

The Grace of Loving Others
3 Simple Steps of Grace - #3 Love Others
Leviticus 19:18, Luke 10:25-27
February 2, 2020 LUMC

Theme: Love Others

We are in Week three of our study of the “3 Simple Steps of Grace” as we see how we reflect and respond to the three central commands of our faith; Love God, Love Others, and Make Disciples. Beginning with the command we see in Deuteronomy 6:4 to Love the Lord with all our heart and mind and strength, then we saw how the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, understood how God loves us through the expression of Grace’s components; Prevenient, Justifying, and sanctifying grace. Today, we begin moving into the notion and the command to “love others” and we’ll begin to see what happens when these two overlap.

Leviticus is one of the oldest codes for holy living and there are some difficult passages. Some of the rules apply to practical living in the ancient world in ways that set God’s people apart from the world and include some dietary laws. Other’s pertain to how we relate to God and to one another. Leviticus commands us to “avoid hate in your heart” and chapter 19 commands us to place God above everything else. Verse 18 tells us to not, **“seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.”** Yet we bear offense and hold grudges like a club over other’s heads. After 400 years of bondage in Egypt, the Israelites needed some teaching on how to be a good neighbor.

This passage specifically applies “neighbor” to the Israelites; “your people.” Jesus broadens that definition when he is confronted by the Pharisees and he tells the parable of the Good Samaritan.” The notion of neighbor goes from “those people just like you” to include “those people not like you.”

It seems to me in the Western world, we have a very narrow understanding of the word ‘love’. To quote the famous Inigo Montoya from “Princess Bride,” “I don’t think the word means what you think it means.” We toss the word out with little regard to what we are saying; Do I really ‘love’ ice cream? Well, I like it and I enjoy it, but love? We equate the word with sexual intimacy and that overtone colors how we react to its use and to other people. We are being told by the secular world that love has no boundaries but is that truth?

Love, as the Bible uses it is the ‘means’ to give God glory. Last week, I used the phrase “means of Grace” and we have many ways of expressing our love for God and allowing God’s love, his grace, to be expressed to us in the means of grace. Love is the highest value of righteousness and justice, it is an eternal commitment made by God on our behalf. Love is accountable – God made a covenant (a contract) with Moses to be their God and we would be his people. The parent/child relationship is

always one full of accountability, at least it should, or children never learn boundaries, respect, or have a moral foundation. I think of Ruth and her sacrificial love for her Mother-in-Law, Naomi. Love is risky. Who loves you enough to hold you accountable?

It is our response to God's demonstration of love for us, but it is never just a 'service FOR God' – he doesn't take bribes, that's works righteousness. Now God's love is rendered unconditionally to you and me and life is one of God's gifts to us, so we demonstrate our love when we take delight in life and in God, we admire what God has done, is doing, and we express a passion of life. We work for justice for the poor and marginalized in the world and community around us, we show hospitality and that may be inconvenient and hard work. These are a few ways we express love.

Last Monday was the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau and I came across the story of Francisca Halamajowa. I'm certain you all know her name? No, we don't, but we should. Francisca lived in Sokal, Poland during WWII and the German occupation. She was a Catholic Christian and was appalled at what was happening with the Jews. Francisca, at great personal peril, harbored 15 people in her home; two families in the hayloft and another in a hole underneath the kitchen floor. Fay Malkin was just 4 when her family came to live in the hayloft above the pigsty and for 20 months that was their existence. Out of the 6,000 Jews who lived in Sokal before the war, only about 30 survived, fifteen from the work of Francisca who clearly understood exactly what it means to "love your neighbor."

Anti-Semitism under Hitler's rule turned neighbor against neighbor and generated a culture of fear. As that hate in Germany was heating up a young scholar, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, left the safety of the US, bypassing a teaching opportunity, and returned to Germany. His love for God gave him the courage to resist the injustice and he continued teaching in an underground seminary. Eventually, his resistance led to him becoming an accomplice in a failed assassination attempt on Hitler and he wound up in prison. Shortly before Hitler committed suicide, in a final act of vengeance, he had Bonhoeffer hung.

Bonhoeffer penned a book titled, *The Cost of Discipleship*. For him, to be a disciple of Jesus meant there would be a cost. He wrote, "Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like cheapjack's wares.... Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field. Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again.... Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ."

When in your life has discipleship to Jesus been costly to you?

Discipleship. "**Love the Lord with all your heart....**" It begins there and then Jesus took it another step – a giant leap when, in Matthew 7 he tells us to love our neighbor as we love our self. Let me say that I think there are an awful lot of people

who don't love themselves very much. Too much regret. Too much failure. Too much dissatisfaction. Too much shame.

It is a roadblock to discipleship to hate oneself. Until you truly receive the forgiveness and freedom offered to you through God's prevenient and justifying grace, you will never be able to begin to advance in the process of sanctification. Becoming a holy people means learning to let go of the things you for which you have already been forgiven; learn to forgive yourself.

Luke 10 we find the account of an interaction between Jesus and a Pharisee who challenges Jesus in a test of the teaching from Moses - the law. **"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"** the Pharisee asks and Jesus, characteristically, asks a question in return, **"What is written in the law?"** The Pharisee correctly answers with Deuteronomy 6:4 which you all know by heart now. But then Jesus launches into the Good Samaritan Parable. A man, a Jew, is beaten and left for dead. Along come a priest, then a Levite, who both ignore the plight of the poor man. Then along comes an enemy of the Jews, a Samaritan! In the end, it is the Samaritan who sets aside the old arguments and chooses a different path, the risky, rocky road of love. This act of mercy is the breaking down of a wall of hate.

Love and mercy intersect when we act with grace, compassion and charity.

What about those who defy God? What about the evildoer? Now be careful here. This is where so many have taken the wrong road. Scripture doesn't say you must love the rapist, the abuser, or the murderer, or those who defy God. Psalm 5, 11, 31, Proverbs 3:32, 6:16 or Hosea 9:15 are some places where this is addressed, but it is not your right to take the road of vengeance or judgment. God alone bears the weight of that. Psalm 35 and 105 testify to that. Jesus himself never engaged in vengeance. Oh yes, he did stop the leaders of the church from profiting by selling religion and bilking the poor of their money when he turned over the tables of the moneychangers. Stopping evil happening in front of you is an act of justice and compassion. Jesus stopped Peter from attacking the soldiers sent to arrest him and then healed the soldier's ear. Likewise, you and I are called to stand up for the weak, mistreated, and to call out for justice.

Love is accountable. Jesus held the Pharisees accountable to scripture and some, like Nicodemus, followed him. He loved Martha enough to tell her to stop the busywork so she could worship and grow in faith. He loved the Sadducees and the Pharisees enough to challenge them when they tried to stone the adulterous woman. And then he loved her enough to challenge her to "go and sin no more." He loved the enemy of the Jews, a Roman soldier, who showed compassion and mercy for a slave and who had faith in Jesus' power of healing. He loved the outcast of a Samaritan village enough to offer her forgiveness and living water even as he broke the law by even speaking to her. In the heat of the day, alone at the well, she received

forgiveness and accountability; go and sin no more. Love without God's accountability is hollow.

Despite the evildoer's acts, God still commands us to act with kindness, gentleness, and mercy. Luke 6 and Romans 12 both have commands for us to pray for our enemies. We pray for them to turn to God and turn away from evil. Luke 6:31, the "Golden Rule" calls for us to not respond eye-for-eye, tooth-for-tooth. It is a difficult teaching. But when that one repents and turns to God, love becomes possible.

In Hebrews 1:3 we see that it is Jesus Christ who rightly reflects God's Glory, bearing his true nature, the nature of love. Some of the marks of this kind of love include respect, compassion, mercy, kindness, gentleness, and accountability. 1 Corinthians 13, the "love chapter" is fine to use at weddings, but it's truly a teaching on what God's love looks like; faith doesn't manipulate or seek its own, but rather seeks what's best for the "other." The New Testament love is motivation to practice our faith through love and this is where and when the grace of sanctification really begins to bear fruit.

One simplistic way to see this is a teaching on happiness. I may not be happy, but I make a conscious decision to live like I am happy. I express happiness in the meeting of people, sharing a meal, whatever it may be and soon, I discover I am happy. Likewise, I choose to obey and love my neighbor – whoever that may be, and soon, I discover, I do truly care what happens to them and I demonstrate those marks of love. When we are living love our faith enables the Holy Spirit to transform us; grace happens. Loving others is mark of faith that transforms us into a powerful people of God building the kingdom and leading others to the saving knowledge of Jesus. This is the hard work of following Jesus.

We receive God's love with the Holy Spirit and the **fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control**. This is God's blessing over your obedience and willingness to act on your faith because love is an action verb and we are called to respond, not just think about it.

This week we added another circle to our understanding of these steps of grace. First was Love God now we add Love Others. There is an intersection of these two circles. It's possible to express love for others without God and we'll talk more about that in two weeks. But where the two overlap there is indeed fireworks; the fireworks of heaven rejoicing in your hard work, in your obedience, in your willingness to be used by the Holy Spirit to be a gift of God's unmerited grace for another.

Like the Israelites, we need reminding to love our neighbor. Jesus reminds us that we who have decided to follow him have been freed from sin and the guilt of sin and we can love ourselves because we are a new creation in Christ Jesus. Let us live that new life together.