

Cruciform Love, Part 3

Feb. 4, 2018

To KNOW Christ and one another more deeply,
To CARE for one another in truth and in love,
To GROW as followers of Jesus.
- CG Mission Statement

Worship: Lectio Divina

(Here is a passage to help your group as you worship. You can go through it together or in groups in meditation and/or in prayer)

Read through 1 Cor. 13 slowly, out loud. Ask everyone to close their eyes as you do so. Briefly pause after reading 2-3 verses (after each thought) and invite people to pray silently in a worship response each time you pause.

Icebreaker

When is the last time you were angry? How did it get resolved? (Lighter alternative: What is your favorite “revenge” movie? Why is it your favorite?)

Text for Discussion: 1 Cor. 13

Turn in your Bibles and read this passage aloud together. Use a different translation than the one you used in the opening worship exercise above.

Aid for Discussion: Sermon Summary

It's easy to equate our spirituality with emotional fervor and enthusiasm, connecting how spiritual we feel to how genuine it is. Or we place a premium on our knowledge, thinking it will mark us as authentically spiritual. But the Bible says the true measure of our spirituality is love. Love is a skill and a posture, something we must learn and grow in. How different would our lives look if love was our highest aspiration? In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul describes sixteen different but interconnected facets of love. We cannot have some aspects of it while lacking others, but by focusing on each we can gain a greater understanding of the whole.

Love is not resentful. Resentment is a past wound hardened into hostility, something we cling to for the bittersweet pleasure we find holding it against our offender. It allows us to feel like noble, morally superior people who've been unfairly hurt. Resentment is one of the deadliest vices that poisons our lives. It defines others by their worst, thereby insulating us from feeling empathy and any need for reconciliation. But love does not have to set the record straight or demand to be understood. Forgiveness feels profoundly unfair because it is. That's why it's so rare. Letting go of the past is one of the hardest things any of us is ever asked to do, because in order to reconcile, we must give up our resentments. It's painful and costs us. But our joy will never be peaceable until we let go of our need for vindication.

Love is not irritable. Irritability is the soil of anger, its an emotional launching pad. Most often we get angry because our self-justification or our personal desires have been attacked. We're inclined to lash out and indict our offenders. And anger isn't necessarily a bad thing. Things like injustice and abuse *should* make us angry. But love isn't about never getting angry; it's the ability to be aware of our own emotions and to slow ourselves when anger arises. Jesus says our anger is something we should take with deadly seriousness. Love is neither resentful nor irritable, so if our anger is truly righteous, it will reflect God: It will be slow, compassionate, and full of grief. Once we recognize our anger and understand why we feel this way, we must then defuse it with a deep sense of humility anchored in God's constant mercy toward us. Irritability cannot survive humility.

Love does not insist on its own way. Love compels us to hold together justice and forgiveness. It doesn't seek its own self, nor should we take justice into our own hands. We must seek to be merciful as God has been with us. “Love moves us to deny what justice urges us to demand.” As long as sacrificing our own rights doesn't jeopardize the rights of others, we ought to strive to set others' needs above our own. Self-denial is not the opposite of self-care; it is the highest form of it. For the essence of the new self we find in Christ is to place others above ourselves. Nowhere does the Spirit of Christ contrast more sharply with the spirit of our age. Ultimately, if we seek God's glory through sacrificing for others, it will lead toward making us into the only thing that counts: people who love.

In the midst of all our impatience, unkindness, envy and lack of mercy, we must remember how wonderfully and undeservedly embraced we are by Jesus, whose love is never exhausted with us. Before we moved toward Him, God drew near to us. How then can we hold other's sins against them when the Lord has not counted ours against us?

We no longer need to keep score because each day presents us with opportunities to grow in God's knowledge of what it means to love.

Guiding Question of the Week

(This question is intended as a target for the whole conversation. Do not ask for responses now. It will be repeated later in the study.)

How do we learn to love in a way that forms our souls?

Questions for Discussion

(Remember it is better to wrestle deeply with two good questions than gloss over many. Sub-bullets are intended for potential follow-up.)

Opening questions...

- Read I Cor. 13:5. Note that there are four things mentioned in this one verse that describe love – we will be digging into them one at a time during this meeting.
 - Love is not rude.
 - What is the core/root of our behavior when we are rude (i.e., self-importance/pride)?
 - Read James 4:6-10 as an “antidote” for this behavior.
 - How do we do what this verse is telling us to do (humble ourselves)?
 - How have you done it in the past (share a specific example)?
 - How did it form your soul to love?
 - Love doesn't insist on its own way.
 - What is the core/root of our behavior when we insist on our own way (i.e., insisting on your “rights”/an unwillingness to forgive)?
 - Read Matt. 18:21-22 as an “antidote” for this behavior
 - How do we do what this verse is telling us to do (forgive over and over again)? Do you think Jesus is talking about 70 X 7 different offenses or ONE offense that we have to keep doing the work to forgive over and over again?
 - How have you done this in the past (share a specific example)?
 - How did it form your soul to love?
 - Love is not irritable.
 - What is the core/root of our behavior when we are irritable (i.e., anger)?
 - Read James 1:19-20 as an “antidote” for this behavior
 - How do we do what this verse is telling us to do (be slow to speak/slow to anger)?
 - How have you done it in the past (share a specific example)?
 - How did it form your soul to love?
 - Love is not resentful.
 - What is the core/root of our behavior when we are resentful (i.e., holding on to offenses/unwillingness to release things)?
 - Read Psalm 40:1-8 and Matthew 6:10 as “antidotes” for this behavior
 - How do we do what this verse is telling us to do (put God's will above our own)?
 - How have you done this in the past (share a specific example)?
 - How did it form your soul to love?

Closing Exercise...

- Ask everyone to join you in prayer. With eyes closed, invite everyone to think of one thing that struck them from the discussion – one thing that jumped out where they have been/are rude about, a thing that they are currently insisting on their own way about, something they are irritable about, something that they are resentful about. Ask them to think of a very specific example.
- Ask them to clench their fists, and imagine that thing inside of their fist.
- As you read slowly through I Cor. 13 once again, invite them to ask God to speak to their heart about that thing as they listen. Invite them to slowly open their hands and release it to Jesus. Ask them only to open their hands as much as they can release it.
- At the end of the reading, invite people to open their eyes, and share how open their hands were by the end of the reading. If the group is open enough, ask each person to share why.

- Pray for one another based on the relative openness/closedness of each other's hands, and the issues people are wrestling with.

Experiment of the Week

Have each person seek out one hidden act of service to do this week for someone as an application of this week's discussion. Come next week prepared to share what you did, and how it formed your soul to love.

Praying for One Another

(Here are some ideas from the study to help focus your time in prayer as a group. Use by themselves or along with other prayer requests.)

- See "Closing Exercise" above...