

A LOVE THAT DOESN'T GIVE UP

1 PETER 4:8

If you could distill the Christian life into its most essential component—it would be *love*. You have only to be a casual reader of the New Testament to find out that love is the basic motive and the basic ethic of the Christian faith (H. Robinson). Just before He left the earth the Lord said to His disciples, “*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another*”. He went on to say, “*It is by this that all men will know that you are my disciples: if you love one another*” (John 13:34-35). Not, “if you think and act alike.” Not, “if you say the right things.” Not, “if you have all your doctrinal ducks in a row.”

The badge of Christian discipleship is *love*. Love is *the* defining characteristic—the identifying mark of the child of God. If we do not love, said Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, it doesn't matter how skilled or gifted or eloquent or knowledgeable we are, we are nothing, and our service counts for nothing (vv.1-3).

But that's where the rub is. Because the kind of love He's talking about is not an easy thing to do.

A wise old sage once wrote, “*To live one day with saints above, oh, that will be glory! To live right now with saints below, well, that's a different story.*”

I have known pastors who love to study and love to preach. They go to a bookstore and they're like Pavlov's dogs—they salivate. Get them talking theology and you can't shut them up. Discuss the nuance of a Greek word and their face lights up. But talk to them about the people they are shepherding, and the smile suddenly fades and their expression sours.

Likewise, I know some on the mission field who are more than happy to live in the most remote, hostile places on the planet, who are brilliant linguists and masterful strategists, but who can't for the life of them get along with other missionaries.

What's wrong? It's very simple. People, being people, are not always easy to love. People fail and disappoint with a disturbing degree of frequency. People have quirks and idiosyncrasies. People have edges on their personalities. People do things that you don't like and that you'd rather not deal with. People *hurt* you.

We all know this. Which is precisely why the New Testament talks so often about our need to love and the need to *keep on* loving. For loving other people, including the ones you don't like, or the ones who have disappointed you over and over, or the ones who have offended you and hurt you deeply—loving them unconditionally—is *the* most challenging, *the* most difficult, *the* most unnatural thing for anyone to do.

Am I right? Think about it. It is not terribly difficult to be orthodox in our doctrine, or to be active in our service, or to use our spiritual gifts, or even to give our resources. But to love people who grate on me? To build and esteem and honor and promote the welfare of that person who doesn't respect me or like me? To want what's best and to *pursue* what's best for that individual who's been a perpetual burr under my saddle?

That's hard. But that's what makes this a distinctively “Christian” virtue. By that I mean there are simply no other people on the face of the earth who are capable of doing this, besides followers of Jesus—and I'll tell you why later. But that's what *is* possible, and that's what is *expected* of Christians.

The authors of the New Testament talk about this all throughout their writings, and Peter is no exception. He addressed it early in his first letter when he said, “*Now that you*

have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart” (1:22). Then in chapter 4 he repeats this imperative and expands on what it means. He says in **verse 8**. *“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.”*

Keep in mind that Peter has just finished telling his audience that the end of all things is near (v. 7). God has completed His redemptive work in the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, and so the stage is set for Jesus to return to this earth and finish what He started. He will completely vanquish evil and establish His visible kingdom of righteousness. And this could happen at any time.

So Peter gives some instructions about how we ought to live in preparation for Jesus’ imminent return. He tells us in verse 7 that prayer is essential. Prayer is a way that we tune our minds and hearts to spiritual realities. It is a way to connect and commune with our heavenly Father. It is a way to tap into His power and obtain His provision. In short, we prepare for the end by attending to our vertical relationship with God.

But Peter says we also prepare for the end by attending to our horizontal relationships—specifically our relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ. Just as our relationship with God is precious to Him, so also our relationships with each other are precious to Him. So much so, that He doesn’t want there to be any walls between us. He says, *Above all, love each other deeply*. Notice the priority of love. It is to be at the top of the list.

But what does *love* mean? The word for love is probably familiar to you. It is the word **agape**—which is a word that describes an act of the will, rather than a feeling. It is a choice to pursue the highest good of another, no matter what—no matter what they do to us and no matter how they make us feel. And, particularly in this context, it is a choice to move *toward* someone, rather than *away* from him/her, when that person has wronged or disappointed or hurt you in some way. It is a choice to pursue reconciliation with that person so there is peace and harmony.

Agape is the New Testament word that expresses the highest and deepest expression of love that is possible, but Peter uses another word in verse 8 that adds even more depth to the quality of this love. He says, *“Above all, love each other deeply...”* Actually the word *“deeply”* is not a very good translation of the Greek word. The word literally means *“tense, stress, strain.”* It has the idea of intensity, fervency, and earnestness.

In ancient literature the word was used to describe the taut muscles of an athlete when he was in the most strenuous part of competition. A weightlifter who has the bar under his chin and was straining every muscle to press the iron all the way; a runner who turned it on at the end of the race and strained for the finish line. The word was also used of a horse made to go at full gallop.

Peter is saying, “Brothers and sisters, put some horsepower in your love. Love each other strenuously, not just with your heart, but with your strength. Not just with your affections, but with your will.” This is a love that doesn’t quit until it has achieved the desired result. It’s a love that hangs in there with someone and doesn’t hold back or withdraw or give up, but keeps moving toward that person. It’s a love that is willing to go all the way to the finish line and hurdle any obstacle along the way for the sake of another.

What’s your natural reaction when someone offends you? When someone injures your pride? How about when a person incessantly irritates you? Or disappoints you time after time?

I know what I *naturally* want to do. I want to say, “Who needs you?” I want to move away from that person. I want to put that relationship on the back burner, or perhaps even in the trash bin. I naturally want to give that person a piece of my mind.

As you know, conflict and tension and disappointment are unavoidable parts of life. But if you're a Christian, it's not acceptable to have a *natural* response. Let me repeat: it's not acceptable to have a *natural* response, which is defensiveness, withdrawal, irritation, resentment, or bitterness.

We are called; we are commanded to have a *supernatural* response, which is love. You see, we have the capability of possessing a love that is not conditional, not easily offended, and keeps no record of wrongs. When Peter commanded us to love deeply in chapter 1 (v.22) he told us that we have the capacity to love because we have been “born again” (1:23). We have the Holy Spirit living in us. He is our new operating system, and He enables us to love with Christ’s love. And that's a love that can withstand pressure and pain. It can endure the blows. Why? Because it's *tense*.

When I was growing up I couldn't afford to relax. That's because my twin brother and I had a mutual understanding. Simply stated: it was open season, all day...every day...including weekends and holidays. Now we never hit each other in the face, but anytime was an appropriate time to haul off and land a blow in the stomach.

When you get punched with enough force when your stomach is relaxed, you're through. It knocks the wind out of you, causes you to double over, and puts you in a vulnerable position for him to finish you off. But if your stomach is tense, his fist will just bounce off the muscle, it hardly hurts at all, and you can return the favor.

So we learned to walk around with our stomach muscles tightened.

The kind of love Peter is talking about doesn't get the wind knocked out of it easily...it can endure the blows. Because it's tense.

People, being who they are, are going to hurt us. People are sinners. It's in their nature to fail, to disappoint, and to offend. That's not the issue. The issue is how we respond to that offense, and that all depends on whether or not we possess this fruit of the Spirit—*love*.

And this love is powerful. It not only survives difficulty and disappointment, it changes them. Because love is the catalyst for healing and resolution.

That's what Peter talks about in the next part of the verse. **Verse 8b** *Love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.*”

The word translated “*cover over*” was a word that was used when someone dug a grave and then “covered” the corpse with dirt. In other words, it means “to bury.” Notice, he doesn't say, “love ignores...” or “love sweeps it under the rug...” or “love pretends it never happened.” Those are ways in which a lot of people deal with conflict, but there's never any resolution in those methods. It may seem like an easy way out, but it's like putting a Band-Aid on a tumor—it doesn't do a bit of good.

No, love almost always deals with an offense head on. It doesn't minimize it, and it doesn't make it bigger than it really is. It faces the issue squarely in the eye and calls it what it is—a real problem, a real hurt, a real barrier that needs to be broken down. And in the process of dealing with it honestly and openly there can be resolution. And that resolution is called *forgiveness*.

Forgiveness strikes a deathblow to any offense and buries it forever. Forgiveness is the funeral of that offense. And if you are a Christian, you will be conducting funerals on a regular basis—perhaps even a daily basis.

I'd like to submit to you that there is nothing more incongruent than a Christian who won't forgive, a Christian who holds a grudge, or a Christian who is harboring resentment or bitterness. And I know of nothing that produces greater spiritual paralysis.

Yet we see it all the time. In my experience this is one of the greatest problems in the church today, and one of the biggest reasons why churches are so ineffective in advancing the kingdom of Christ. It's because there are fractured, broken down relationships and people are not attending to them.

And yet these people wonder why there's no joy in their relationship with the Lord, why their prayers seem to hit the ceiling and go no further, why they're stuck or discouraged or defeated.

It's because they've fallen into the devil's trap.

Do you remember the passage in Ephesians about not giving the devil a foothold? Do you know the context? The context is an unforgiving spirit—letting the sun go down while you're still angry (Eph. 4:26-27).

I want to make two statements that are pretty strong, but please hear me out. *1. People who won't forgive are shaking hands with the devil.* They are inviting him to have a foothold in their lives; they are giving him an element of control and influence over their minds that he *will* exploit in order to wreak havoc in their lives. I know people whose spiritual lives and influence have been destroyed by the devil because they wouldn't forgive. He turned that resentment into bitterness until they were spiritual invalids. And either they didn't know it, or they got to a point where they didn't care.

2. People who won't forgive are strangers to God's grace. Either they've never experienced it or they've forgotten what it's all about. They've failed to grasp the magnitude and the ugliness and filth of their own sin. They've never really seen the offensiveness of that sin before a holy God who was under no obligation to forgive; who had every right to send them to everlasting punishment.

Isn't it absurd to think that I could hold a grudge against someone for a relatively minor debt, in comparison with the debt God pardoned for me?

Listen to what Jesus says in **Matthew 6:14-15**. *For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*

Some of us read this and want to say, "Jesus didn't *really* mean that God wouldn't forgive you. I mean, God is a God of grace. God loves us unconditionally. I know these verses *seem* to suggest that my forgiveness of others is a *condition* of His forgiveness of me—that *if* I forgive others God will forgive me but if I don't forgive others God will not forgive me. But Jesus is obviously using hyperbole or some other figure of speech because God's grace supersedes *everything*."

When you read a passage like this, even a passage that is so seemingly severe, don't try to spin it. Don't try to spin it to fit into your theology, let *it* shape your understanding of God and how He thinks and feels.

What Jesus is saying is that when I do not forgive another person when he/she sins against me—when I refuse to let go of that hurt, when I insist on nursing a grudge or harboring resentment so that there is a wall between me and that person, then there will be

a wall between me and God as well. In other words, when I refuse to extend grace to others, God's grace, to some degree, stops flowing to me.

You may have valid reasons to be angry and hurt, but you have no *right* to hold on to it. You gave up your rights when you received God's grace and God's forgiveness. And as long as you're holding on to that hurt it *is* a debilitating problem for you, and it will remain a problem until you release it to the Lord.

You say, "Man, I just can't!"

Yes you can. If God's Spirit lives in you, you can indeed. You see, your forgiveness of others is a supernatural response to God's grace in forgiving you. It is also the M.O. of the operating system that was installed in you when you put your faith in Jesus. I'm referring to the Holy Spirit who dwells in you, and enables you to be like Jesus who, when He was being abused and brutalized and shamed upon the cross, said, "*Father, forgive them for they don't know what they're doing.*"

Friend, don't take this lightly. If you are holding a grudge or harboring resentment in your heart, you must confess it and repent. You must get out pick and shovel and start digging a hole, for love buries a multitude of offenses.

So let's get practical. How do you actually bury an offense? What does forgiveness look like and how do you know if you've really forgiven? A few years ago someone from our church wrote the following testimony that explains how this works in real life.

One night I was really mad at my wife. I don't remember what I was mad about, but I was so mad I couldn't sleep. I began thinking about other times that she made me mad in the past. The bitterness in me got bigger and bigger, and kept me from seeing my wife as the beautiful person that she is. I was miserable. I tossed and turned in bed as the bitterness tormented me. Jesus wanted me to let go of my anger and forgive my wife. I didn't want to let go, I didn't know how to let go, and I didn't want to forgive her. God wanted me to be happy with her. I didn't want to be happy with her. I was mad at her and I wanted her to hurt! Every time I closed my eyes, tormenting pictures of the things that made me mad, would start dancing in front of me, getting me more miserable and mad. I cried out to the Lord in my heart, "Lord, help me. Help me to forgive my wife, help me to want to forgive my wife!"

In my despair the Lord brought to my mind Jesus dying on the cross. He reminded me that my selfish me, of unforgiveness and bitterness, had been nailed to the cross with Him. That my life wasn't my own anymore, but belonged to Jesus. That the part of me that says "no" to Jesus, and gets mad at my wife, was crucified with Him on the cross. I wanted to say yes to Jesus, but I wanted my wife to hurt too.

I thought, OK Jesus, I'm going with you. I turned and left those tormenting thoughts and pictures that were dancing gleefully in front of me. I went over to Jesus' side. I said "yes" to Jesus about His Word in Galatians 2:20 that says that the "mad, unforgiving" me, has been "crucified with Christ; that it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me..." I visualized my old sinful nature with my bitterness being put to death with Jesus on the cross, and that it was not myself, but that it was Jesus that lived in me now.

I grabbed that truth and took it to the place where the tormenting thoughts had been tempting me. The area was vacant. It was completely clean. Not one tormenting thought was left. I felt no bitterness anymore. I felt free! It felt like I had been released from prison! I looked over at my sleeping wife who was so peaceful and lovely. I was overwhelmed with

love for her. I wanted to protect her and do kind things for her. I wanted good for her and not bad. I wanted to throw my arms around her and tell her how much I loved her.

As I lay there, I felt something else happen. I felt God's covering of blessing and protection come and rest over my home. In Eph. 4:27 I am told, "do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold". Satan no longer had a foothold in my home through which he could harm my family. Jesus had freed me from the bitterness that bound me. Now He was free to love and protect my family through me.

I lay there in perfect peace, perfectly in love with my precious wife, in a home secure in Jesus' power, and filled with His love.

Isn't that beautiful? This is a great illustration that when we have been hurt there is a fierce battle going on between the flesh—the remnants of our old sin nature—that wants to nurse that grudge and look for ways to retaliate, and the Spirit—our new nature—who wants to move toward that offender and forgive. This story illustrates that forgiveness is a choice to surrender our hurt feelings to the Lord. It's a choice to go with Jesus, and get on Jesus' side. And the story illustrates that forgiveness isn't something we wait to do when our feelings have changed toward the person. Our feelings change *when* we obey the Lord and choose to forgive. And that change of heart is from the Lord Himself. The Spirit of God who lives within us—the Spirit who is the Author and Source of love—changes the way we feel toward those who have hurt us.

You say, "But shouldn't the person who has hurt me apologize? Shouldn't he/she ask *me* for my forgiveness? Sure. The person should. But don't count on the fact that he/she will. And don't wait for him/her to do it.

Agape is a choice to pursue the highest good of another, no matter what—no matter what they do to us and no matter how they make us feel. And, particularly in this context, it is a choice to move *toward* someone, rather than *away* from him/her, when that person has wronged or disappointed or hurt us in some way. Whether they confess their wrong or not. Because agape love is unconditional. It is an act of obedience to the Lord who loves us unconditionally, and gave us the capacity to love others unconditionally.

I am under no illusions about how difficult it is to forgive. It's one of the hardest things in the world to do. Which is why we can only truly forgive when we are filled and controlled by God's Spirit, who is then able to express through us this love that is so deep that it can bury a multitude of sins.

A LOVE THAT DOESN'T GIVE UP 1 PETER 4:8

MAIN IDEA: OUR LOVE MUST GO ALL THE WAY TO THE FINISH LINE AND HURDLE ANY OBSTACLE ALONG THE WAY

THE BADGE OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

“*ABOVE ALL*”: THE PRIORITY OF LOVE

“*AGAPE*”: THE MEANING OF LOVE

“*DEEPLY*”: PUTTING HORSEPOWER IN YOUR LOVE

“*LOVE COVERS OVER*”: THE ACTIVITY OF SPIRITUAL GRAVE DIGGING
DEALING WITH AN OFFENSE HEAD ON

FORGIVENESS IS THE FUNERAL OF THE OFFENSE
A PERSON WHO WON'T FORGIVE IS SHAKING HANDS WITH THE DEVIL

A PERSON WHO WON'T FORGIVE IS A STRANGER TO GOD'S GRACE

FORGIVENESS IS A SUPERNATURAL ABILITY
THE BATTLE BETWEEN FLESH AND SPIRIT

THE CHOICE TO BE SPIRIT-CONTROLLED

