

# HOW TO LOVE LIKE JESUS

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**MATTHEW 5:43-48**

**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**

**BY: RYAN DUECK**

**SEPTEMBER 3, 2017/13<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

One of the problems that I regularly have is finding a good title for my sermon. Very often, I will get near the end of writing a sermon, and I'll feel reasonably good about it, but I won't for the life of me be able to think of a title.

More often than I would prefer, Friday finds me sitting at my desk looking a good sermon with a bad title (or no title). Or at least what I *think* is a good sermon. There may be other opinions on the matter, I know... ☺

At any rate, this week, I had the opposite problem.

I thought of the sermon title that you see in your bulletins near the end of June as I was putting together the summer preaching schedule.

*Living with Diversity: How to Love Your Neighbour Without Turning Them Into an Idol.*

I thought it was a good title. I thought it would be a way of ending of our summer worship series with a bang.

I thought it would be a rather humorous way into critiquing a common tendency I see out there in the broader culture to turn love into something that is very often little more than a harmless preference for words like "tolerance" and "diversity."

And so all week long, I laboured to produce a sermon worthy of what I imagined was a pretty good title. It was clever enough to draw a few sarcastic comments from Kevin about how he hoped my sermon wasn't as long as the title, so it had to be worth something, right?

And then on Friday... and Saturday... and even early this morning, I found myself sitting at my desk with a good sermon title and a what I was quite convinced was a bad sermon.

I was trying to force two passages together that didn't fit. I had all kinds of things to say about idolatry from Psalm 115. I had all kinds of what I thought were interesting points about how we, as human beings, can turn even something as beautiful as love of neighbour into a form of self-worship, about how we can make even something as other-focused as love mostly about ourselves.

But as I read it over, I found that I had little interest in scolding anyone or telling you to be careful how you love. The idea of standing up here and warning us all about loving the wrong way seemed like a bit of a fool's errand.

It's not that I don't think human beings are eminently capable of inserting selfishness and idolatry into even something as beautiful as love. I think this is very possible.

It's just that I found that once I had written that sermon, I had very little interest in preaching it.

I had no desire to critique any of our efforts to love, even when they go off track a bit, as they obviously do. Surely the world could do with more love, even if it's not always or perfect love, right?

So, at 6:30 this morning, with a tiny amount of sadness, I abandoned my clever sermon title. I deleted the majority of my sermon and decided to go back to the beginning, literally and theologically.

This morning's sermon will be called simply, "How to Love Like Jesus."

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Way back in July, at the outset of this series, I stood here and said that I was going to be roughly saying the same thing every Sunday: Love your neighbour as yourself.

And that's pretty much what I've done. Whether it's in relation to those who don't look like us or believe like us or live like us, whether it's to our fellow citizens or to the person across the aisle in church, our task as Christ's followers is to love. Full stop.

This morning, I think Jesus' words at the end of Matthew 5 encapsulate our summer theme very well.

*If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? (Mat. 5:46)*

This, in a nutshell, is the big takeaway from our entire summer series.

As human beings our default tendency is always toward the path of least resistance. And it's easy and natural to love those who are easy to love.

Those who love us, who speak well of us, who support and encourage us. Those who reflect our values back to us and validate them. Those who we find safe, unthreatening, predictable.

Those who think like us, look like us, act like us. Those who believe the things we do.

These people are not hard to love.

But Jesus consistently pushes us beyond our default tendency.

Throughout his ministry Jesus embodied this. He told stories about Samaritans and lost sons who had scandalously ruined their dads' reputation.

He reached out to women (a strange thing to do at the time) and Roman centurions and synagogue leaders and lepers and misfits and prostitutes and tax collectors.

He set free those in bondage to evil spirits. He befriended outcasts.

He pushed people to move beyond the idea that God is for me, but not for you.

And of course, the climactic moment in the story is where Jesus stretches out his arms on a cross in a expression of suffering love for his friends and for his enemies, for his own people and for all of humanity, forgiving even those who had driven the nails into his hands.

Anybody can love those who love them. Even *tax collectors*, Jesus says, appealing to what was evidently a nearly universally despised category of people.

You want to do something totally radical, something that will make those around you scratch their heads in bewilderment, something that on the face of it seems laughably impractical?

You want to do something that has the possibility of putting a stop to the endless recycling of hostility and violence?

You want to do something that will change the world?

Love your enemies.

In extending the love of neighbour commandment to include even enemies, Jesus is essentially telling us that there is *nobody* that falls outside the boundaries of love. Nobody.

Those who love like this, are the ones that Jesus calls children of his Father in heaven.

Jesus is doing more than just setting up an impossible ideal. He's not just giving us a really hard new set of laws, even though it might seem this way, at times. We have enough trouble loving our neighbours, after all! How are we supposed to love our enemies?!

What we must always, *always* remember is that Jesus asks nothing *of* us that he did not first show *for* us. The love that Jesus asks of his followers is the very nature of the love that God has for every human being on the planet, including you and me. It is the kind of love that he demonstrated in the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

As American pastor Brian Zahnd is fond of saying, "Jesus is what God has to say." Full stop.

Jesus doesn't show us the nice side of God to balance out the angry Old Testament God. Jesus isn't an interlude in the life of God, where God sets aside his usual harshness to talk about love.

Jesus is the definitive statement about what God is like, the clearest picture of God we will ever get. The exact representation of God's very being, as Hebrews 1 puts it.

Speaking of Brian Zahnd, his new book came in the mail this week. It's called *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God: The Scandalous Truth of the Very Good News*. He's quite a bit better with titles than I am. 😊

The image on the cover of Zahnd's book is the one that has been on the screen throughout my sermon this morning. It's by an artist named Cody Miller and I think it is a beautiful visual representation of the kind of love Jesus modeled for us and asks of us.

The title of Zahnd's book is a riff on a famous 18<sup>th</sup> century sermon by Jonathan Edwards called, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. In Edwards' version, God is very, very angry at you. Your sins are a filthy stench in the holy nostrils of God. God would be fully justified in torturing you for an eternity—indeed, God right now you are dangling over the pit of hell and God is poised and ready to drop you and all the world's sinners, unless you repent!

The sermon scared the hell out of people on July 8, 1741 and it has been scaring the hell out of people ever since.

This is the theology and the picture of God that Brian Zahnd and many American evangelicals grew up on. It's probably more severe than many of our experiences, but I know that some of us, too, grew up with the image of a very severe God who was always ready to smack us if we did something wrong or if we believed the wrong things or whatever.

The question Zahnd is asking in his book is a simple one. Is this what God is like? Unsurprisingly, the answer turns out to be a resounding, "No!" No, this *is* not what God is like.

There are parts of the bible that when taken in isolation can make it seem that way. But as Christians, we believe that Jesus is what God has to say. Jesus is God's last word on what God is like.

Here's what Zahnd says:

Even a casual reader of the Bible notices that between the alleged divine endorsement of genocide in the conquest of Canaan and Jesus' call for love of enemies in his Sermon on the Mount, something has clearly changed! What has changed is not God but the degree to which humanity has attained an

understanding of the true nature of God. **The Bible is not the perfect revelation of God; Jesus is.** Jesus is the only perfect theology. Perfect theology is not a system of theology; perfect theology is a person. Perfect theology is not found in abstract thought; perfect theology is found in the Incarnation. Perfect theology is not a book; perfect theology is the life that Jesus lived.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus is what God has to say. And Jesus not only taught the most radical love the world has ever seen, he lived it. All the way to the end. All the way to *his* end.

Which of course turned out to be not an end at all, but a beginning. A beginning that it is the task of the church to joyfully proclaim and live in our relationships with all those around us.

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And so as our summer series draws to a close, I simply want to say, love your neighbours in the same way that Jesus *has* loved and *continues* to love you.

As Christians, the only way we will be bound together inside the church to our fellow Christians, and outside the church to our neighbours and our fellow citizens, is through embodying the perfect love of Jesus in all our relationships.

*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Mat. 5:48)*

We see that word “perfect,” and our radar goes off. Who can be perfect? Not me, certainly.

But the Greek word translated “perfect” is *teleos*, which can also mean “complete” or “mature.” It can point to the idea of, “finding fulfillment” or “becoming what a thing was designed for.”

A mature and complete human being is one who is always in the process of being drawn to and perfected by the love of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Zahnd, *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God: The Scandalous Truth of the Very Good News* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook, 2017) 31.

A person who is becoming what they were made to be is a person who is always seeking to expand the boundaries of love, refusing to stop with just loving those who are like us, because we know that this is not the way that God, in Christ, loves us.

A person who is becoming what a human being was designed to be is someone who is governed less and less by fear and more and more by love.

A few years ago, I spoke at a young adults retreat out in the Crowsnest Pass. During our sessions, I reflected on what it means to be “set apart” for Jesus and, more specifically, what it is that ought to set us apart as Christians.

I tried to make the case that it is not the correctness of our theology or the devotion we have for Scripture or our ethics or any of the other things that we scramble to do or think to secure our own salvation, but our capacity *for* and willingness *to* give and receive love.

Love can be a surprisingly tough sell.

In a number of sessions, I noticed an undercurrent of fear behind many of the questions that were being asked. Fear of getting it wrong, fear of failing to give non-Christians the “right information” when discussing faith, fear of being on the wrong side of theological controversies, fear of apparently harsh passages in Scripture, fear of hell, of being on the outside looking in, of not measuring up. Fear, fear, fear.

On the last session of the weekend, we spent some time in 1 John 4, one of my favourite passages in all of Scripture. Near the end of this passage John says these words:

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: **In this world we are like Jesus.** There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

It strikes me as more than a little ironic that Christians have so often adopted general postures toward the world, to those who are different, to social issues that are fear-based rather than love-based.

What does this say about the status of our “being made perfect,” our “like Jesus-ness,” our “completeness?”

Would it be too much of a stretch to say that the existence of followers of Jesus who consistently allow fear to dictate our responses and reactions to complex social, theological, political, hermeneutical realities represents a far greater failure than missing the mark on any test of orthodoxy that we could ever devise?

There is a marvellous passage in Henri Nouwen’s book, *Lifesigns* that puts it like this:

When we consider how much our educational, political and social lives are geared to finding answers to questions born of fear, it is not hard to understand why a message of love has little chance of being heard. Fearful questions never lead to love-filled answers... Fear engenders fear. Fear never gives birth to love.

No, it doesn’t.

And those of us who believe that God *is* love—not that God acts loving most of the time, or is really, really loving compared to most other deities, or that God prefers love over other alternatives, but that love describes God’s very identity... and that God seeks love from his children, and that the world was created in and for love and is leading toward a future reality where love will be the final word on our whole story... We ought to know this better than anyone else.

We, of all people ought to be those whose approach to the pain and confusion and complexity of the world is to be governed by a defiant and determined conviction that love is deeper, stronger, and more durable than the petty fears that naturally rise up within us.

We, of all people, ought to be those who know that fear is ultimately no match for the love that is not just a nice-sounding word or a poetic gesture toward our highest ideals, but the final truth about who God is and about what God wants.

We, of all people, ought to know and live and proclaim this glorious truth—that love is how God’s children are perfected, how we become what we were made to be, how we are like Jesus in this world.

Amen. May it be so.

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