

Teaching of Jesus: Exceptional Love

Nelson Cathedral,
23 February 2025.

OT: Genesis 45: 3-11, 15
NT: Romans 12: 9, 14-21
Gospel: Luke 6:27-38

Introduction:

If you have been watching evening TV lately you will have noticed that our society is obsessed with Love. There are a whole range of programmes where people embark on the journey of love: Love Island UK and Australia, Married at First Sight, even Farmer Wants a Wife.

But is this really what we mean by true love, seeing as 99.9% of these relationships do not last.

As we continue our look at the teachings of Jesus in Luke's Gospel, we come to a view of love that is quite different to that seen on our TV screens.

In Jesus, the Kingdom of God had finally come and once again Jesus turns our society's views upside-down, or as I said last week, maybe he makes them the right-way up. The emphasis on love in Jesus' words are not just about a way to live, but more importantly they show us what God's love is like.

And if this is what God is like, then that is our motivation to be like this as members of God's family. We are called to show our family likeness as Children of God. Not a love like the worlds, especially on reality TV, but a unique love that endures.

All you need is love: A praxis of the kingdom

That the phrase "all you need is love" was first spoken by Jesus and not the Beatles might not come as a surprise. But what Jesus meant, points to an exceptional, unconditional, generous and self-sacrificial love. The very quality at the heart of who God is, where Jesus himself is the greatest expression of this love through his life and death.

And just like the beatitudes that we looked at last week, the focus on love that Jesus talked about is an attitude of our heart that shows our dependence on God, not our independence.

So what does this Love look like -what Does God's love look like?

We often call the love described by Jesus the “double love command” (Matthew 22:35–40; Mark 12:28–34; Luke 10:25–28), where in Luke Chapter 10, Jesus commanded his followers to first love God [“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might,” as expressed in Deuteronomy 6:4–9]; and to love their neighbours as themselves [Leviticus 19:18].

But as we heard in Luke 6, Jesus takes love even further. It is one thing to love your friends, family or neighbours, but in Luke 6:27–35 (and Matthew 5:44), we

have Jesus telling his followers to, “love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you.”

The normal reciprocal definition of “loving those who love you,” does not reflect God's heart. What Jesus is talking about is an exceptional expression of love in what we often call the Golden rule, “do to others -that is to everyone - as you would have them to do to you”. Because as Jesus said in vs 32, “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.” Loving those who love us does not take much special effort.

Jesus offers an expression of love that is unique in the world, as the children of God reflect God's gracious, merciful, and forgiving character. This is the type of love we see Jesus displaying on the cross as he prayed for those who were crucifying him.

The concrete expression of God's love as expressed by Jesus is mercy.

- through forgiveness that we have experienced in baptism - the washing away of our sins because of what Jesus did on the cross.
- Mercy makes us right with God and is a gift given to us. We did not earn it - Hermione could not earn it – she is only 6 months old. But it is a gift given freely none-the-less for us to accept.

In the Old Testament we see this type of love expressed in the story of Joseph. Sold into slavery by his brothers, rising to becoming second in command of Egypt, Joseph finally meets his brothers once again and shows his love through mercy and forgiveness.

If this is what God is like, then Jesus calls us to be like this as we show our family likeness, by displaying love through repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation in concrete action towards others.

On Friday there was a moving expression of this type of love on the News. You might remember the case of Aiden Sagala, a 21 year old who was given beer by his employer that was contaminated with methamphetamine, leading to his overdose death. On Friday, his Father, a Christian, stood up in court and said to the man who supplied the beer, "We forgive you".

Exceptional Love

As we hear the list of examples Jesus gives,

- Turning the other cheek in response to a slap – a sign of insult and rejection
- The taking of clothing, symbolising the willingness to be vulnerable
- Giving to those in need and lending without the expectation of profit indicating generosity
- Honest practices in business

we realise that Jesus is not asking us to put ourselves in dangerous situations, although that might be the case in extraordinary situations. Jesus is calling for our heart response by placing our trust in God as we show love to others, confident that God is watching over us.

The overriding ethic which Paul describes that echoes the words of Jesus, is for us not to repay evil with evil – which is the way of the world - but to repay evil with good. This is an extraordinary expression of love.

So, what are the challenges in our society and in our own lives that requires this display of exceptional love? Who are the “enemies” we are called to show love to?

As we look at the world, our society and our lives, we can summarise many of these as a growing “Us and Them” mentality:

- becoming both more individualistic and more nationalistic.

- Caring for the vulnerable including migrants and refugees;
- The growing gap between rich and poor;
- Issues of identity and gender diversity that are at the forefront of our culture.
- How we deal with crime....the list goes on

The differences in our society are not opportunities for hate – rather these are the opportunities to demonstrate the exceptional love that Jesus has shown us.

After all, God is generous to all people. He provides good things for all to enjoy, the un-deserving as well as the deserving. He is astonishingly merciful, so how can we as forgiven children be any less. Only when people discover that this is the sort of God they are dealing with will they have any chance of making this way of life their own.

This is no less challenging on a personal level

As Bishop NT Wright states:

- Think of the best thing you can do for the worst person and go ahead and do it.
- Think of what you would really like someone to do for you, and do it for them.
- Think of the people to whom you are tempted to be nasty, and lavish generosity on them instead....

The point of love that Jesus taught and demonstrated is an attitude of heart in the face of all that the world can throw at you. Jesus remains both our example and source of strength for the Christian life that is applicable in all situations, so we can choose to love God and each other just as God loves us.

Conclusion:

Finally, there are two astonishing things about the instructions Jesus gives us about love:

- first their simplicity - they are obvious, clear, direct and memorable.
- second their scarcity - how many people do you know who really live like this; how many communities do you know where these guidelines or rules of life are followed. “Imagine” what that would look like – sorry John Lennon you didn’t come up that one first either.
- Has God changed or have we forgotten who God really is.

At the heart of Jesus’ words is the basing of our Christian behaviour on the loving and merciful character of God. To be his child is not only to be bought into a relationship where God has forgiven us; it is the beginning of a process of reflecting God’s character to the world. God is generous, and extravagantly merciful, gracious and loving. How can we, his forgiven children be any less.

Amen.