is saying is that God’s intention is so much bigger and better, not worse. And that we often times are like children

playing with the mud, when Jesus is offering us a Holiday at the Sea. **We are far too easily pleased.** And we need to key off this hope, that he is the one who will bring our relationships to their full glory, it is not up to us. **Thank God, it is not up to us.**

I remember when I was in Scotland one time and I was running a Bible study, and one of the women said, “Isn’t wonderful that we’re all going to be in heaven together.” And before I thought about of what a stupid thing it was to say I said, “Yes, Isn’t it wonderful that we will all be transformed.” Because if we were together in heaven right now... (laughter) Okay.

We need to realize that our relationships, like ourselves, are hid in Christ. It is not obvious yet, it is barely obvious. That’s because we are barely alive right now. To live out our relationships in Christ we participate in what Christ is doing in our relationships.

He mediates our relationships. Okay, that’s the main thing I want you to understand. When we become Christians, Jesus actually mediates, not just our relationship with God, but our relationships with each other. He stands between us.

So how do we participate in his mediation (of all of our relationships)? The first thing is we need to abide in him. In John 15, Jesus says he is the vine and we are the branches, and he repeats that over and over, in that section. If I were to ask you, what is the command in that chapter? **Abide!** The command is not, make yourselves branches. (laughter – It is so hard to abide, I’m giving everyone a warning, get yourself back in that vine, you’ve got yourself lost) Also, we are not commanded to bear fruit. Did you ever notice that? **The only command is to Abide.**

Now abide means to remain and continue in, and the verb is present tense. So what he is saying is **continually abide in me.** It isn’t just once. I think this command is easily neglected because we don’t really understand what that means. So we just figure, well let’s do the commands that we do get, and forget that one.

It's interesting because there are so many commands about not being anxious, that's another one that we totally ignore. Like, he doesn't really mean that, he doesn't mind if we're anxious, as long as we're doing what he wants us to do. But not being anxious, not being afraid is the most repeated commands in the Bible, so it's kind of interesting that we ignore them.

I think that Jesus speaks at length to his disciples because this is when he is coming to the end of his time on earth. Why does he take so much time talking about abiding in him? I think it is because we are tempted not to do it. He knows how hard it is to remain in him. So he encourages them to do that.

I think it's similar to the author in Hebrews when he says, ***strive to enter his rest***. (laughter) That's what it says, some people say to me, that is so weird, why does it say that, isn't rest something where we are not striving? He understands that we live in a world that is not restful. Things are constantly coming in to keep us from being able to easily rest in him (so we have to strive to rest).

Alright, I'm going to run through a bunch of things that I think "abiding" is and also helping flesh this out for you. I think the first thing to say about abiding is....

Abiding is having your identity and your life only in Jesus. All your strings attached to him. Who are you? You are his beloved child, that is who you are. Karl Barth one time said that scripture forbids us to take sin more seriously than or even as seriously as grace.

Next, let go of all your expectations, all the ones your aware of. ***Let them float to the surface and then kill them***. (laughter) The only expectation that you can have...here it is: that God will be God in every situation of your life. You can count on him to be present and active and always true to his good and glorious character.

Jesus can be counted on to be more faithful than we are. We are to hold everything lightly, including our relationships. You know you're going to grab them back. So one thing that is very helpful in the morning is to hand them all over again. And by handing them over I don't mean basically

hoping God will work in them, but literally saying, if this is the last time I will see this person, thank you for the time that we have had. Because none of these relationships are mine, no matter who I am thinking of.

Next, God will never allow anything in your life that he cannot and will not redeem. The great thing about God, he is a really good golfer. He always can play the ball where it lies. You hit it into the sand trap, he can always play it. It may take a little longer to get back up on the green. But God always plays the ball where it lies. And He is confident in himself that he can fulfill his purpose in us.

Abiding is continually looking away from ourselves to Jesus. I think I heard Gary saying something about that, right? Abiding is continually actively receiving God's word to you. **Which is that he is delighted with you.** I don't even like using the word "love" sometimes because I still put in "put up with" so I've been working hard on understanding and receiving God's delight in me. Which seems real silly, but it's just there, if he wants to say he delights in me than I'm going to try to believe it. It's important to understand that **Abiding is not just the means that God uses, it is the end.** This is something we so often don't understand. We think of abiding as sort of a cheat thing, I'm abiding in God so I can get something done for him. No, his intention is for us to completely abide in him (rest in him).

In John 14 when he says I'm going to prepare a place for you, and I'm going to come back and take you where I am so we can hang out together. That's what he's up to. Not so that we can be doing his work for him in heaven. It's to be with him. God's goal in our relationships and in our lives is not that we have perfect relationships here on earth. And it's not for us to be perfect and have all the answers. I used to think when I first got married that God would really, really help himself out if he would perfect me instantly, because I knew then I could be a lot more help to him. Back then in the state I was in I did try often to convince him of my own thinking. God's goal in our lives is for us to **participate in our own becoming** that's what he's primarily up to. We so often think that he is primarily up to things out here, but he is primarily up to things in

here. (indicating the difference between external and internal – the heart) To make us truly able to be free in him. To know ourselves as his beloved. Not just with our heads but with every cell of our bodies. To know who we are in him.

So abiding is something that is deliberate, it is not passive and it is not automatic. Abiding is thanking God we thank God primarily as a reality check. To help us remember the truth. So when we thank him we realize again that he is already at work, and he so good and he knows what he is doing. Abiding is living in the moment, because the moment is all we have to meet him in. That's it; each day is a gift from God. Each day we get up and say, oh my goodness I'm alive, he's decided to give me another day, well all right let's see what he wants me to do with it, that's pretty amazing.

We waste so much time because the moment that we're living in we're busy thinking about the past or the future and we miss abiding in the moment that we have, even though that's all we have. When we live primarily by principles and commands what we are really doing is living by the real absence of God instead of the real presence of God.

To abide is also to recognize that we are always no more than bugs in a rug. When I think about rugs, I'm actually thinking of those 60's shag rugs about that thick with the pile (gesture-4inches), and we are a little bug and we never know what's going on, we never even know who we are ourselves, do we? Isn't it funny how we think we do (know ourselves). People will come up to me and ask, why are you crying? I'm saying, I don't know. I've got to come up with some reason. It's kind of embarrassing to feel that I don't really know what's going on, I have no idea. We don't know what's going on in other people's lives. We are bugs in a rug.

We trust our sanctification and our relationships to God, over and over and over again, and we trust that he will take us to the next step he wants. We're not in charge of our own sanctification; we don't always know what he needs to do with us. Most of the time we don't know. I'm always surprised at how bad I really am. I thought I was better than that. God is always at work internally transforming us. So one of the ways I was thinking about this was in terms of forgiveness. We are told how to

forgive. I'm sure all of you have people that you need to forgive. And I remember when I first became a Christian I was told, you really need to forgive your parents, you really need to forgive your family. And so I was given How To's on how to forgive.

But no one said that when we abide in Christ and when he mediates our relationships our forgiving other people is nothing more than handing it to him. And trusting first of all that God takes what happens to us more seriously than we do. God never forgives sin, **he destroys it**, he is against what is against us. So forgiveness isn't trying to come to the place where you finally feel like it was okay what somebody did. Forgiveness is not trying to get over it because gosh they did their best. Sin is sin, and we hand that person over to God and we hand sin over to God. Trusting that he will redeem it. I think that as we trust him to help us forgive he enables us more and more to do that. I have never been able to do it out of a sheer will, it is very hard.

The next point I want to make, now that we have abiding clear is that when we let Jesus mediate we relate to one another indirectly. So what do I mean by that. We only give what we see Jesus giving us to give. And we only receive what he is giving us to receive from others. So let's start with receive.

Don't let other people tell you who you are. Learn to filter what people say through the truth of God. As Jesus mediates, let him take what people say first, and let him throw out the garbage. Let Jesus be your garbage collector. A friend once suggested that I think of Jesus as a shield around me, and I listen for the plink when people shoot arrows at me and they fall to the ground instead of into me. Jesus doesn't ask us to let people sin against us.

We need to develop practicing keying off his real and active presence so that we do not react directly to the people that we are with. We have him with us in our actual conversations; we are listening to him while we are listening to them. One of the most helpful things somebody said to me one time is, Kathy, what I want you to do is learn to take seriously living in God's peace, so make that your priority. And I started paying attention to

how often I was really in peace; I started paying attention to what conversations robbed me of my peace and why they did. And I had to rework everything about the way I understood what it meant to be loving. Because you see if you are not at peace what are you giving other people? We all have God's love to give to each other, and if we aren't living in God's love, I'm not sure what we think we are giving. I can be as wise as anybody but if I am anxious and guilty and angry, then my words don't really add up to much, do they. The reality of Christ is always there, always there for us. We can either live in it or refuse it, but he is always coming toward us.

I want to make sure that you understand going back to the peace thing. That when we live in the peace of Christ, it is not only more loving for us; it is more loving for them. Because the only thing that they can really have in life is God and his peace. And when we allow other people to primarily disrupt that all the time because we think we are being loving, all we're really doing is helping them be dependent on us and not dependant on Him.

We give only what Jesus gives us to give to others, so we wait on Jesus when we're together. Picture yourself always having room between you and other people, where he is standing, he is there. That's what it means to abide. It's so funny how we always want to have it be principles. Remember what I said yesterday that it's not true for Jesus. He didn't sit down in the middle of the time with others and look at some instruction and say wait a second I need to figure out what God told me to do. No, he had him right there, the Father all the time. That's the deepest reality. The deepest reality is not what you think about yourself. You're not even yourself yet. That's just silly. And our relationships here are not the last word; they're never the last word. Jesus is the last word. (Amen) The main thing about trusting him to give us the word is that he can help us to be happy in that moment, and all he wants us to give somebody is a cup of cold water.

For example, with my kids, who are sitting over there. I am the wisest person I know, they haven't always figured this out. And because I see them making choices that I wish they wouldn't, I believe that the most

loving thing I can do is straighten them out. And if I talk at them long enough, they will be transformed. (laughter) But as I have attempted to abide in Jesus, I will lie in bed at times and have the longest most effective conversation with one of my children in my head. But when I get up in the morning, and I am attempting to abide in (Jesus), I will find that the only thing (Jesus) gives me to give to my child, is to give him his breakfast. (laughter)

We are always to look for God's actual work and to participate in that. Not what would Jesus do, but what is he doing. He is doing something, and he knows what he is doing in my kid's lives, and I don't. I need to see what he's doing and participate in that. God will always lead us out of peace and permission if we will wait on him, because that's what is glorious.

It's not glorious to get us to do things, as if God were a Nike commercial. It is so much more glorious, it so much shows who he is when we live out of peace and he gives (what we need in the moment). You may be anxious, but that is not the question. The question is: is God anxious? And if he is not, then we don't need to be anxious. And I gotta tell you God is not anxious. He's not worried he's not going, Oh! My, I don't know what I'm going to do now; they've completely messed up everything I was hoping to do.

When we let Jesus mediate, we let God justify us. We acknowledge that we don't do our best, we never do. In the last couple of years I discovered that one of my children was deeply sinned against by another child in a family that we trusted when we were living in another place. And I have really had to work through a lot of stuff about what it means for me as a mom. A lot of well intentioned people would say to me, Kathy you did your best, you didn't mean for that to happen. And in a way it was helpful, but I knew that was not what I needed to hear. Because I didn't do my best.

There were a lot of times that I acted out of anger and selfishness wanting to have my way. When I was willing to look at what I was doing in my life during that very painful time. This (look) helped me to realize that when he (God) chose me to be their mother, he said, I didn't make a mistake. Because I know what I am doing in your life, I am growing you up

in the midst of this, and I never allow anything that I cannot redeem. And it was so freeing to stand before him with no justification. You know, to him we all try to say well I did this, or I did my best, I had nothing to say. I remember when my first daughter was born and I was looking at her beautiful little face. I said to God, Are you nuts? Do you know who I am, I am such a mess. Are you sure you think I'm going to be able to take care of her, I am overwhelmed by the craziness of it. What a crazy idea he had. Someday when I'm with him, I'm going to say I have some really good ideas for you.

I just have one more thing to say, and that is in Matthew 11, Jesus says, come unto me all ye who are burdened and heavy laden and I will give you rest, take my yoke upon you for I am meek and gentle of heart, and I will give you rest unto your souls.

He (Jesus) exchanges burdens with us. He takes our anxiety, our anger, our upsets, all the things that keep us from being peaceful. Jesus' burden for us is His love, His love is the only yoke he has for us, and his yoke is light. Take seriously the command to abide and to live in his peace. Principles can never give us his peace, only Jesus is our peace