

Reimagine: So That My House Will be Full
Reimagine the Great Commandments, Part 2
Matthew 5:43-47; 1 Cor. 13; John 13:34-35

Introduction: In 1929, Cole Porter wrote a hit song for one of his musicals in which he asks, "What is this thing called love? Ask the Lord in heaven above, what is this thing called love?" What is this thing called love?

ILL. - I read about a young man who was determined to win the affection of a lady who refused to even talk to him anymore. He decided that the way to her heart was through the mail, so he began writing her love letters. He wrote a love letter every day to this lady. Six, seven times a week she got a love letter from him. In all he wrote her more than seven hundred letters. And she wound up marrying the mailman.

All of us have a working definition of love in our minds. Love is one of those words that we instinctively know what it means. We sing about love; we watch movies about love; we read romance novels about love. Love is part of what it means to be human, and no matter what culture you live in, most people would say they know something about love.

But it's one thing to talk about love. It's a whole different matter to love someone. Love is hard. We know this. Or if you don't, you will soon. Love sometimes hurts and disappoints. And too often, we simply fail to love.

On our best days and in our right minds, we all know that love is good, and we all want to be known as loving. Nobody wants to come to the end of their lives and be remembered as someone who was selfish and bitter and hateful. But as we all know, that is far easier said than done.

And yet, to be remembered as loving by our friends and family is one thing. But what about God? **What would it take for God to see in us a life of love?**

Last week we talked about Reimagining the Great Commandment, which is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and today we're going to talk about Reimagining the second Greatest Commandment, loving others as we love ourselves.

BUT FIRST, LET'S PRAY

STORY: A woman once told of her experience as a Church secretary. When she answered the phone she'd say, "Jesus loves you, Sharon speaking. How may I help you?" But one day she got distracted because she was talking to others in the office. When the phone rang, she answered: "Sharon loves you, Jesus speaking. How may I help you?" There was a pause on the line... and then the caller said, "Somehow, I thought your voice would sound different." (Sharon Landers, Reader's Digest 12/98 p.180)

SHARON LOVES YOU... JESUS SPEAKING!

She slipped up. She didn't mean to say what she said but she did, and because she said it, we laugh... it's kinda funny. But there SHOULD BE truth behind her statement. There should be a truth that - in everything we say - people should sense what we're really saying is: "I LOVE YOU... Jesus speaking."

The idea that we should love each other - permeates the New Testament.

1 John 4:7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. (NKJV)

1 John 4:11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

Romans 12:10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love;

Ephesians 4:2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love,

1 John 3:11 For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another;

1 John 3:18 Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.

1 John 4:21 And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.

1 Thessalonians 3:12 ...and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you;

Romans 13:8 Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law.

1 John 4:8 The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

1 John 3:16 We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

1 John 4:12 No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.

Galatians 5:14 For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Ephesians 4:32 Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

1 John 4:20 If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.

Philippians 2:2 make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.

1 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.

1 John 4:19 We love, because He first loved us.

[I could go on and on with verses like these.](#)

Love is a big deal because Jesus foretold in Matthew 24: ***10 At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, 12 Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold,*** (NIV).

In and of ourselves, we're not capable of loving God. We can only respond to His love for us. Our love for God is really a reflection of God's love for us that we have embraced with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

In each of the synoptic gospels, (Mat 22:37, Mark 12:30 and Luke 10:27) Jesus gives the answer to a lawyer's question about which is the Greatest Commandment; ***"love God with all your heart, your soul, your mind, and strength and "love your neighbor as yourself."***

Now some people think Jesus said you must learn to love yourself first before you can love others. But Jesus simply said to love others "as yourself." He didn't say to love others "after you love yourself."

In fact, the Bible warns against self-love in 2 Timothy 3:1-2 ***"But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. 2 People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy" (NIV)***

When Paul wrote that verse, he was writing about selfish, self-centered love that is very different from the self-giving love God wants us to have.

According to worldly wisdom, self-love is vital to the proper functioning of human beings. But self-love and self-esteem teaching has the opposite affect; we become more focused on ourselves, and less focused on God and others.

Paul says in Romans 5:8: ***"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*** (NIV)

In 1 Peter 4:8 it says, ***"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."*** (NIV)

The word that Peter uses for love is agape. Often, agape has been described as unconditional love — love that is without condition, love that is not earned, love that we did not see coming. It is unexpected. It is unannounced. It is unmerited. It's a gift.

When you think about it, most love that we know is conditional. If you love me or if you're beautiful or attractive, if you're something, then I will love or

continue to love you. If I feel a connection and attraction; I choose to love. If I stop having that feeling, my love will stop.

The Greeks had several words for love. The most common word was ***phileo***. This word described the garden-variety love—the love you have for friends, for people in your family, for your country, for your team.

There was another word for love that was very common in the ancient world—***eros***. When translated into English, it almost always speaks of sexual passion, erotic love.

Agape love, on the other hand, pursues the object of its love. It loves even in the face of resistance, rebellion and even rejection.

Paul told the Roman church that we must not owe anything except the debt of love. He told the Galatians that the fruit of the Spirit, the evidence of God working in your life, is first LOVE. In 1 Corinthians 13:1–3, Paul basically says,

1. If I don't live a life of love, nothing I say will matter.
2. If I don't live a life with love, nothing I know will matter.
3. If I don't live a life with love, nothing I believe will matter.
4. If I don't live a life of love, nothing I give will matter.
5. If I don't live a life of love, nothing I accomplish will matter.

1 Corinthians 13:2 says, ***“If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.” (NIV)***

If you look deeper into the list in 1 Corinthians 13, you discover it has fifteen phrases. The first two serve as an umbrella for everything that follows. The love of which Paul writes is ***patient*** and ***kind***.

Then Paul lists eight negative things that love doesn't do. Love does not envy. It does not boast. It is not proud. It is not rude. It is not self-seeking. It is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs. It does not delight in evil.

Then Paul turns the corner and gives us five positives. The love of which he speaks *"rejoices with the truth, always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."* (vs. 6-7)

Normally, when we hear of something unprovoked, we think of anger, attack, aggression, or violence. When we hear about that unprovoked aggression, we say there was nothing in the person who was the recipient of the attack that had this coming. We ascribe the act of violence to the perpetrator.

I like to think agape as unprovoked love, and it works on the same principle—just in the opposite direction. **The Father's an agape lover. He loves whom he loves, not based on our loveliness or worthiness, but on the basis that He is love.**

[There are three contexts where AGAPE, loving as God loves—must be present.](#)

1. You need agape for the LEAST of these.

The least of these are the people you're most likely not to notice, or if you notice them, you're tempted to avoid them. They smell. They look funny. Jesus describes it this way: They're beggars. They're prisoners. They're hungry. They're needy.

Those are the least of these people. You just want to rush by; you don't want to make eye contact with the least of these. Like the Samaritan who helped the man beaten up on the side of the road in Jesus' story in response to who is my neighbor. They drain you. There's no gain in loving them; and there's no loss in not loving them. You know you can just go by and you're not going to be punished. Everybody's passing these people by. Nobody's holding you accountable, it seems (until you get to heaven). We need God's agape love to overcome those feelings and love them anyway, because Jesus said that whatever we do for the least of these, we've done for Him. (Matt. 25:40)

2. You need agape for the MOST of these.

The most of these is the person you're most likely to notice and resent at the same time. The most of these is the person who does what you do, only better. They eclipse you. They leave you in their long shadow. It's your prettier sister. It's your more athletic brother. It's the teacher's pet. The most of these is that person who excels in the area in which you want to excel.

We are most threatened by those who are most like us, just a little better. And where agape must come in and supplant your feelings of **superiority** toward the least of these; agape love needs to free you up from your feelings of **envy and jealousy** toward the most of these.

God wants to give you agape love for that person. He wants to convert your feelings of animosity or resentment or intimidation into enormous love and favor toward that person.

3. You need agape for the WORST — of these.

The worst of these is that person who has hurt you. They have betrayed you. They've taken something precious from you. They've exploited you. The most of these you may resent, but they are probably oblivious to that. It takes God-sized Agape love to love your enemies and pray for those who despitely use you.

You know what the opposite of love is? It is not hate, it's fear. 1 John 4:18: "**... perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.**" (NIV)

Fear causes us to think: "I don't measure up. I'm not worthy of anyone's love, much less God's. If people really knew me, they wouldn't love me." That's fear. And guess what? God knows everything about us and loves.

Yet the reality is: "**See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!**" (1 John 3:1, NIV)

"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8, NIV)

You have no cause for fear. You can let love flow into you and let that fear leave. As you experience the fearlessness of being loved by God, you will be able to do what is otherwise humanly impossible: love the least of these, love the most of these, and love the worst of these.

Love unlocks eternity. Love confirms that we have passed from death to life. The abundant and obedient life only happens with love. Love motivates

obedience. Obedience nurtures love. Together, love and obedience produce fruit. God does kingdom work through those who love.

Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, said he used to preach a sermon on love that had four points:

- 1) God loves you unconditionally;
- 2) You are commanded to love others – God, your neighbors, your enemies.
- 3) You are incapable of loving others in your own strength; **and**
- 4) You can love others with God's love.

That's good biblical teaching. But he said God showed him through the Word and through experience that he needed to add a fifth point:

5) Sometimes you've got to love by faith. You've got to **show** love even if you don't **feel** love.

We could say that agape love is acting in someone else's best interest unconditionally (no matter who they are), willfully (no matter how you feel), and sacrificially (no matter what it costs). **Agape love is a transforming love.** Agape love is outrageous love. It's not natural to love someone who doesn't love you. It's not natural to give your very best when you could get by with a lot less. It's not natural to love someone who doesn't even care. It is not natural to give everything when there is absolutely no guarantee that you will receive anything in return. **It's not natural, it's supernatural.**

STORY: A college professor of religion once gave a final examination for her New Testament ethics course in a novel way. The students were warned ahead of time that the exam would be graded strictly on a pass-fail basis. As the inevitable complaints arose about the grading system for the final, the professor simply smiled and told them that with ethical decisions in life either you do, or you don't.

So, with only those clues the students busied themselves preparing for their final examination in the usual way - summarizing the ethical teachings of Jesus. On the day of the exam, the students found a note taped to the door to their usual classroom stating that the examination was being held in another

classroom that happened to be a long walk across campus. Because of all the construction there, the students really had only one practical route to walk to the new examination room so off they marched one by one.

Along the way they first encountered a skateboarding student who had fallen and twisted his ankle badly. You could see the dark bruise forming on the student's leg already. Under the beautiful vine-covered stone archways between buildings they passed a homeless person seated at a table asking for contributions to support a local shelter.

As they crossed a parking lot closer to the new exam room a professor was desperately trying to get into his car where he had locked his keys by accident. His son had just been injured, and the professor needed to go to the hospital.

Guess which students passed the exam? The ones who stopped at any of the *staged* incidents to help out. The ones who showed up for the examination at the new location failed because they failed to help those in need.

As a church, as the body of Christ, we're called to fulfill the Great Commission and live out the Great Commandment to love God and others.

This is all basic stuff, right? Let's take loving others up a notch. Go with me to the scene of the Last Supper in John 13. Look at verse 34. Jesus is speaking.

"A new command I give you: Love one another..."

I've heard David Bowden say that for the last 25 years whenever we've done the Living Lord's Supper.

Loving one another wasn't something new. But Jesus wasn't through. What came next was blasphemous. What came next changed the world. If we can reimagine what came next, it will be life changing.

"...As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

Loving others as we love ourselves is so old covenant. This was new. This was personal. When we read ***"love as I have loved you,"*** we think of the cross. We

think Jesus' shed blood, forgiveness, grace, and mercy. Those disciples thought back over the previous three years. Each of the disciples could have thought of a moment when Jesus had loved them. Matthew, Nathanael, Peter, James, John.

How we treat, talk about, respond to and care for one another is the identifying mark of a genuine Jesus follower. Not what we believe. Love, as Jesus defined it is the difference-maker.

Jesus didn't hitch his new command to all the other commandments, He hitched it to himself. **Now the litmus test for a Jesus follower was not religious, but relational.** We are to demonstrate our devotion to God by putting the person next to us in front of us. Jesus did not leverage his holiness, his righteousness, his authority, or his supernatural abilities, He leveraged His example...**HOW HE LOVED.**

Jesus' love for those disciples in the upper room, rather than His authority over them, is what He leveraged to instruct and inspire them. He refused to exercise His power even though He declared, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."

The disciples got the message, because in that same gathering Jesus demonstrated His new Kingdom ethic by washing their feet. Why should his disciples obey his command to love? Why should we? Because He loved us first. He loved us best.

The history of the church in the decades following the death of the apostles tells us how they did. The Jesus movement was characterized by compassion, generosity, selflessness, and boldness. Boldness fueled not by arrogance, but by concern for others.

How are we doing with Loving others as Jesus has love us.

Think about the last two years, and the culture wars being fought in America. Think how we may have thought about others who are not on our side politically, or economically, whatever.

I want you to reimagine that the problem with culture wars is that there aren't just winners and losers. There are casualties. When the church takes a leading role in the fray, the casualty is always the faith of the next generation. Their faith is sacrificed on the altar of temporary power and political gain.

University of Virginia sociologist James Davison Hunter coined the phrase culture wars in 1991. In his landmark book, Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America, Hunter argues that while Americans hold a wide range of moral commitments and political priorities, they are often portrayed as holding one of two distinct worldviews competing in an epic struggle.

In the 1990's those on the front lines of the culture wars were evangelical pastor and leaders, many of whom pushed the idea that faithfully following Jesus meant the church must take control of major spheres of influence in society, even if it required aligning with a political party to gain power.

Author and commentator David French notes that the culture war approach often confuses **Christian power** with **biblical justice**, and it creates incentives for Christians to rule. He says it is the cross, not the boardroom, not the oval office or box office that is the absolute center of the Kingdom of God.

You can't love your enemy in this scenario like Jesus told us to do on the Sermon on the Mount, because you aren't supposed to love your enemy, only defeat him.

Ed Stetzer asserts, "you can't hate people and engage them with the gospel at the same time. You can't war with people and show the love of Jesus. You can't be both outraged and engaged in loving." (***Christians in the Age of Outrage, page 105***)

Jesus doesn't take sides. When Christianity is reduced to belief, we leave the door open for someone else to rule. When Christianity is reduced to belief, it's easy to decorate our politics with the symbols, and sayings of the Christian faith. Our faith is not an adjective. There is no such thing as a Christian conservative or a Christian liberal. We're a Christ follower or we're not.

What posture should Jesus followers take toward people who are far from God? Think about the story of the Prodigal Son.

Luke 15:20 says, ***“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” (ESV)***

He kissed him because he had never canceled him. The prodigal son wasn't banished, he was lost, but always loved.

The older brother on the other hand, verses 28-30; ***“But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, 29 but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’***

That's what canceled culture sounds like; it's not just new to the 21st century.

Key Take Away #1: When we reimagine Jesus to fit our agendas, political or otherwise, we rob the world of the message that changed the world. We cancel the message that canceled our sin.

Listen to what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount; Matthew 5:43-48 (NIV)
43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’

Jesus is referring here to the teaching of the Pharisees and scribes. And just so you know, their teaching was not in line with the word of God!

Their teaching only said, "Love thy neighbor." They were not teaching - ***“Love your neighbor as yourself.”*** Not only were they omitting a vital piece from the word of God. They added to the word of God - ***“and hate your enemy.”***

Proverbs 25:21-22 says, ***“If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you.” (NIV)***

What were the Pharisees doing? They were adding to the word of God so they could be **comfortable**, rather than submitting to the Word of God, so they could be **conformed** to God's character.

Romans 13:8, "***Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.***"

I am to love people because God loves me - regardless of who they are - how they act - what they believe - I am to love people.

Look at verses 44-47 says in the (NIV), "***44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?***"

The world says, "love those who are like you - love your friends - love those who like you." The world's standard for love is - "love those who love you."

God's standard of love is - "Love even those who hate you."

It's not notable if we love people that love us. If we're content to be believers rather than doers, we will be divided. Reducing faith to a list of *beliefs* provides us with plenty of margin **not** to love, forgive, provide for, celebrate, and pray for people we disagree with.

A pastor named Vaughn Roberts put it this way: "When you love people who are like you, that's ordinary. When you love people who are unlike you, that's extraordinary. When you love people who dislike you, that's revolutionary."

God is calling us to join the only revolution that can change the world. To love everyone as Jesus has loved us.

The earliest Christians didn't have church buildings and met in homes. They had no access to the mass media of their day. They had little money, absolutely no political influence, and didn't even have a Twitter account, Facebook page or website.

In other words, the church did not grow because people were forced into it or coerced into it or even talked into it. **People were drawn to the church like iron is drawn to a magnet because they loved like Jesus loved them.**

Love is not a noun that you **feel**; it is a verb that you **do**.

Love is not a matter of **can or can't**.

It is a matter of **will or won't**.

Love is not an emotion. You cannot command a feeling. Love may express itself emotionally and it may give you warm fuzzies, or make your heart beat faster, but those are not signs of love. Liking is a feeling and loving is an action. I don't have to like everybody, but I must love everybody.

A man named, Aristides, who in the days of the early church was sent by the Emperor Hadrian to spy out these strange creatures known as "Christians". Having gone and observed them, he came back to the emperor with these immortal words that have echoed down through history, ***"Behold! How they love one another!"***

CONCLUSION: The number one mark of a Christian in the 1st century was not theological knowledge, religious rhetoric, or even church attendance. **It was love.** When people walked into those early houses that functioned as churches, whether they were slave or free, Jew or Gentile, male or female, rich or poor, it didn't matter who they were, where they came from, or why they came, they saw people who loved each other in a way they had never seen before.

Key Take Away #2: There is no bigger magnet and no greater attractive force to an unbelieving world than when we love each other as Jesus loved us.

If you're not a Christian, I know that you must be overwhelmed, but understand that before God calls you to show love, and love others like Jesus has loved you, God first calls you to receive his love. **Being a Christian is first and foremost not about doing something for God, but it is receiving something from God; His love, forgiveness, grace, and mercy.**

Every description of love that we are given here, connects back to the way we have been loved by God in Jesus Christ. God doesn't love us because we are good. God loves us because ***He is good.***