

Christians Under Construction
“Furnishing It with Love”

I John 4:7-18

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There’s a popular song which says:

*I’d like to build the world a home and furnish it with love,
Grow apple trees and honey bees, and snow white turtle doves.
I’d like to see the world for once all standing hand in hand,
And hear them echo through the hills for peace throughout the land.
Well, why not? Why not a life furnished with love?*

Over the last 30 days, nearly a thousand of you have been trying to build a life that really matters. You are earnestly seeking to put God first, to love others well, to become a devoted member of Christ’s Church. Some of you are finding this experiment more exciting than you imagined, more meaningful than you anticipated, more helpful than you hoped for. I know because you are writing me letters about it. I am reading every one of them. So today, I challenge you to build a life that really matters and “furnish it with love.”

This sermon can be reduced to six simple words. **God is love. Love one another.** All you need to know about theology and moral ethics can be reduced to those six words. Let us explore them a little further.

God is love. Consider THE LOVE OF GOD

*The love of God is greater far
Than tongue or pen can ever tell
It goes beyond the highest star
And reaches to the lowest hell.*

Love is not an attribute of God. Love is the essence of God. God is love. When God creates, He creates in love. When God rules, He rules in love. When God redeems, He redeems in love. When God judges, He judges in love. Every move God makes, every action God takes is an expression of God’s very being, which is love.

That is all more than my mind can comprehend. To think of this grubby tennis ball we call earth, set in the vast infinity of space; to consider our lives are just milliseconds in the outward surge of time; to ponder our individuality among the billions of human beings; and then affirm that God loves me is more than my small mind can fathom. That is exactly what the Bible says.

The love of God is UNEARNED. You can’t accomplish or achieve love. John Elderidge, in his new book, Waking the Dead, talks about the wounded heart of

his friend Abby. Listen to her story. “The assault started as a young girl. There was something about me that seemed to aggravate my father. Something that seemed to annoy him and repel him. As I grew older, I only seemed to become more frustrating to him. I would ask him a question about how he was doing, and I would watch as the look of annoyance filled his eyes. And I began to suspect that there was something deeply wrong with me, something that made me unlovable, undesirable. Something that was “too much” and “not enough.” I’ve met a lot of Abby’s in this world.

Though no one mentioned it, I assumed as a child that love was something you earned. However, by adolescence I became very angry that no amount of effort ever seemed to enlist those three magic words “I love you” from my father or mother. As a young adult my efforts only intensified. But no degree I earned, no sermon I preached, no award I received, no church I served ever seemed to be enough. It took me a long time to discover that love was not something we earn.

God is love. You don’t have to pester God to get His attention. You don’t have to grovel for God to be good to you. You don’t have to bite your lip, and groan or moan to show God you really mean business. For God in Christ Jesus has already demonstrated His love for you. God took the initiative. God is love.

The love of God is UNCONDITIONAL

It’s been years ago now, but I will never forget going with a mother to visit her teenage son in a county jail. He had done some things that he ought not to have done, and then made the mistake of running from the police which landed him in jail. The next day we walked into that dark, dingy, hole in the ground, to visit him. I watched in silence as that brokenhearted mother walked slowly up to the bars, then, putting her hands through them, pulled the face of her son as close as she could. Then, leaning against his cell she said, “Son, no matter what you have done, I want you to know that I love you, and I want the best for you.” Then, both of them began to cry. God loves us like a mother loves a child.

Brides like to have I Corinthians 13 read at their weddings. In the mystical moments of a wedding I suppose it is fair to wish for a spouse that is always patient and kind, never boastful nor proud, one who is not easily angered, who keeps no record of wrongs. In moments like that you wish for a love that always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. After 39 years of marriage, I must confess I have not always measured up to such a high standard to love. Sandy might say I have miserably failed at it. So I no longer read that chapter with my name in it. Howard does fail, can be rude, and is easily angered.

I Corinthians 13 describes the nature of God. God is patient and kind. God bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. He’s never failed us yet.

The love of God is UNENDING

Consider the affirmation of faith we used today, where Paul asks, “*Who shall*

separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No. In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who love us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

John says, *“There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear.”* So it does. There is no fear in life for God will never leave us nor forsake us. There is no fear in death for God has conquered death, and turned it into everlasting life. *What have I to dread, what have I to fear, leaning on the everlasting arms? I have blessed peace with my Lord so near, leaning on the everlasting arms.*

LET US LOVE ONE ANOTHER

The love of which I speak is neither the erotic passion of sex nor the sentimental ties of family. Christian love is the determination to do good, and not good only, but the highest good possible. Christians coined a word for it. They called it agape.

We can aspire to that kind of love because we have been loved in that sort of way. I'm not asking you to write a check on an account over drawn. I am asking you to drink at the fountain of God's grace until you have love like an ocean in your soul.

Love one another WHEN IT'S EASY

When I consider the love we have received from all of you the last two months, my heart is filled with gratitude. If heaven is any better than the healing service you held here two weeks ago on my behalf, then I am more than ready to go. Surely the presence of the Lord is filling this place. I can feel His mighty power and His grace. Our hearts overflow with love for each of you.

In the book, Tuesdays with Morrie, Morrie, who is dying with Lou Gherigs disease, says to his former student, Mitch, who is rubbing his back, “When we are infants we need people to survive. When we are dying we need people to survive. But here's the secret, Mitch. In between we need each other even more. We must love one another or we die.”

How different would our lives be if once we could really trust that simple acts of love make a world of difference? Think about it. Every little act of faithfulness, every gesture of love, every word of forgiveness, every bit of joy and peace, multiplied and multiplied as long as there are people to receive it. Imagine for a moment that our smiles and handshakes, embraces and affirmations are only the early signs of a world-wide community of love and peace.

Henri Nouwen used to say, “If ever we loved one another as God already loves us, the world would be a house of love.” Isn't that worthy of our prayers and deepest devotion?

Love one another WHEN IT'S HARD

Somebody is surely saying by now, "Yes, Howard, but your enemies didn't show up at your healing service." You don't get cards from people who despise you and criticize you. Are you asking us to be patient with people who have the warmth of a vulture and the tenderness of a porcupine? How can we forgive the money grubbers and the back stabbers we meet, love, marry and divorce?

I'm not asking you to do anything beyond the grace given to you. I just need to remind you that Johns says, *"If we say we love God and hate our brothers, we are liars."* Jesus said, *"If all you do is love the lovable, don't expect a bonus. Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run of the mill sinner does that. Maybe it's time to grow up and live out your God created identity."*

For a while, revenge was the rule. Do more to your enemies than they do to you. Then Moses came and said, Revenge is mine says the Lord, retribution is enough for you. So do not do more to others than they do to you, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Then Jesus came and said, You don't have to get'em back. There is no need to get even. With My grace, you can forgive and you can love. Is it not a better way to live?

Jim Moore tells the story about General Omar Bradley traveling on a commercial airline in a business suit. A young, gregarious private in the Army sat down beside the general and not recognizing him wanted to talk. You must be a banker, said the private. The general, in no mood for casual conversation with a private replied, "I am General Bradley, a 5 star general in the U.S. Army. I am head of the Joint Chief's of Staff at the Pentagon in Washington, D. C." "Well, sir," replied the kid, "that's a very important job. I hope you don't blow it."

When it comes to loving others as God first loved us, we have pretty important work to do. I sure hope we don't blow it.

Amen.