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John 3:16-18.

The Love of God.

¹⁶For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. ¹⁷For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. ¹⁸“He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Introduction.

This is the third of the three messages I have had the privilege of sharing with you at OIC over the Easter period. The three themes have been taken from 1st Corinthians 13:13, "And now abide faith, hope, and love, these three; but the greatest of these is love." This is the short list of only three things that will never be taken away from us for all eternity and today I want us to look together at the greatest of the three which is love. I think I need to make clear first and foremost that I am talking about love as it is taught in the Bible, i. e. agape love as it is called in the original Greek language of the New Testament. When we read in 1st Corinthians chapter 13: 4-8, the characteristics of this love, we soon begin to realise this is not the same thing as what the world talks about and sings about as love. The world talks about love as something based upon human sentiment which always looks for something in return so it is basically self centred, The love which the Bible teaches us is love that is based upon the decision of a person's will and is self sacrificing. To put it simply the Bible is talking about the love of God for us which is unlimited, and is most clearly expressed through the sacrifice of God's Son Jesus on the cross.

Today I would like to look together at some of the main characteristics of God's love.

1. Eternal Love.

Jeremiah 31:3. "The Lord has appeared of old unto me saying, Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; Therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you."

It is significant that this same chapter of Jeremiah 31 goes on to give us in V31-33, the promise of the New Covenant which would be sealed for us by the blood of the lord Jesus shed on the cross. The Blood of the Eternal Covenant of God's Eternal Love.

1st Corinthians 13:8. "Love never fails."

In the whole Bible there is only one promise that I know of which is unconditional and it clearly reveals Eternal unchanging Love.

Hebrews 13:5-6. "for He Himself has said, I will never leave you nor forsake you. So we may boldly say: the Lord is my helper; I will no fear. What can man do to me?"

All God's promises are yes and amen in Jesus to the Glory of God by us." but in order to prove them true for ourselves we have to fulfill the attached condition. e.g. Matthew 6:33. "Seek first the Kingdom of God and

His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you." Every promise has a condition attached, so until you fulfill the condition you won't know in your experience if it is true.

With Jesus' promise in Hebrews 13:5-6 there is nothing we have to do except watch as time goes by and we will find out that it is true. The more time passes by the more we experience that it is true. For me the most wonderful thing about this promise is not just the promise of the Lord's presence at all times, because that is only half of it. V6 explains what the Lord means by promising to be always with us. It isn't just to be there by our side while we struggle with all kinds of problems.

He promises to always be there as our Helper, so He is not only always by our side, He is always on our side. He is not only always with us, He is always for us. He is never against us even when we fail, because His love doesn't depend on our performance.

This is not always easy for us to believe because we tend to think on the level of human love that means when we fail Him as we all do at times, He is no longer on our side. We easily think that He will turn against us to do us harm because that is what we often see in the world with human love and we wrongly expect the same from God.

Testimony. (When I was a young Christian I thought how much God loves me depended on my performance as a Christian. I tried so hard to obey God perfectly that I fell into a legalistic religious Christian experience. It was so exhausting that I even reached the stage where I thought it would have been better if I had not become a Christian. It was the opposite of what Jesus taught when He said "Come unto me all who labour and are burdened and I will give you rest." Jesus' invitation was to free people from the exhausting legalistic religion of the Pharisees and give them rest for their souls. His invitation is still the same today for us but we can still fall into legalism even after becoming a Christian. Remember in Acts chapter fifteen this was the reason the first ever Christian Conference was called in Jerusalem. Also we should remember what the Apostle Peter stood up and said in that conference.

Acts 15:10-11. "Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?"

But we believe that through the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."

It is not supposed to be about legalistic religious performance but the free gift of God's Grace given to us in the Lord Jesus.

A good test to find out if you have fallen into that kind of legalistic religion is check how harsh and judgmental you are of others. That is what legalism always produces harsh, severe, judgmental people with little or no mercy for others.

That is why Jesus used some of His most severe words against those people and said to them you need to learn what this Scripture means "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." Matthew 9:13. This leads us into our 2nd point and 2nd main characteristic of God's Love.

2. Self Sacrificing Love.

John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son..."

The shortest word in this verse is so, but we should be very careful not to skip over it. This little word is emphasizing how much God loves us. When we think about how much God loves us, it is so much that He gave His one and only Son not just to be born into this world, but to suffer the most cruel, unjust, and agonizing death that anyone could ever experience. This love far surpasses what we are able to comprehend, or imagine, but it doesn't mean we cannot know God's love in our personal experience. Ephesians 3:19-20. " To know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God .

Now unto Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think,(also translated imagine) according to the power that works in us."

This sounds like a contradiction in terms. "To know the Love of Christ which passes knowledge." The Apostle Paul is praying that they will know the Love of God in all it's fullness in their personal experience. Every Christian knows the love of God to some extent through experiencing the forgiveness of sins. The more that we realise how much we have been forgiven the more we come to love the Lord Jesus. A beautiful example of self sacrificing love which Jesus said would be a told as testimony everywhere the gospel is preached.

Luke7:47.

This is what Jesus taught while having dinner at the house of Simon a Pharisee in Bethany. The woman who brought the alabaster box of precious ointment, and washed Jesus' feet with her tears loved Him so much because she knew how much she had been forgiven. Obviously, we don't have to sin more to grow in God's love, but the closer we get to the Lord Jesus the more deeply we become conscious of the depth of our own sinfulness.

For a Christian becoming more aware of the depths of our own sinfulness doesn't make us feel guiltier but more filled with thanksgiving and love for the Lord Jesus. So the Apostle Paul was praying that they would grow much closer to the Lord Jesus. We can all grow closer to the Lord Jesus by surrendering ourselves fully to Him, and when we do this we will know what it is to be filled to overflowing with His love. This woman was surrendering the most precious thing she had because she was filled to overflowing with love for Jesus. She did not think of it as a sacrifice but gladly surrendered it.

Just like God's Love surrendered His all for us, when we can are filled with His love we surrender our all for Him without thinking of it as a sacrifice.

1. Unconditionally Completely Forgiving Love.

1st Corinthians 13:5.

Unconditional Love also means unconditional forgiveness. The words at the end of V5 are probably the most difficult for us as Christians to put into practice and probably also the most misunderstood words in this whole passage about God's Love. "Love thinks no evil." Another way to translate these words is "love keeps no record of wrongs." It is actually talking about forgiveness that is total and unconditional. When Jesus prayed on the cross "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." He didn't pray "Father forgive them if they repent." It is very obvious they were not repentant when Jesus prayed for their forgiveness. So why do many churches teach us that as Christians we have no duty to forgive if the offender has not repented? Jesus didn't wait for us to repent before He prayed for our forgiveness. This is the most

powerful prayer ever prayed on this earth, and it was not only prayed by Jesus. Acts 7:60. Stephen the first Christian martyr prayed exactly the same prayer for those who were murdering him while they were completely unrepentant. History proves that God answered Stephen's prayer exceedingly abundantly above all he could ask or imagine, The chief persecutor was not only forgiven but became the first and greatest ever Christian missionary who wrote at least half the New Testament. Of course we only received God's forgiveness and reconciliation when we repented but God forgave our sin at the cross of Jesus around 2'000 years ago. We are commanded by God to forgive in exactly the same way as He did for us totally and unconditionally. Reconciliation requires the offender to accept the forgiveness offered, but forgiveness can be and must be unconditional if it is to be done in the same way as Jesus did it.

It may not be cool and it may not be popular but that is the example Jesus give us, and He used very clear and very strict words on this matter.

Matthew 6:14-15. It is the only thing in the whole Lord's prayer that Jesus repeated and emphasized very clearly.

This is definitely possible for every Christian because we can be filled to overflowing with God's love, if we fully surrender our lives to Him. Then being able to forgive each other completely and unconditionally becomes the most powerful witness. This is the one thing that is supposed to distinguish us as Christians from the world above all else.

Conclusion

The Greatest Love of All. When we put all these characteristics together it is clear that this is the greatest Love of all.

John 15:13. "Greater love has no one than this than to lay down one's life for his friends," Even human love can be self sacrificing and the greatest example of human love is when a person lays down their life for their friend, probably this is most easily understood in the context of a parent child relationship. Any of us who are parents probably feel we could lay down our lives for any of our children. However, human love would not sacrifice their own child for another person and especially not for an enemy. This is what God's love did for us and why it surpasses human understanding.

Romans5:8. "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Here we are told that the death of Jesus on the cross is where God has most clearly revealed His love for us, and it clearly says it was not when we were His friends. Now just in case anybody is still in doubt that God's love enabled Jesus to die not just for His friends but for His enemies, The Holy Spirit goes on in this passage to repeat in clearly in V10. "For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled we shall be saved by His life." Of course, none of us consciously chose to be God's enemies but that does not change the fact that the Bible states clearly that we were. It was when we were His enemies that Jesus died for us and when we come to understand this we understand for the first time the greatest love of all and where it is most clearly seen,

John13:34-35." A new commandment I give to you that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

V35 By this all men will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." As I have loved you. There is nothing new about the commandment to love one another that has been there since the 10 commandments, "Love your neighbour as yourself."

Jesus' new commandment takes it to a much higher level; Love each other as I have loved you."

Romans 5:5." Now hope does not disappoint because the Love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us."

If we fully surrender ourselves to God we can experience being filled to overflowing with God's love and we can love each other just the same way as Jesus has loved us.