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January 2014

The Problem of Love

Loving others is not always the easiest thing. It is hard to love sometimes, don't you agree? There are times when, because of how we're feeling or thinking we find it very draining to love others. Frankly, people aren't that lovable a good chunk of the time. It is easy to see others as ungrateful or that we just aren't in the mood to be loving. But we are told to do so. Over and over in scripture we're told to love others.¹ This creates a problem. On one hand we have the Bible telling us to love, and on the other we have our lack of loving, be it from not feeling it or thinking people don't deserve to be loved. And if this problem isn't resolved it leads to guilt and shame, people burning out and giving up. Or it leads to pride and callousness, hard-hearts. In order to resolve this we need to understand some principles about loving others, actions, and feelings.

God Cares About the heart not just actions. Actions are important. But so are our hearts also. The catch though is that we can do the right actions with the wrong heart, the wrong motives. I volunteer with Love In the Name of Christ, or Love INC for short. It is a para-church organization that works with local churches to meet the complex issues surrounding poverty.² Specifically I, with another volunteer, move furniture, appliances, stuff. I signed up when the director of the Merced Love INC spoke at our church. She highlighted the needs in our community for help and for us the church to step out and love. I thought I could help, I had some free time, so I checked the furniture delivery worker box. I was and am following the biblical mandate to love. I've been doing it for a year or so. But on

¹ John 13:34, Matthew 5:44,

² For more info see <http://www.loveincmerced.com/index.html>

most of these deliveries my heart isn't in it. In Psalm fifty-one David tells us what it is that God cares about: and that is "a broken and contrite heart." David precedes that with "For you will not delight in sacrifices or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering,"³ God cares about our actions but when they're done with our hearts in the right place is when it pleases him. You can think of it as the vertical component to our actions. Between us and God.

With the vertical is also the horizontal, between us and others. Our actions are for us, and for those around us, because God doesn't need our good works, he doesn't need our actions. God didn't need all of those sacrifices and he doesn't need our actions today. To paraphrase Luther: "God doesn't need your good works, your neighbor does." We know others are hurting, this is a broken world with broken people. And people need love.

But We Don't Always Feel Like Loving. There are times when we don't have the desire to love someone, and we rely on emotions for motivation. Sometimes the coordinator from Love INC will call, and I know I should answer, I'll feel guilty if I don't, but I really do not want to spend my afternoon moving what I usually categorize as junk, i'm not feeling it. We can look to emotional gratification for loving others. So I'm in a pickle. A no-win scenario, if I don't help I'll feel guilty, if I do help I dislike it while I'm doing it. Can you relate?

Both The Actions And The Feelings Are Tricky. Tricky because we would normally categorize our actions as good, and feeling gratified as good too. Sometimes people are appreciative for moving some furniture for them. But you start to look at these experiences as the reason behind your actions, it'd go something like this: *It felt good to help others*. Now let me be clear: there is nothing wrong with it feeling good, though we need to be careful those feelings don't become the basis for our loving others.

³ Psalm 51:16-17, ESV.

These things take the basis of our loving others off of where it should be, and it should be based on Christ.

If we know that God cares about the heart, that we shouldn't base our love on emotions, and that we're suppose to base it on Christ, then how do we accomplish this?

So this brings us to our verse this morning. Now that we've recognized and diagnosed the problem how do we reach out solution lets look at the Scriptures. 1 John 4:19 "We love, because He first loved us." It can be easy to read or listen to that verse and dismiss it. The two edged sword of memorization is stagnation. We've heard this verse so much we become desensitized to it. The same goes for verses like Romans 5:8 "But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us."

Let's break down what that means, we have two parts to this verse. The first is "we love", we are making an action. It is in line with the biblical command, and in the context love is an integral part of abiding in God, and showing that we are Christ's disciples. The second part is the why. It is the motivation for our actions. And don't miss this, it relies on God not on us. God's prior action is what frees us to love others, who aren't lovable and when we're not emotionally charged. "Because He first loved us", not the other way round, it doesn't say *we love, so he will accept us*, nor does it say *we love, so we can go to heaven*. We need to make sure our cart and our horse are in the correct order: God loved us, so we can now love others. We are no longer dependent on the feelings of gratitude or lack of, we don't need to feel guilty, we have grace. Grace that gives us the freedom to love.

(side note: I hope this sounds familiar. But the familiarity can lead to dismissal: I've heard this before so I can tune it out. please don't, that's when we run a greater risk of falling into this dilemma.)

When We Remember Christ's Action On Our Behalf It Changes Our Motivation. Its that

simple. Remember. Remember why we do communion. That Christ took our sins, upon himself on the cross. That we deserved to die, to be forever separated from Him, the only one who gives our lives purpose. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”⁴ Remembrance of the Gospel is key. Who did the action, that we had nothing that made us lovable. It was all God by his grace. God reminded me of this on one of my trips with Love INC. I got a call, didn’t want to take it, from the Love INC coordinator Natalie to help move someone from Merced to Atwater. So I got to spend my Saturday morning doing this. I got there and I was greeted by a small dog yapping constantly. the whole time I was there I don’t think it took a breath. By the end I was considering punting it over the fence. Then I met the lady we would be moving (lets just say she lacked some people skills) She was chastising one of the other volunteers for moving something too soon, or something like that. I walked in and was assaulted by the smell of her apartment. So I was not the most motivated volunteer, I just wanted it to be over. Then as we were finishing one of the other volunteers told the lady right to her face, that she needed to be grateful and to thank us for taking time out of our day, which was true, to help move her. And so on the way back to Merced - sure that I was smelling like I had been a chain-smoker for the past thirty years, and peeved that this lady wasn’t as grateful as I thought she should have been. I mean I had just spent my Saturday helping her move. I had lost hearing because of that dog. She should have been way more thankful. Then I remembered and it hit me in the form of a question. Am I always grateful for what Christ did for me? I was reminded of my position and that I had no grounds to be demanding this ladies gratitude. When we remember Christ’s action our outlook, and our motivation can’t help but be changed, and when our motivation changes, so will our actions. In the Gospel according to Luke, Luke tells how a woman with

⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:21, ESV.

a reputation loved more than a religious teacher. In chapter seven Christ is sitting, eating dinner with a Pharisee when this lady comes in and starts washing Jesus' feet, and anointing them with oil. And the Pharisee is thinking *if Jesus knew who she was, he wouldn't be letting her do this, because she's a sinner*. But Jesus knowing exactly what this guy was thinking tells a parable about two debtors, one who owed a whole lot more than the other, but both of their debts were erased by the moneylender. Jesus asks the Pharisee then "Which of them (the debtors) will love him (the moneylender) more?" and the Pharisee answers "the one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." Jesus tells him he answered correct and then commends the woman for her actions of cleaning his feet and rebukes the Pharisees saying "He who is forgiven little loves little."⁵ Put in the positive, if we are forgiven much we will love much. And we have been forgiven a whole lot. C.S. Lewis in his book *The Four Loves* talks about this type of love that is empowered by God's forgiveness. "Divine Gift-love... (that's the love we're talking about) enables him (enables us) to love what is not naturally lovable; lepers, criminals, enemies, morons, the sulky, the superior and the sneering."⁶ do you get that? Because we've been forgiven everything, we can love everyone. Remember what Christ did and you will love others with a joyful heart. It won't be based off of guilt, or how you're feeling, or how lovable the other person is, it will be based upon God's love and his action.

A Practical Tip For Remembering How do we remember? Something I heard a while back was this: Never stop preaching the Gospel... to yourself. Read the Bible - not as a theological piece of literature, not as a self-help guidebook - read it as a sinner in need of salvation, because that is what we are. Sinners looking for a savior. When we realize that we are no better than that old worn lady with her yappy dog, and her stuff, when we remember Christ's action for us, because he chose to love us. We

⁵ Luke 7:36-50, ESV.

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, (New York: Houghton, 2012), iBooks, parenthesis added.

become like the women who washed Jesus' feet, and we will love much.