

**John 15:12-14; I John 3:16-18**

**John 15:12-14** (NKJV): "This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup> Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. <sup>14</sup> You are My friends if you do whatever I command you."

**I John 3:16-18** (ESV): "By this we know love, that He laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. <sup>17</sup> But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? <sup>18</sup> Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth."

## INTRODUCTION

Are you familiar with the 1957 movie blockbuster, *Bridge on the River Kwai*; winner of 7 Academy Awards, including Best Picture? It portrays the hellish abuse of Prisoners of Wars in WWII who were forced by Japan to construct a railway line through Thailand's dense jungle for a planned invasion of India. For labor, POWs captured from occupied Asian countries or the British Army were conscripted. Each day, thousands of prisoners hacked their way through the jungle and built up a track bed through low-lying swamp land. Naked except for loincloths, the men worked in 120-degree heat, their bodies stung by insects, their bare feet cut and bruised by sharp stones. Death struck daily. If a prisoner seemed to be lagging, a Japanese guard would beat him to death, bayonet him, or decapitate him in full view of the other prisoners. Many dropped dead from exhaustion, malnutrition, or disease. Under these horrors, 80,000 POWs ultimately died building the railway; 393 fatalities for every mile of track!

Ernest Gordon, a British officer captured by the Japanese at age 24, survived this ordeal by the intervention of the God he only vaguely knew. He'd had more faith in man's basic goodness and the ability of science to improve society. His autobiography, *Miracle on the River Kwai*, reveals the untold story of how the presence of **Jesus Christ** transformed the prisoners' lives. The movie gave full credit to British pluck. Gordon writes, "For most of the war, the law of the jungle had ruled in the prison camp. As starvation, exhaustion and disease took an ever-increasing toll, the atmosphere in which we lived became poisoned by selfishness, hate and fear. We were slipping rapidly down the slope of degradation. Before, the patterns of army life had sustained us. We had still shown some consideration for each other. Now that was all swept away. We lived by the law of the jungle—the survival of the fittest. For most of us, little acts of meanness, suspicion and favoritism permeated our daily lives. In the food line, prisoners fought over the few scraps of vegetables or grains of rice floating in the greasy broth. Officers refused to share any of their special rations. Theft was common in the barracks. Men lived like animals; hate was the main motivation to stay alive. We had no church, no chaplain, no services. We were forsaken men—forsaken by our friends, our families, by our Government. Now even God seemed to have left us."

Yet, as Gordon goes on to describe, stories began to circulate in the camp; stories of self-sacrifice, heroism, faith, and love. Gordon was left to die alone of disease in a filthy death hut. The sacrificial ministrations of two Christian prisoners—who came daily to visit, bathe, and feed him from their meager rations—started him rethinking every core belief he once held dear. Another event soon sent similar tremors throughout most of the camp. Japanese guards carefully counted tools at the end of each day's work. One day the officer in charge shouted a shovel was missing. He walked up and down the ranks demanding to know who'd stolen it. When no one confessed, he screamed, "All die! All die!" and raised his rifle to fire at the first man in the line. A man then stepped forward and said, "I did it." The officer fell on him in such a fury that he beat this man to death with his fists and rifle butt. That evening, a recount of the tools discovered a mistake had been made; no shovel was missing. One of the prisoners recalled **Jesus'** words, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends."

These acts of self-sacrifice sparked revival fires in the camp. Services began to be held, most of the prisoners were set free by God's forgiving grace through **Jesus**, and they embraced each other as brothers in Christ. With no prompting, they began looking out for each other more than themselves. Though to be caught meant death, they undertook expeditions outside the camp to find food for the sick. Thefts grew increasingly rare. They began generally treating the dying with respect; organizing proper funerals, burials, and marking each man's grave with a cross. Ernest Gordon adds, "Death was still with us—no doubt about that. But we were slowly being freed from its destructive grip. . . . True, there was hatred. But there was also love. There was death. But there was also life. God had not left us. He was with us." Christ's love perhaps shone most brilliantly the day the victorious Allies overran the camp. The POW survivors, reduced to human skeletons, lined up before their captors. Instead of exacting revenge upon their tormenters, they insisted: "No more hatred. No more killing. Now what we need is forgiveness."

This is our third sermon based upon the legend of Saint Valentine and the faithful, sacrificial love he modeled. Valentine is believed to have been martyred February 14, A. D. 270. He took to heart **I John 3:16**: "By this we know love, that He laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." We've noted that at the time of **Jesus'** birth, three types of love were commonly spoken of in the Greek language that served as the universal tongue of the Western world: 1) *phileo*: friendship love; 2) *eros*: romantic love; and 3) *storge*: family love. *Agape*—the ideal of unconditional, selfless love—was celebrated but rarely used. But **Jesus'** staggering demonstration of selfless, sacrificial love caused *agape* to become the standard for recognizing the quality of love practiced by **Jesus'** followers. *Agape* appears in some form over 300 times in the Greek of the New Testament to express the depths of God's quality of selfless, unconditional "love" in our relationship with God and with others, as in **John 15:12**, "'This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.'"

**Jesus** taught us in **Matthew 22:37-38**, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command." Using LOVE as an acronym, our previous sermons challenged us to demonstrate *agape* love in our relationship toward God, by our Loyalty and Obedience toward Him. Yet, **Jesus** immediately added, "The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. <sup>40</sup> All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands" (**Matthew 22:39-40**). LOVE's last two letters challenge us to demonstrate *agape* love in our relationship toward our fellow human beings by our Vulnerability towards them and our Expression of love to them.

## GOD-CENTERED LOVE

### C. VULNERABILITY

Social professionals asked a group of 4-to-10-year-olds, "What does love mean?" Here are a few of their surprisingly deep answers: To Danny, age 7, "Love is when my Mommy makes coffee for my daddy and she takes a sip before giving it to him, to make sure the taste is OK." Jenny, at age 4, already realized, "There are two kinds of love: our love; God's love. But God makes both kinds of them." For Chrissy, age 6, "Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs." Chris, age 8, said, "Love is when Mommy sees daddy smelly and sweaty and still says he is handsomer than Robert Redford." When these same kids were asked, What are most people thinking when they say, "I Love You"? Michelle, age 9, said, "The person is thinking: Yeah, I really do love him. But I hope he showers at least once a day."

Have you ever thought you might be living like you're part Buddhist; part Christian? As followers of **Jesus Christ**, we know we're under obligations to be, in His words, "gentle, merciful," & "peacemakers" in our dealings with others (**Matthew 5:5-9**); to be "the salt of the earth" by preserving what is of God in society and opposing what is ungodly (**Matthew 5:13**); to be "the light of the world" by putting God's love for people on display through our "good works" (**Matthew 5:14-16**); to "forgive people their

wrongdoing" against us to the extent we want our "heavenly Father" to forgive us (**Matthew 6:12, 14-15**); to put more effort into pleasing God and storing "treasures in heaven" than "treasures on earth," as we "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteous" (**Matthew 6:19-33**); to practice the Golden Rule at every opportunity in our dealings with others: "whatever you want others to do for you, do also the same for them" (**Matthew 7:12**); to "Go, . . . and make disciples of all nations, . . . teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you" (**Matthew 28:19-20**); and for our actions to demonstrate our two greatest priorities in life are, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind," and, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (**Matthew 22:37-40**). In short, we are to place ourselves, our time, and our resources in service to "Jesus Christ, our only Master and Lord" (**Jude 4**), regardless of the risks involved. Three reasons we fall short of living this way are: Fear of negative consequences (rejection, loss, ridicule), our dislike of the inconvenience, and our distaste for discomfort.

In other words, we seek to avoid the *vulnerability* being a faithful follower of **Jesus** requires. This is our Buddhist streak. Gautama Buddha died about 500 years before **Jesus'** birth. He believed our main goal in life is "tranquility," which he defined as the "avoidance of stress and pain." Because he believed, "Suffering arises from attachment to desires" (his 2<sup>nd</sup> Noble Truth), he promoted cold-hearted views of love. The safest, most peaceful way to go through life is to avoid commitments love requires. Buddha selfishly declared, "He who loves 50 has 50 woes. He who loves 10 has 10 woes. He who loves none has no woes." We are perhaps never less like **Jesus** or never more like Buddha than if we seek to avoid the commitments of placing ourselves, our time, and our resources fully in service to our Savior, purely from desires to escape the "woes" of possible negative consequences, inconvenience, or discomfort.

C. S. Lewis wrote in his book, *The Four Loves*, "To love at all 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 only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations [troubling concerns] of love is Hell."

We might not hesitate to lay down our lives in a crisis to save our loved ones. We may be willing to die as faithful followers of our Savior **Jesus Christ**, should persecution ever require this of us. But there are other ways to fulfill the command of **I John 3:16**: "By this we know love, that He laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." It's been said it's often more difficult to live for Christ than to die for Him. When we are willing to risk ourselves in some form of service toward others in **Jesus'** name despite our fear of possible negative consequences, our dislike of the inconvenience, or our distaste for discomfort, we fulfill God's command, "let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth."

Can we send mixed messages to non-Christians around us if our actions don't clearly portray the love of the Savior we profess to follow? Speaking of mixed messages, one day a gas company sent a senior training Supervisor and a young trainee out checking meters. They parked their truck at the end of the alley and worked their way to the other end. At the last house, a woman looking out her kitchen window watched the two men as they checked her meter. When they finished, the older supervisor, wanting to prove he could still meet the demands of his job, challenged his young coworker to a foot race down the alley back to the truck. As they reached the truck, they were startled to hear the lady from the last house huffing and puffing right behind them. They asked her what was wrong. Gasping for breath, she said, "When I see two gas men running full speed away from my house, I figured I had better run too."

## CONCLUSION

The church of one of Loretta's coworkers at the Banner Health University Medical Center South Campus (formerly Kino Hospital) was recently challenged by their pastor to share their Salt & Light experiences to affect the world around them for Christ. She reported back to the on February 13 of this year. Please allow me to share her story in her own words:

"I worked Saturday and came across a few people that stood out and I felt God wanted me to help. On my next day off, I stopped by the dollar store, picked up a few items, and went by to see the patients. Going on my day off meant I could visit with the patient without feeling rushed or crunched for time.

"One patient I had was having a hard time reading his book. He said the words were blurry. He was an elderly homeless Native American man. I figured if he could not read his book he would also have a hard time reading different patient education materials. So, I got several different glasses strengths and designs from the dollar store and offered them to the patient to try on and keep what would work best for him. The rest I left at the Nurses station for other patients that might need them.

"The next patient was also homeless; in process to go to a halfway house. He was a middle-aged man in desperate need of freshening up & showering. I told him he was on my mind and I wanted to be sure he had everything he needed. The hospital used to carry regular lotion but not anymore, so I got him some for after his shower today. I also did not see toothbrush or toothpaste, so I got him a little travel bag set. The patient was so shocked and thankful; amazed that anyone noticed him on a personal level. His smile was so big for such little things. He said, 'Wow! Thank you so much!' several times.

"The third person I felt drawn to stop by and visit was an Elderly Man with long nails that had dirt and other things under the fingernails. He did not have the strength to get to the bathroom to wash up and I could not wash it out with a washcloth. So I got a manicure set from the dollar store and asked him permission to wash his hands and clean under his nails. His daughters were at the bedside and were glad I came by. So I washed his hands, clipped his nails, and got his hands all cleaned up. He held up his hands and said, 'Oh, they are beautiful!'

"I don't do this everyday I have off; just occasionally when I feel God has put someone or something in my path. After I've done what I feel has been requested of me, I feel good, satisfied, and a sense of accomplishment. I also feel happy and content when I am able to fulfill a need like that or follow what I think God is telling me. I suppose I feel God looking down at me and saying, 'Good Girl,' which is really nice, because most of the time I don't feel I measure up. I get frustrated with myself and my behaviors. I also get frustrated with my mind and my speech—trying to find the right words to say; stuttering when I talk and getting stuck trying to find my words, especially when I am nervous or upset—I struggle often with my anxieties and worries. But when I see what others are going through at work, it helps me put my life in perspective. It reminds me how blessed I am and that God will take care of things. I hear Him say to me and others, 'I see you and I hear your prayers.'

"He really does hear you calling out to Him. It's nice to know we have a real God that, as busy as He may be and as crowded as this world is, He can point us out in all that chaos and in the multitudes of people, and can say, 'I see you.'"