

All You Need is Love – Part 5

by Rev. Robert Griffith

In the last sermon in this series I shared a story about a beautiful home which was built on a concrete foundation which was faulty and so, as the structure of the home grew during the building process, the weight finally challenged the weak foundations and it gave way - resulting in a major disaster. I then suggested that the foundation of our lives can be flawed in the same way if we have not really learned how to receive love and give love.

Another analogy which I think is helpful here is that of a circulatory system. If there's a 'bloodstream' to our emotional and spiritual life – then it has to be love. Love is what flows between us and God. Love is also what circulates between us and others around us.

Now you can do all kinds of great things - you can pray; you can read your Bible; you can volunteer in some community service, you can serve the Church in some leadership role; you can smile at people and bless them with acts of kindness - you can do whatever you feel the desire to do; but at the core of all those things should be *love*. Every legitimate ministry should be motivated and empowered by love and the source of that love is always and must always be God.

Now of course if there's something faulty in your blood, your whole body suffers as a result. You may get by for while - but put enough stress on your body and a faulty blood supply will bring your whole body down eventually. So too with our spiritual life.

If we don't truly understand the love of God or have never really learned how to receive the fullness of God's radical love, then sooner or later the weight of our life and the pressures upon us will challenge that core deficiency and our whole life, in spiritual terms at least, will be in real trouble.

Unfortunately, this truth can be so subtly disguised and even deliberately hidden by Satan. The enemy of God delights in impressive, outwardly magnificent lives. He convinces us that who we are on the outside is all that life is about. He does not want us to examine our foundations or what is at the core of our being.

If that foundation of God's love has not been firmly established, if that life's blood of God's love is not flowing into us and then through us, then eventually we will see all kinds of problems emerge in our lives. They might be physical problems, or emotional and relational struggles; anger, jealousy, lust or destructive attitudes may emerge; performance orientation can take over which may give rise to compulsive work habits; a spirit of criticism; and the most common one of all – when our emotional and spiritual foundation is not strong, depression and anxiety disorders will emerge. There are many different symptoms which can manifest over time when we are not secure in God's love and don't know how to fully participate in love and pass it on.

The ability to receive the love of God deep into our lives and allow that love to fill us to overflowing so it then touches those around us, is foundational in every respect in our lives. This is true first of all in a chronological sense. As a new born baby you needed to be loved in a way that you understood. When babies cry they need to be taken care of. They need to be loved by having their needs attended to. They need to know that we're coming when they cry. This is a foundational experience for every human being.

From the first day we open our eyes we need to know that there's love in the world. We don't know all the philosophical aspects of love - we just need to know that somebody's there to take care of us - that's love. That is the bedrock layer of the foundation of love. If that is laid securely then a lot of other skills or abilities to receive and to give love can be built on top of that.

Now it is also true that the ability to receive love and to pass on love is foundational not just chronologically - but it's foundational theologically also. We have already read Ephesians 3:14-19 more than once in this series and that is because it contains the essence of this whole teaching. Let's take another look.

"For this reason, Paul says, I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name ... (Remember God is big on 'family') ... I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power ... (then, having a foundation in love, then you will be able) ... together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

God's desire and plan for us is that we would experience life in its abundance.

If that is to happen - then what is wrong with us needs to be healed, what doesn't belong needs to be removed so that more of God's personality, more of God's wisdom, more of God's being, more of God's power, more of God's essence, which is *love*, needs to invade our lives. That's what it means to be "... *filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*" That's where we are headed. That's the promise of God to each one of us here now: that we will be filled to the measure of all His fullness! God *is* love and so to be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God is to be filled with, saturated with, overflowing in love. But Paul reminds us here that this will not happen unless we are rooted and grounded, or established in love.

Now a lot of western Christianity has taught, either directly or by inference, that we need to be rooted and grounded in our performance. Despite what the Bible says about being rooted and grounded in love, the Church has been guilty of teaching sloppy theology and legalism, so we end up believing that what *we do for* God and for others is what's most important in our Christian faith.

When I became a Christian I soon learned all the things that I had to do to be a good Christian:

- I had to pray (that's a good thing)
- I had to read the Bible (that's a good thing)
- I had to tithe (that's a good thing)
- I had to attend Church services and activities (that's a good thing)
- I had to serve in some ministry (that's a good thing)

All too often we can be given the impression that the quality of our Christian life depends on our effort and our performance and yet nothing could be further from the truth! If we believe that lie then we are heading in the wrong direction as soon as we leave the starting gate! Eventually, years later, we wake up to find our whole life has shifted on that flawed foundation and is about to collapse, and we wonder what went wrong. What went wrong is we didn't hear the true Gospel of Jesus Christ, we didn't receive the truth about ourselves and God from the start. Now I stress here that we *heard* the wrong things. We may not have actually been *told* the wrong things by all our Christian teachers and mentors, but we may have chosen to hear them the wrong way. Why is that? Why do we fall for the lies of religion?

It's because that's what the whole world around us teaches and we are trapped into thinking that the Church is like the world. Sadly it often is, but it shouldn't be. We can get so easily caught up in this deceitful humanistic philosophy. It's all around us. The foundation of your education is what? The marks you are given which reflect the quality of your effort. The foundation of your earning ability is what? The quality of your hard work - your ability to make the right choices - your ability to meet the right people. There is no doubt that the quality of your life in worldly terms depends primarily on your performance and your actions.

Now in the kingdom of God, your efforts are not worthless – not at all - your efforts are very important, but I'm talking here about the foundation beneath your efforts. If you take nothing else from this sermon, I would encourage you to absorb this next truth:

In the kingdom of God, the quality of your life depends not on what you do for God or others, but on believing and receiving what God has done for you and continues to do for you, in you and through you - in Christ.

That's the first priority and until we are secure in that, until that foundation is laid firmly in place, we should forget about all the things we want to do for God. We have to let God do it for us first and I'm not talking about a once-off reality here at the beginning of our journey. This is a daily reality throughout our entire life. Receiving from God first, before giving to God and others.

Now I remember the day God turned the lights on for me and I embraced His saving grace for the first time. It was 45 years ago, on a Friday night after a BBQ run by the Orange Churches of Christ youth leaders. I had grown up in the Presbyterian Church but had never really owned my parent's faith personally. But I did that night as a young teenager. I was overwhelmed by God's grace and love for me and I can remember how real His presence was on that cold winter's night when our youth leader prayed over me.

But within weeks, I jumped onto that good old performance-based, 'let-me-pay-God-back-for-His-grace' treadmill and I was off and running! I was leading a junior youth group within a month. I was a lay preacher and lay presider before was even 16. Now God blessed those kids I was leading in spite of me. I just opened the door and let them in each week and He did the rest. God used me as a young preacher and presider at the Lord's Supper, but my foundations were still very weak. God hadn't even put His initials in the concrete before I started rapidly building my house!

I look back now and I so wish I had just sat in Church and listened to sermons and read my Bible and had people pray for me until that foundation of God's love was firmly set. I really wish I had done that for the first year or two of my Kingdom journey. It would have been so much better if I had just been allowed to get used to God holding me and loving me like the new spiritual baby I was.

Now of course if you want a life that is abundant and fruitful and world-changing then by all means read the Bible - study it with everything you have, pray all you can, get involved in Church, give generously, serve in a ministry, pray for the sick, feed the hungry, release the oppressed. Do all those things and more - but make sure they are the fruit of something far deeper and more important; make sure all that service and discipline and good works are flowing out of the abundance of God's love in you.

Otherwise you will be caught in the trap of performance-based religion which is an abomination before God and it will only burn you out and toss you aside one day because none of us have the stamina to 'perform' for God for any length of time. We all run out of motivation and inspiration.

Learning to receive the love of God - being filled to the measure of all the fullness of God - and then seeing *that* fullness - *that* love - overflow from your life into the lives of others - and back to God - *that* is what an authentic, fruitful, effective Christian life looks like. *"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."* (1 John 4:10)

So God's love must be the foundation of our lives. But His love must also permeate every room of that grand 'house' we build upon that foundation of love. When God comes to us at our conversion and at various significant times throughout our life - He invades our house, as it were. He enters various rooms in our life by His Holy Spirit. **When He enters - He enters as love because God is love** - and when His love enters the various rooms of our heart and soul and memory, His love heals and cleanses and restores and fixes what is wrong with us, because that's what love does.

The more God presses into who we are, the more God permeates and saturates our being and the more His love affects us and the more we are healed and empowered as a result. One of the many issues in our life which God deals with is fear - His love casts out fear. Let's look at 1 John 4:16-19 again.

"So we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like Jesus..."

What he's saying here is that as love is perfected in us - we become like Jesus. That's why we can be bold and confident on the day of judgement because there's no fear in us. We can be bold because we have been filled to the measure of all the love of God.

"...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. We love because He first loved us."

We can see John going in this circular way. We love because God first loved us and the effect of that love is that we then love. The effect of love is that it casts out all fear and when all fear has been cast out, we know that we have been perfected in love.

Fear and phobias are large and painful problems in the Christian community today. Fear, in whatever form it comes to us, is crippling and humiliating. Now let me clarify what I mean by *fear* in this context. I am not referring to what the Old Testament talks about as the 'fear of the Lord.' That is a Godly, reverent, worshipful 'fear' and it refers to an awe, a holy respect before God. The fear I am talking about here and next week is what we would normally refer to in our day as fear: an unhealthy caution, anxiety, stress, being afraid or scared or debilitated or intimidated by something, someone or some event or circumstance. Now that kind of fear is anything but Godly and it can often be found lurking in the shadows in one or more rooms in our life.

I really believe that over the coming weeks the Holy Spirit wants to get into those rooms and cast that fear out and even more so, He will give us the wisdom to minister to those we might know and love who suffer from this debilitating fear and don't even know it.

God wants to shine His light into those rooms - those memories - those experiences which Satan is using to hold us back and cripple us in our Christian walk and by doing that, entire churches are crippled in their ministry. The Holy Spirit wants to fill those rooms with the love of God. When that happens, He will cast out any fear that may still be there. He wants to get into the nooks and crannies of our life, the rooms that have been closed to Him, He wants to flood those dark places with His love and banish any and all fear.

You might wonder why He hasn't done that already. The reason is simple. The door-handles to those rooms are on the inside. We have to let the Spirit of God in. Those 'rooms' in our lives which harbour debilitating memories and negative emotions are often shut from the inside. That well known verse in Rev. 3:20 says, *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me."* That verse is so often used in reference to conversion. We are given the picture of Christ knocking on the door of the unbeliever's heart - begging to come in and save him or her. It is featured in so many evangelistic rallies. It may even have been the verse you responded to when you came forward one day or made a commitment to the Lord.

However, if we want to be true to the context of that famous verse, we would never use it in that way because it is actually addressed to believers – to Christian disciples already following Jesus - and I believe it refers to what I have been saying here. As believers, we need to open all the doors of our life and let Jesus come in and fill them with the light, love the presence of God.

I'm reminded of the Pastor who knocked on the door of one of his Parishioners, to see how she was going after some recent illness, and there was no answer. So he listened for a moment and heard something inside and realised she was home, so he knocked again. Still no answer. He took out his business card and smiled as he wrote on the back of it: Rev. 3:20. *Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in...* and he slipped it under her door. The following Sunday as the people were leaving Church, the same woman slipped a little white card into the Pastor's jacket pocket as she left. The Pastor was not the only one with a sense of humour. He later took out the card and read it. She had written: Gen.3:10. *"I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."*

Brothers and sisters, God is knocking on those doors in our life today and every day and perhaps the lives of those we love and care about, but often we feel naked and ashamed and we too hide from Him because we have not been rooted and grounded in His love. But if we do let Him in, He will give us a spring-cleaning like never before as His love removes all trace of fear and doubt and anxiety. But He only comes in where He is invited and our fear and ignorance can keep those doors closed to the love of God.

Judging by the feedback I have received already to this teaching, God is clearly already doing some spring cleaning, some healing, some restoration and redecorating in some people's lives and I believe He has more to do in the days ahead and I would encourage you to stay connected with this teaching and be prepared for Him to do some amazing things as His love fills all the rooms in your life, especially those ones whose doors may have been shut tight for a long time.

We need to trust Him. He made us. He knows how we work best. He knows that the only way we will experience the abundance of life in Christ this side of heaven, is if we allow His love to saturate every aspect of our lives. We can trust Him to be gentle with us. God only enters those rooms in our life as love, for God is love, He cannot enter any other way and His love is always transformational. You cannot encounter the love of God and remain the same. God's love will always transform because His plan and purpose is to transform you and me and all people on this earth into the image of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ and He does that by the power of His love.

When that happens, we will stand in awe once again in the face of a love so amazing, so divine, it truly will demand our soul, our life and our all. All we need to do right now is come to Him, just as we are. Religion tells us to clean up our lives before we stand in the presence of God. Religion tell us we are blessed and loved when we obey and serve and perform for God. Jesus tells us the truth. Jesus bids us to come, just as we are, every day, and let Him love us back to life, every day.