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# **The Greatest of These is Love**

**1104-A**

**Series: Why Do You Run When I'm Crying  
(The Caring Church in a Hurting World)**



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There are enough words penned about it to fill the world with literature. There are so many songs composed about it that were there never to be another tune penned, there would be music enough to last for all the generations yet unborn. It is the subject of most of the books that have stood the test of time, and is the foundation upon which most of the plays and films that have become classics have been built.

Or is it? It depends, of course, a lot on what you mean when you say that word. Why, so misused is that solitary word that the enemy has literally made it the cornerstone of a gospel of pleasure. Yet that same word is so filled with awesome power that God has made it the cornerstone of a Gospel of Holiness.

That word, of course, is love. Paul said this about it:

Now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (I Corinthians 13:13 NKJV)

And it is that amazing statement made by one of the most analytical minds in history that we use as a basis for this week's study of the caring church in a hurting world.

For the past few weeks we have walked together through the pages of Scripture and through the highways and byways of experience into the villages of real life where Jesus walked. We have watched somewhat in awe as God in human form, the Living "I AM" come to earth, chose to build His edifice of human lives using a plan so diametrically opposed to the ways of man that the mind of man could not comprehend it.

Man elevated activities. Jesus elevated godliness instead. Man was drawn to the dramatic. Jesus was drawn to the quiet place. Man gave authority to the ones who attained. Jesus gave authority to the ones who became nothing. Man chose to reach out to those who had something to give. Jesus, on the other hand, walked past those who had something to give and turned to give Himself instead to those whose very lives spelled despair and failure.

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The disciples would have gone to the prominent men of the age, advertised in the successful publications of their day, and offered places of visibility to those whose very presence would be an advantage in the minds of the world. Jesus, on the other hand, chose to stop and invest His time in the likes of the poor, the blind, the leper, the lame. He said, "Only those who know they have a need know they need a doctor." He built a ministry which was to send shock waves into the far corners of eternity by loving the unlovable and by building His church, at least in part, out of the building blocks of human rejects that the rest of the world was stepping over or walking past.

All the while He was trying to draw us a picture of what that elusive word "love" was all about. All the while, He was trying to paint for us a portrait of who it was He so loved.

He came to love those who were crying. Those whose hearts were breaking in two. Those whose very tear-stained cheeks were monuments to announce to a proud, pompous world, looking for winners, that they did not claim to be the ones who could. They only claimed to have a need. He came to save those who knew they were lost and minister to those who knew they were hurting.

Now two thousand years have come and gone. And the church, His Body on this planet earth, now stands as His ambassador to that same hurting, crying world. The question we have been trying to ask is, "If Jesus spent so much of His time reaching out to the weeping of the world, why do they look at us in despair and ask, 'Why do you run when I'm crying?'"

In our last study we took note of one of God's imperatives to a ministering church. We concluded that if we are to be His representatives to those who hurt, we simply must learn to listen. It doesn't come naturally for us. Our tongues, "flames of fire set on fire by hell itself", according to James, don't like to be quiet long enough to let our ears function. We must learn to be "quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger" if we are to represent God effectively on this earth. God doesn't need perpetual interrupters, but quiet, steady listeners to illuminate and demonstrate His character to the crying of this world.

But to listen, and even to empathize with those who are hurting, though it gives them great comfort, is hardly fulfilling the plan of God. We are to listen so we can learn how we can really meet their needs.

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It is that subject that we address in this study today. We will try to determine just what the love of God is, and how it will manifest itself in us and through us if we are letting God be Himself in us.

And so our title is: The Greatest of These is Love

Our Outline is:

I- The Need for Love

II- The Command to Love

III- The Nature of Love

### I- THE NEED FOR LOVE

Music has always captured the essence of man's quest to be loved. Such titles as: "What the World Needs Now is Love", or "Love Makes the World Go 'Round", and "Love is a Many-Splendored Thing". These illustrate the deep need man feels for love.

All of us desperately want to be loved. We could, indeed, empty many of the psychiatric hospitals in the world today if we could somehow communicate to those within their walls that they are loved. How many of the criminals who stalk our streets in angry search of revenge would never be there had they really come to know in some way that they are, indeed, loved?

Love is the spark that ignites the soul to its greatest heights. Love is the flower of life when it has reached full bloom. Love is the gentle shower of grace that overcomes the burning heat of life's great disappointments. Love is the essence of God as it is communicated to man. Love really is a many-splendored thing. Love really does make the world go 'round, provided, of course, that we use God's definition of love.

### II- THE COMMAND TO LOVE

To simplify that definition, we must understand four things.

1- Love is a command.

2- Love is divine.

3- Love is an imperative.

4- Love is incredible, and incredibly sufficient.

We will address the first three of those in today's study. Let's assume that you want to minister to that person in your office who is passing through a crisis in his life. Both he and his wife are desperate for help. Their marriage is in trouble. Their

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finances are in shambles. Their relationship with God is either non-existent or unfruitful. There's just one problem. You can't stand them. They are self-centered, condemning, and ungrateful. You say, "Love them? I don't like them, let alone love them," as though "loving" were but an extension of "liking".

I doubt if Jesus "liked" Judas. He was a phony, a schemer, an embezzler, a betrayer, and a hypocrite. I don't think Jesus particularly "liked" Judas. But I know Jesus loved Him.

Love is not an extension of liking someone. Love is not even implying the approval of someone's character or behavior. You can love someone you don't like. In fact, you have to. Otherwise, we would all love only the "nice" folks, and no one would love the rest of us but God.

If it were impossible to love the unlovable, I'd be lost and headed for an eternity in hell and so would you. But God commended His love towards us in that while we were still stinkers, Christ died for us. That's a loose, but accurate translation of Romans 5:8. No, love is not only not an extension of liking, in many ways it is the opposite because so many of the people God tells us to love are either those we do not like, or those we do not like at the time they need that love the most.

Most marriages fail when one or both of the parties reach the conclusion, "I don't love her anymore", or "I don't love him anymore." That's obvious. What often isn't obvious, however, is that if they don't, it is because they have chosen not to love.

You say, "But listen to what their mate did." Negative. I don't want to know. All I know is that the more unlikable that mate is, the greater the command to love. Love, you see, is a command. It is not a feeling. Some people never feel loving. Others always feel loving, but don't know how to love. Love is an act of obedience to the will of God.

And this commandment have we from Him: that he who loves God *must* love his brother also. (1 John 4:21 NKJV)

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34,35 NKJV)

You love because God told you to, whether you feel like it or not. In fact, the less you feel like it, the more you must.

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III- THE NATURE OF LOVE

“But,” you ask, “how can I love someone I don’t like, or how can I love someone I hate?” You can. Jesus told you to in Matthew 5. He said you must:

- love your enemies,
- love those who hate you and persecute you and say all kinds of bad things about you,
- love even those who spitefully use you.

For if you [only] love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

(Matthew 5:46 NKJV)

No, anyone can love the lovable. That requires nothing divine. To love your mate when he or she is tender, quiet, responsive, considerate, and loving is natural. To love your mate when he or she is arrogant, unteachable, hostile, inconsiderate, and uncaring is supernatural. That’s why God commanded it.

So love is a commandment, not a response.

Secondly, love is the result of divine enablement. The fruit of the Spirit is love. In other words, love is a fruit of the Spirit; you cannot have it unless you have been born again.<sup>1</sup>

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death.

(I John 3:14 NKJV)

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

(I John 4:7,8 NKJV)

In other words, you cannot love anyone the way God loves them, unless and until Christ comes into your heart. Conversely, once you are able to let Christ be Himself in you, there is nobody you cannot love.

So love is 1) a commandment, 2) divine, and 3) an imperative.

Paul said it perfectly in I Corinthians 13:

If I speak with the eloquence of men and of angels, but have no love, I become no more than blaring brass, or crashing cymbal. If I have the gift of foretelling the future and hold in

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 5:22-26

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my mind not only all human knowledge but the very secrets of God, and if I also have that absolute faith which can move mountains, but have no love, I amount to nothing at all. If I dispose of all that I possess, yes, even if I give my own body to be burned, but have no love, I achieve precisely nothing.

(I Corinthians 13:1-3, Phillips Translation)

So, Beloved, without love you have no ministry. I don't care if you can preach like Billy Graham, sing like a bird, have the wisdom of Solomon, and the faith of Abraham, if you do not obey God in the area of love, all that you are doing, you are doing in vain. You amount to nothing at all and you achieve in this life precisely nothing. Paul just said it.

One of the most distressing statements I hear is, "But I'm not expected to love, it's not my spiritual gift." There is no spiritual gift called the gift of love. You received the Gift of Love when the Person of Love came to take up residence in your life and it doesn't matter if you have the gift of prophecy, or the gift of mercy, or the gift of administration, or the gift of service, or any other gift, you are commanded to love.

I don't know of any other thing in the Bible more essential than love. I don't ever remember God saying that if we don't witness, we amount to nothing. I don't ever remember God saying that if we don't meditate we are nothing. I don't ever remember God saying that if we don't attend church every Sunday, we amount to nothing. But He did say that if we don't love, we are nothing, and we will achieve nothing in this life. So stop making light of it, and stop accruing that responsibility to certain people in the Body of Christ who seem naturally emotional, or even supernaturally responsive. It is God's word to you, and it is an imperative, that is, it is without option or without alternative.

Husbands, you must love your wives. It is commanded in Ephesians 5:35. Otherwise, in your marriage, you amount to nothing at all. Women, you must love your husbands, It is commanded in Titus 2:4. You are to love your children. It is commanded in that same verse. You must love those whom God places over you spiritually, or who minister to you spiritually. You must. It is commanded in I Thessalonians 5:13. In fact, you simply must love all Christians everywhere. It is commanded in I Peter 2:17, and confirmed in I John 5:1. You must.

Not only that, but we are all to love our enemies. Those who resist us, refuse us, and even those who would destroy us. We



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must. We are commanded to in Matthew 5:44, Romans 12:14, and I Peter 3:8, 9. Love is an imperative and either we learn to love, or we accept the fact that spiritually all we are doing that we ourselves are so impressed with, amounts to nothing. It is like taking a million dollars and removing the one in front of it. What's left isn't worth counting. Love is the number in front of the zeros of life that gives it value. Remove love and you remove everything.

Okay, then. Love is a command. It isn't something you feel. It is something you do. Love is divine. Apart from the indwelling Holy Spirit, we can't love. Love is an imperative. Without it, we are nothing. Without it, we accomplish nothing. So what is it? How do we do it? How do we know that what we call love, is in effect, what God calls love? For if we are to meet the needs of a hurting world, and if they are going to stop saying, "Why do you run when I'm crying?" then we are going to have to begin to let God be Love in us.

I want to remind you again of what love isn't. It isn't a feeling. It isn't an emotion. It isn't a reaction. It isn't a response. Then what is it? Here's what love is:

*Love is that active expression of the nature of God, which demonstrates itself by giving itself away; and it is a ministry to be eagerly pursued.*

To "feel" love for someone and do nothing to demonstrate it is not love. God commended His love for us by dying for us when we weren't worth it. God so loved us that He did what? Felt all warm and cuddly inside? No we weren't lovable. We were in absolute rebellion, outside His will, and without hope. He so loved us that He gave Himself for us and gave Himself to us. He gave Himself away, without consideration for the cost. That is love. It is the active process of giving oneself away without regard to personal cost. Love doesn't stop to determine whether or not the person is worthy of that love, and it doesn't wait to see if the person appreciates that love; it simply gives itself away.

And how do we do that? Here are a few logical steps we can take immediately:

1- We can get down on our knees and ask God to broaden our vision of His love. In other words, we can pray with Paul. In Ephesians 3 we read:

[That you may really come] to know [practically,through

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experience for yourselves] the love of Christ,

(Ephesians 3:19 Amplified Bible)

That is another of those dangerous prayers because to come to know Christ's love effectively, we must be placed in places where love is needed. He was. And so will we.

2- When we encounter someone with a need, someone we may not like but need to love, we must quietly pause and ask God to release His love through us. Immediately. Abundantly. Remember, we can't do it and He won't do it if we don't ask. As we see in Matthew 7:7, 8.

3- We mustn't then sit and wait for a warm, fuzzy feeling. We mustn't wait until we begin to experience love for that person. That may not happen. In fact, as we begin to love, we may well find even more things about that person to dislike. Remember, love is a choice of the will, often over the objections of the emotions and that person's worthiness; even their lack of response to our love has nothing to do with the reason we love. After all, God commendeth His love towards us while we were yet, remember?

4- Begin doing for that person what you would like to do for the person you like the most.

If they are hungry, feed them.

If they are lonely, comfort them.

If they are sick or in prison, visit them.

Don't wait until you feel like it. Begin to act as though you did, and let God empower you to love.

5- Do not count the cost. If love originates in God and finds its conclusion in the glory of God, then God can afford to replenish whatever you give away, be it time or money or strength. He will return it to you, "good measure, pressed down, and running over," as we read in Luke 6:38.

6- Keep on keeping on. Remember, love never faileth. In other words, pursue the process of loving, and pursue the process of developing the qualities that make love, love. I Corinthians 14:1 says it best:

Eagerly pursue and seek to acquire [this] love [make it your aim, your great quest; (1 Corinthians 14:1a Amplified Bible)

Hebrews 10:24 in the Amplified Bible adds this:

And let us consider and give attentive, continuous care to

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watching over one another, studying how we may stir up  
(stimulate and incite) to love and helpful deeds and noble  
activities, (Hebrews 10:24 Amplified Bible)

The problem most of us face in this Christian life is that we get all stirred up when we hear a sermon or read a book or listen to a tape. We then determine that we will become God's kind of man or woman provided, of course, that something tangible happens the first week to let us know it's working. We never stop to realize that the Christian life is a lifetime pilgrimage, and the process of becoming godly is not an instant pill or a ready-mix. It is a lifestyle that develops ever so gradually as a result of making obedient choices, again and again and again and again.

7- Make a lifetime goal of studying the nature of the love of God. Read I Corinthians 13 over and over and over. Meditate on every word. We will look at it in depth in our next study. It is the key to understanding just how the love of God in man works, and how we can know it's working.

8- Finally, never forget there are three things in life that last. God delights in giving us all three. So ask Him.

Ask Him for *Faith*. He will give it to you, and you will be able to stand.

Ask Him for *Hope*. He will give it to you, and you will be able rest.

Ask Him for *Love*. He will give it to you, and you will be able to give yourself away.

Ask Him for *faith, hope, and love*. And a loving, gracious God will enable you to have all three. But never, never, ever forget, that....

The greatest of these is...*love*.

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### Assignment on Love

1- Using a concordance and a topical Bible, do a study on the three great qualities that remain, according to I Corinthians 13: “Faith, Hope, and Love”. Define each in practical terms, and try to identify Bible characters that most demonstrated that quality in real life.

2- What do you think Paul meant when he said “the greatest of these is love”?

3- How does the world’s concept of love differ from God’s? Why do you think Satan has gone to such great lengths to counterfeit something God considers as foundational? How has he succeeded?

4- If love is something we can’t do apart from God, then why would God command us to do it? Have you ever thought of love as an extension of liking someone? Can you see that it is often even the opposite? We love by choice. We like by response. So often the ones who need our love the most are those we do not like. How has the world squeezed us into its mold and caused us to miss the obedience factor of love?

5- Make a list of the groups of people in Scripture that God commands you to love. Now take that list, and put names to it. (Christian leaders, husband, wife, enemies, etc.)

6- Using that list as a springboard, go back over the steps on developing love found in this lesson.

7- If love is divine, and can only come from the indwelling Spirit, explain why some non-believers appear to exhibit more love than Christians. See if you can find a Scriptural answer.

8- Read I Corinthians 13 over and over and over this week.

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