

**“Choosing To Love”**

In some ways we could make this sermon very short. I won't! But we could. We could simply repeat the last verse, verse 21. “And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother (or sister).” It is that simple. It is that direct. It is not an encouragement. It is a command. It is not a suggestion. It is an order. And if we are soldiers of Jesus Christ (which is one of the definitions of being a Christian), then it is clear that we have received an unambiguous directive from our Master, and it is ours but to obey. Sir, yes sir!

But wait a minute, someone might object. You are using all this military language, all this chain of command stuff; and you are talking about love. Love isn't like that. Love is something you either feel for someone or you don't I mean, you could say, I command you to love so-and-so!” But that doesn't mean I will actually love that person. I could go through the motions, I suppose, but you cannot command someone to love other people any more than you can command

someone to like the taste of brussel sprouts. You cannot tell someone that from here on out their favorite flavor of ice cream will be licorice. I mean, you can say it, but that won't make it so. And you can tell someone to love other people, but you can not make it an order.

Aye, but there's the rub, my friends in Christ: God has made it an order, a command. And we are stuck with it whether we like it, or not, whether we agree with it, or not. And unless we are feeling awfully full of ourselves (dangerously cheeky, in fact) we can no more begin to debate the issue than we could reasonably respond to the commandment, "Thou shalt not commit adultery", by saying, "I am really on board with that, Lord, unless I meet a really attractive person, and if they are interested.... Well, I have to tell you, all bets would be off. I mean, let's be realistic, Lord! You see, we wouldn't say that. We don't debate the relative merits of the Ten Commandments. They are commandments! And brothers and sisters in Christ, so is our obligation to love one another. It is not up for debate. God is not waiting for our input. He is waiting for our obedience. He did not ask us to reflect and respond to it as though it

**was some kind of policy initiative currently under consideration. He said we must. And therefore, we must.**

**So now what? We have been raised in a culture that has insisted in ten thousand movies and books that love is a feeling. You either feel it or you don't. And that feeling has an inexorable quality that cannot be stopped. It is as undefiable as gravity. And that is how we talk about it. "I couldn't help it: I fell in love!" And how can anyone avoid falling in love? And conversely, if you don't love somebody, it is hardly a feeling I can manufacture. I mean, that wouldn't be real. And let me tell you something: our culture is exactly right ... if love is primarily a feeling.**

**But that is not, what the Bible says. The Bible makes it clear, over and over again, that love is primarily a decision we make; not a feeling that overcomes us. Love is a decision we make with regard to how we will interact with other people. Now look, I think I am an unabashed romantic. I love love. I love poetry. I love great, sweeping stories of epic relationships. But I think God is saying to folks like me, "Look, if you want romance, read 'Romeo and Juliet'. I am not**

**askign you to fall in love with anybody. I am telling you to make a commitment with regard to how you will interact with your brothers and sisters in Christ, for the rest of your natural life.**

**So, you see, the issue has shifted. In order to get this passage right, we have to stop thinking along the lines of our cultural programming, and start thinking like men and women who are under the tutelage of the Word of God. Paul wrote in Romans 12:2, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.” So that’s what we are about here, folks. We are being trained to shift our perspective from love as an uncontrollable feeling, to the biblical perception that love is a decision we make and a commitment we live-out in our moment-to-moment interactions with other human beings.**

**And maybe another way to come at this would be to consider the mature reflections of one of the twentieth century’s most influential Christians; C.S. Lewis. Lewis, as you might already know, was not raised in a Christian home. His mother died when he was young. His**

**father was a somewhat formidable and distant figure, who sent him off to British boarding schools, and wasn't inclined to coddle him with affection. By the time he was in his mid-teens, C.S. Lewis was a convinced atheist who had little truck with the preposterous myths of Christianity. To make a long story short, it wasn't until he was thirty-one years old, that he finally became profoundly convinced that the remarkable thing about Christianity – the “myth” that God became a human being and died on the cross in our stead – actually, really happened. But once he became convinced, he became what one close friend described as “the most thoroughly converted man he had ever met.” (Don't we wish that could be said of us?)**

**At any rate, while Lewis became a profoundly changed man, and wrote some of the most persuasive books and arguments for Christianity in his generation, he nevertheless remained a somewhat emotionally reserved Oxford professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature. Then, in his fifties, after long decades of confirmed bachelorhood, he became friends with Joy Graham a divorced American woman with two children. It sounds bizarre, but, in order for her to be able to stay in England, he agreed to marry her, knowing**

that their relationship would remain strictly platonic, and that they would live in separate households. Well, two things happened that they didn't expect. She came down with a terminal case of cancer, and he grew to love her, deeply and profoundly. When her cancer went into a miraculous remission, they were married again – this time by an Anglican priest, and enjoyed three or so years of rapturous love as husband and wife, before the cancer reasserted itself and she died. In a wonderful movie about their relationship, called "Shadowlands" Lewis (played movingly by Anthony Hopkins) concludes the film with a voice-over narration that goes, "Why love, if losing hurts so much? I have no answers anymore, only the life I've lived. Twice in this life I've been given the choice, as a boy, and as a man. The boy chose safety, and the man chose suffering. The pain is part of the happiness. That's the deal."

You see, what Lewis came to realize as he matured in his Christian faith, is that love isn't primarily about hearts and flowers and Hallmark greeting cards. Those are all fine as far as they go, but in the end, love is about a decision we make with regard to how we will interact with another human being. And while we may reap some benefits

from that relationship, loving someone isn't primarily about what we will get from the relationship in terms of an emotional pay-off. It is about a decision to value that person's life, to recognize their worth in God's sight, even at their least attractive and most terrible moments. Talk to the parents of a newborn baby just home from the hospital. They would without hesitation be willing to lay down their lives for that baby, but let's be honest, it isn't because at that point the baby is capable or even interested in meeting their emotional needs. They value that child's life and they recognize his or her worth in God's sight, even though in those early months and years the child is not exactly contributing to the family's savings or helping out much around the house. Or talk to the parents of a teenager, on one of those days when the teenager is not, perhaps, exhibiting their greatest degree of, shall we say, other-centeredness. The parents, on those days, might be seeing cross-eyed or lapse into moments of temporary insanity, but I would lay you odds that even at those terrible moments, the parents would still walk through fire for that child, because they have a deep, internal valuing for that young man or woman that goes way beyond the behavior being manifested at the moment. And, we should say, when our children are able to forgive

**us for those hopefully rare but ugly moments when we act like jerks, it isn't because they have developed an affection for our jerkiness, but because they, too, hold a deep, often unspoken love for us, that transcends our worst days and our least attractive behaviors.**

**So the question is, why? Why are Christians persuaded that loving people in this “in spite of” way, is the way God would have us love other people? John says it in verses 9 through 11; “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”**

**Well, there you have it. In other words, God didn't fall in love with us because he found our sinfulness adorable, or because our rebellious ways kindled his affection. God chose to act in a loving manner toward us, because his valuation of us was such that he was not willing that any of us should perish – no, not one. His love, in fact, proved to be the most costly love that can be imagined. Greater love**

**hath no man than this: that he lay down his life for another. That is God's kind of love. It is an "in spite of" love that doesn't wait for us to be worthy of it. While we were yet sinners Christ died for us. That kind of love isn't about waiting for us to be loveable. It is a decision God made toward us when we were the least likely candidates for his love. You see, the world tells us that we should only love someone if we think they deserve it. And the Bible says, that is not the way of love. God's love for us was expressed on the cross, when the cross is precisely what we deserved. Instead, God made the decision to love us in a personally costly way, without any guarantees that you or I would give a fig, let alone love him back.**

**This is why the mature C.S. Lewis wrote, "To love is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative**

**to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell.”**

**Are we getting this? Love is a risky business. It will most certainly cost us more than we imagined. We will inevitably sustain hurts along the way. It cost God the life of his Son. But what is the alternative? To refuse to love is to place ourselves in our own self-manufactured hell. If we will only and ever choose safety over suffering, we may wind up with less scars, but we will just as certainly be smaller human beings, and possibly run the risk of not being recognizably human at all.**

**Remember that great quote from “The Velveteen Rabbit?” One child’s toy is talking to another and asks, “What is real? Asked the Rabbit one day. ‘Does it mean having, things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?’ ‘Real isn’t how you are made’, said the Skin Horse, ‘It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time – not just to play with, but really Loves you – then you become real.’**

**‘Does it hurt?’ asked the Rabbit. ‘Sometimes’, said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. ‘When you are real, you don’t mind being hurt’. ‘Does it happen all at once, like being wound up’, he asked, ‘or bit by bit?’**

**‘It doesn’t happen all at once’; said the Skin Horse. ‘You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept.’**

**‘Generally, by the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are real, you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.’”**

**Brothers and sisters in Christ, the Word of God pleads with us to choose to live out (right here in River City) the only kind of love that is worthy of the name Christian. We are being talked to here by God himself. “I’m talking to you”, he says to each of us. “Watch your mouth. And, yes, treat every person here even better than they deserve. Choose to behave toward them in a loving manner, because that is exactly what I have done for you, even when you were at your**

**worst. I'm not asking you to love this way. I'm telling you to do it.  
Today. All the time. From now on. Period." Amen? Amen.**