Believe: *The Virtue of Love*
John 15:1-11; John 13:34-35; 1 Corinthians 13

In our series called *Believe*, we have been unpacking the process of becoming like Jesus…it is the “process” of becoming those who bear fruit in Jesus’ name. The process can only begin after we have repented of our sin, made our profession of faith in Jesus, and surrendered our lives to Him. Upon our confession of faith, we are then indwelled and empowered by the Holy Spirit, and by His power we begin a process of transformation that will eventually lead us to become like Jesus in every way…we will take on His character and likeness…we will bear fruit.

The process begins with thinking like Jesus. Our actions betray what we believe to be true. So our transformation must begin with the way we think.

The next step in the process of becoming like Jesus is to practice life the way that Jesus practiced life. These are the spiritual disciplines.

When our thoughts are conformed to the thoughts of Christ, and our habits are conformed to the habits of Christ, over time, as we abide in Him, we will develop the virtues of Christ…in other words, we will become like Him in every way. So, what will that look like? Each of us will reflect the Light of Christ in a unique way, just as the breath of the musician sounds differently depending upon the instrument through which he is breathing. But there are some key virtues that will be consistent in the life of the Christian simply because they are the virtues of Jesus Himself. The virtues of Christ include love, joy, peace, self-control, hope, patience, kindness/goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and humility. For the next ten weeks we will be unpacking these virtues through a study of the Scriptures and an examination of Jesus Himself.

The first and primary virtue of the Christ-filled life is love. This morning I will unpack this virtue under three subheadings: 1) what Christian love is not; 2) the unique attributes of Christ-like love; and 3) the most difficult and ironic application of Christian love.

**I. What Christian love is not.**

The word “love” is a word that can mean a great many things to all of us. For the most part, we use this word to carelessly suggest that we “favor or enjoy” something. For example: I love a ribeye steak, cooked rare…as in, put it in the sun for a minute and stick it on my plate! I love fishing…it brings me great joy and relaxation. I love college basketball, I love duck hunting, I love dark chocolate…etc.

We also use the word “love” to express a deep feeling that we have for another person. This romantic sense of love expresses an emotion of desire and even commitment. When I expressed my love for Christy Thomas in my dorm room at Wake Forest University in February of 1990, I was saying in no uncertain terms, “I want to be with you and only you for the rest of my life.” My love for her went a whole lot deeper than my “love” for steak or fishing…well, at least steak. All kidding aside, my “love” for Christy was something I had never felt before for anyone…it was a love that included great desire and a great commitment. I “loved” Christy because of who
she was, how she loved me, how she made me feel when I was with her, and the fact that she was
the most beautiful woman in the world to me! When I said “I love you,” I did so with hope (and
a lot of anxiety) that she would express the same feelings for me.

There is also a love that is “brotherly” in nature. It is the love we have for the guys on our
football team or the soldiers who fight beside us in battle. It is a love for our best friends who
stand beside us through the good times and the bad. It is the love we have for our coaches or our
teachers out of sheer respect and admiration.

As we grow older, many of us experience a new kind of love when our children are born. It is a
love that we did not know was possible…a love that is even unreasonable. It is a love that
nurtures and protects, a love that sacrifices sleep and willingly wipes up poop! It is a love that
asks for little in return…at least for the first 7 years or so! When I say I love my children, it is
still a different quality of love than that of loving my wife, my brothers, or my hobbies.

So love can mean many things…but I want you to know that the Christian virtue of love is
actually NONE of these things that we have mentioned. That’s not to say that Christian love is
absent from marriage or parenting or brotherhood or enjoyment…it’s simply to say that Christ-
like love trumps them all…it is altogether a greater kind of love.

II. The Unique Attributes of Christian Love

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul writes about the virtue of Christian love. The Greek word that he
employs is the word “agape.” Agape in its earliest form meant “affection,” but the Christians
hijacked the word and made it their own, using this particular word to express the unconditional
love of God for humanity as incarnated in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Listen to the way that
Paul unpacks the Christian virtue of agape love:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I
have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove
mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be
burned,[a] but have not love, I gain nothing. 4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not
arrogant⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;⁶ it does not rejoice at
wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all
things. ⁸ Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge,
it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass
away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a
man, I gave up childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I
shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³ So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest
of these is love.

For Paul, this virtue of agape love is the greatest of all virtues, and its absence renders the
employment of any competing gift or virtue null and void. In other words, agape love is at the
very beginning and end of what it means to be a Christian, and it serves as the means to evaluate
how we are doing as a Christian. According to Paul, if we lack agape love, nothing else that we
are doing will amount to a hill of beans.
So what are the unique attributes of agape love? Paul lists those things that agape is, and those things that agape is not. First, what agape is: “Agape is patient and kind; agape rejoices with the truth; agape bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

And here is the list of what agape is not: “Agape does not envy or boast; agape is not arrogant or rude. Agape does not insist on its own way; agape is not irritable or resentful; agape does not rejoice at wrongdoings. Agape never ends.”

Now, in case this description of Christian love makes you feel like crawling under your chair, please know that this kind of agape love is not something we decide to do, as though it would be within our human ability to simply muster up agape love. The love that Paul describes here is the love of God…it is the love that Jesus modeled in His earthly life…it is what John refers to as “perfect love” in 1 John 4:18.

All human beings are incapable of “perfect love” in the flesh. Why? Because in the flesh, our love is always laced with need. I love steak because I am hungry. I love fishing because I need to relax. I love my wife because I need what she brings to our relationship and because she loves me back. I love my kids because I need to be needed, or because I need them to make me feel significant, or I need them to carry on the family name. I love my brothers and my friends because they provide a place for me to belong and they cover my back when I need their support. Think about it: in the flesh, apart from Christ, every bit of love that we have is attached to a need that we desire to be met in our lives. But not so with agape love.

The love of God has no “needs” attached to it. God loves because it is His character to love. God loves perfectly because God IS perfect love in His nature. God loves without condition, with no regard for what God gets out of the relationship. When Jesus says, “For God so loved the world,” rest assured that God’s love for the world was not contingent upon humanity’s excellent behavior! God loves…and God always loves with this agape love that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13. And here’s the hope that comes in Christ: when we acknowledge our sin, when we understand that we have been forgiven through the LOVE of GOD in Jesus Christ who died for us when we were yet sinners, when we place our faith in Him and find our identity as those who have been saved, chosen, redeemed, and accepted…the very love of God Himself can begin to flow out through us…the redeemed…the little Christs. Not only can this agape love be channeled through us, it must be channeled through us, or the world will never know how much God loves them. It is the love of God that changes human hearts…there is no substitute.

In his book entitled Think Act Believe Like Jesus, Pastor Randy Frazee succinctly sums up the unique attributes of agape love with three descriptors: agape love is unconditional, sacrificial, and forgiving.

1) Agape love is unconditional. When the love of Jesus begins to work its way into our character, we will discover the ability to love people without any condition whatsoever. Our love will not be contingent on being loved back. We will not withhold our love because we disapprove of people’s choices. We will not withhold our love because somebody wrongs us. We will simply love people the way that Jesus loved people…without condition, without expectations, and without stipulations. Only when this kind of Christ-like love enters into our character might we
ever “love our enemies” as Jesus commanded. It is only through God’s love indwelling in us that we are capable of loving others as we love ourselves. The unconditional nature of agape love is the most admirable and amazing attribute of Christian love.

2) Agape love is sacrificial. Jesus said it this way in John 15:13: “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” True Christian love is sacrificial…it places the needs of others before our own. When Paul describes Christian love as it applies to Christian marriage, that love takes the form of sacrifice. Paul writes in Ephesians 5, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord…Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her…” As our character is transformed into the likeness of Christ, we will willingly sacrifice our time, our privilege, our resources, our sleep, our portion, and our pride for those whom we are called to love. And even in this act of sacrifice, we will expect nothing in return…no note of appreciation, no reciprocation of any kind. Again…this is not a love that we can muster on our own. Nobody in the flesh makes a sacrifice without expecting something in return…but the Christian does. It is a virtue of Christ that we inherit, and it is the kind of love that changes hearts and points people to our Savior.

3) Agape love is forgiving. Knowingly or unknowingly, most of us withhold our love from people when they disappoint us. We don’t mean to, but we do. And we often project this kind of fickle love onto our beliefs about God. In other words, we’re pretty sure that God is angry with us and is withholding His favor when we screw up. But note what Paul writes: Agape keeps no record of wrongs. Agape love is not surprised when people sin; in fact, agape love comes into the relationship with the awareness that all people have sinned and all people fall short. As Christians we have learned that God’s love in Jesus Christ is unfailing, even when we sin. God’s forgiveness was given to us as a free gift in Jesus Christ who suffered the penalty that we deserve, and thus demonstrated a love that will not let us go, even on our worst day. God’s love is most powerfully felt in His forgiveness, and as such, when we love others in the virtue of Christian love, we will forgive. We will forgive as we have been forgiven.

Unconditional, sacrificial, and forgiving…this is the unique nature of the Christ-like virtue called agape love. But let me remind you that there is one more unique attribute that Frazee left out…it’s right there in 1 Corinthians 13 and we find it all throughout the four gospels: agape love rejoices in the truth. That leads me to my third and final subheading.

III. The most difficult and ironic application of Christian love.

I read recently that over 40% of American young people agree and/or strongly agree with this statement: “If you disagree with me, you are judging me.”

I want you to think about the significance of that statement. If you disagree with me, you are judging me. In other words, if you tell me I’m wrong, you have placed yourself above me and condemned me.

Now here is the next statement that is also agreed upon by most people. It is actually a quote from Mother Theresa: “If you judge people, you have no time to love them.” In other words, as soon as we judge another person as somehow less than ourselves, we are acting in a way that is unloving. I agree with Mother Theresa; I suspect most of us do. The Bible certainly agrees as we find multiple passages in the scriptures that make it very clear that we are not to judge others.
Jesus said in Matthew 7, “Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.”

James writes in James 4, “Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?”

Clearly Christians are forbidden to “judge” other people; it is not our role to “condemn” other people. We’ve already seen clearly that Christians are called to love others as Christ loved us. So where does that leave the Christian church in 21st century America?

If we are strictly forbidden by Christ to judge, and our culture equates disagreement with judgment, then in order for us to be “loving” in our culture requires that we not disagree with people. It means that we should, under no circumstances, tell people that their belief and/or their behavior is wrong, even if the Bible condemns such beliefs and behaviors as wrong.

This “love” that lacks judgement, disagreement or rebuke is now the culturally accepted norm in the public square as well as in many expressions of the local church. To “love” others now means to provide unconditional acceptance of people’s beliefs and behaviors. It is to agree to disagree without ever expressing disagreement…because disagreeing would be judging, and judging is unloving.

So…let us ask the question: does acting as a “loving” church mean that the church should offer people unconditional acceptance of their beliefs and behaviors…even if we read that those beliefs and behaviors are what the Bible defines as sin? Some of you are quick to assume that I’m talking about LGTBQ behavior…but I could just as easily be talking about lust, gossip, lying, self-righteousness, drunkenness, the use of pornography, or gluttony. I’m talking about sin…period. Does “loving” people mean that we speak not of God’s judgment regarding sinful behaviors that would render them “a sinner?” Does “loving” people mean that we do not risk offense?

Jesus embodied Perfect Love, so the let us ask the question: Did Jesus love people without offense? Did Jesus provide unconditional acceptance of people’s beliefs and behaviors?

No…He didn’t. Jesus loved people perfectly, Jesus loved people without condition, Jesus loved people sacrificially, and Jesus loved people with His offer of forgiveness….but the love of Jesus included telling people the truth about their beliefs and their behaviors in light of God’s law and judgment. Look to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 where Jesus essentially says, “You’ve heard it’s bad…I’m telling you it’s worse than you think!”

For example: You have heard it said, “You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.” But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to the council and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. Matthew 5:21-22
You have heard it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Matthew 5:27-28

Jesus condemned people and entire cities because they refused to repent…and yet there was not one second in Jesus’ life when He was not perfectly loving.

Jesus loved people perfectly; but loving them perfectly meant holding people accountable to the judgements of God. Why? Why would Jesus risk offending his listeners? Why would Jesus risk challenging the cultural norms of beliefs and behaviors that were socially and religiously acceptable in His culture? Here’s why: because the love of God and the justice of God are inseparable. God loves us, but God will also hold us accountable for our sin. Such is why Jesus thought it loving to warn people about their sin so that they would have the opportunity to repent and be forgiven. And then Jesus went to the cross so their sins could be forgiven and atoned for.

Jesus forgives, but first Jesus calls people to repent. Jesus knew that when people repent and receive the forgiveness of God, a forgiveness Jesus would purchase with his own perfect blood, those repentant souls would be forever changed, they would become saved people…they would become Jesus people…they would become the fellowship of the redeemed, The Bride of Christ, …those who repented and received His forgiveness would be spared an eternity apart from God. And that was the mission of Jesus that he articulated in Luke 19: “To seek and to save the lost.”

We are all “the lost.” We are all those who are covered up in sin, and nobody’s sin is any worse than the rest. But only those who will confess their sin and repent of their sin will inherit the gift of God’s unmerited grace in Jesus Christ. Jesus sent his disciples into every town and village with a very clear message: The Kingdom of God is at hand, REPENT! Jesus was perfectly loving, and here is what He said: in Luke 13:3 Jesus said, “Unless you repent you will perish,” and then two verses later He says it again in vs. 5, “Unless you repent you will all perish.”

Church: telling sin-sick people that their sin is not sin is not loving. If we tell sinful people that their sin is not sin out of “love,” we are actually telling them, “Don’t repent! No worries, you are good…you should feel secure and confident that you will go to heaven without repentance!” We are comforting them with an unspoken promise that “good people go to heaven…repentance is not required.” But that is a false promise that is not at all in alignment with the teachings of Jesus. According to the Bible, good people don’t go to heaven…forgiven people go to heaven. And forgiven people are those who repent of their sin and call upon the name of Jesus for forgiveness.

Church, the virtue of agape love as modeled by our King and Savior, Jesus Christ, never spared people the judgments of God. His was not a milk-toast kind of love that avoided confrontation because, let’s be honest, real love…genuine love…does not spare confrontation. Tolerance spares confrontation…genuine love risks offense.

That is why the most difficult and ironic application of agape love is this: we will risk offense to confront people with the judgments of God. To ignore the confrontational nature of agape love is to edit the vast majority of what Jesus actually said in the gospels.
Now, let me be perfectly clear: presenting people with the law and judgments of God means simply honoring God’s Word as the authority of our faith. It means we apply God’s Word first to ourselves, but in love, we do not spare others from the same treatment. IN NO WAY am I advocating that we should be judging people…WE DON’T JUDGE PEOPLE…GOD JUDGES PEOPLE. And it is not our job or our privilege to point out people’s sin as though somehow we are qualified or appointed by God to be the “sin police.” God forbid…not one of us is tasked to point out the speck in brother’s eye until we have dealt with the plank in our own eye. What I am saying is that we do not neuter the Word of God, or amend it, or in some way provide “work arounds” for people out of “LOVE.” Love means we lead people to Jesus, to hear what He said, to submit themselves to His judgments, and to call upon His grace for their forgiveness. AGAPE, unconditional love, is not squishy, and it’s not legalistic…it’s JESUS…period. To love people is to lead them to Jesus, and to love them like Jesus. Like Jesus, we will extend grace to the broken, and we will speak truth to the proud. We will eat with sinners, we will touch the lepers, we will rebuke the self-righteous, and we will lay down our lives for people who hate us. The virtue of agape love in us will make us shine like a city on a hill…but it will be costly.

Make no mistake Colonial, this perfect kind of love is the narrow road that Jesus spoke of. It is costly, and it requires more action than words. The virtue of agape love will be too “confrontational” for the left and too “liberal” for the right! There is no “safe” side for the Jesus follower. Jesus was hated by the left and the right...both wanted Him dead. The narrow way, the hard way, the way that leads to life...is this path of agape love...truth and grace...it is the way of Jesus. I pray that God gives us the humility and courage to walk this path no matter what comes…and I thank God for the privilege of walking this path with you. Let’s pray.