

Together We Experience Love
Pastor Joe Oakley
GFC – 9/22/19

We're happy to have you with us as we continue our Back to Church series called *Together*, which is based on the book of Ephesians.

As we start out today, I'd like to play a little word game. Some things just go together. Need proof? Okay, I'm going to say a word, and I want you to say the first word that pops into your head. You can just call it out. Ready?

Salt and ... (pepper)

Peanut butter and ...(jelly)

Adam and... (Eve)

Hide and ...(seek)

We could go on all day, demonstrating the power of things that have become so closely associated that they are inseparable.

Now, what do people think of when they hear the word *church*? You may have a word that comes to mind, but it's not likely the same for everyone. Depending on your experience, the association could be positive, negative, or somewhere in between. Common answers are things like faith or hope. But 1 Corinthians 13:13 says:

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

God is telling us that the greatest thing we can be known by is love! I want to challenge us as a church to consider what it would take to build an inseparable link between *church* and *love* so that when the world hears the word *church*, their immediate association is *love*. That's a tough challenge, so how do we get there?

Last week our focus was on Paul's message that Together We Find Peace. Today we'll explore this concept: Together We Experience Love. In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul addressed this same topic of how as believers we can experience love. If you weren't with us last week for Back to Church Sunday, we talked a little bit about the church in Ephesus.

For a quick recap, this group of believers faced challenges much like the ones the church faces today. They were a diverse, multicultural group, trying to figure out how to live out their faith in Jesus together. And in light of those challenges, Paul emphasizes over and over again the importance of love. And he prayed for it in Ephesians 3:16-19:

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,

together with all the Lord's holy people, 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.

What great imagery Paul uses here to convey God's vast, limitless love. I pray you know love that passes knowledge!

Think of the widest thing you can think of – and God's love is wider.
That means no matter how far you are from God – He still loves you!
Think of the longest things you can think of – and God's love is longer.
So, no matter how long you've been away from God – He still loves you!
Think of the deepest thing you can think of – and God's love is deeper.
So, no matter how deep you've fallen into sin – God still loves you!

this is the love we can experience and model together in the church. You see, the thing about love is that it's relational. It is meant to be shared. It is meant to be experienced together. It is together that our ability to grasp God's love deepens. God dwells with His people, and so His love is present when we come together. As we gather, we experience His love in tangible ways. We find support, belonging, acceptance, encouragement, and strength from others. The Apostle Paul talked about this in 2 Corinthians 7:5-6:

When we arrived in Macedonia, there was no rest for us. We faced conflict from every direction, with battles on the outside and fear on the inside. But God, who encourages those who are discouraged, encouraged us by...

How do you think God encouraged Paul? Here's how: *...by the arrival of Titus.*

God could have encouraged Paul all by Himself – but sometimes God does some of His best work through people! All of us need God – but all of us also need friends from God. We experience love together!

All of us go through tough times in life and we need people who will comfort us and encourage us. But it goes both ways.... If you want people to be there for you in tough times you need to be there for others in the tough times. Proverbs 18:24 says:

A man who has friends must himself be friendly, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

The way to have friends is to be a friend to others! The way to be loved is to love others! If all we do is show up here once or twice, a week, walk in, sing a few songs, smile and shake a few hands or share a few hugs, then walk back out into our lives like nothing is different, then we've missed the point. We might as well drop in at the country club or the PTA meeting. But instead, if we came to church with the motivation to love God and love people with all our heart and strength –

it would change everything! When that happens, we're able to receive support and encouragement when we need it—and to offer acceptance and help to others when they need it. And in all these things, we are then experiencing the transformative power of God's love in our individual lives and our church. We are tapping into the very nature of God.

1 John 4:8 tells us: *God is love.*

God doesn't just have love or show love, He IS love. God and His nature cannot be separated. The world has been shaped by God's love from creation to Revelation! It was love that caused God to send His only Son to earth to die for us so that our sins could be forgiven and we could be restored to God.

Love is not a side note! It is God's nature and His plan for the world. It is also how the world will know the truth about Jesus! Jesus gives us the big key to reaching unbelievers for Christ in John 13:34-35:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.

People will not know we are believers in Christ by our buildings or our hard work or our success or our church services. They will know by our love. The key to reaching unbelievers is to love other believers!

I know you're probably thinking, "Wait a minute, the key to reaching unbelievers is to love unbelievers." And there is truth in that. Loving unbelievers is a key to outreach – but it's not the main key. We must love believers and unbelievers, but Galatians 6:10 says:

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Notice that the emphasis is on loving other believers first! God's Word says that the world will know we are Christians:

Not by our Church attendance or our Bible knowledge.

Not by our giving, our worship or by our praying.

All those things are important and have their place in the Christian life.

But Jesus says that there is one quality that overrides them all: LOVE!

The key to reaching unbelievers is the way we treat each other!

People will not believe we love Jesus unless we love each other.

Almost 100% of people believe Jesus was good and loving. If they don't see us living and loving like Him, they don't believe we are His followers. So, you can say you are a believer – but if unbelievers don't see you loving your wife and kids and other believers – they won't believe you! People will not believe we are Christians if we don't love other Christians!

Not only that, but Jesus prayed for all believers in John 17:23

May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me.

Wow! This is one of the most powerfully disturbing thoughts in Scripture: The world will not know that Jesus is the son of God if we don't love one another! The world will not believe that Christianity is true if we don't love each other. The world will not believe God loves them if they do not see our love for each other.

The point is that the way we treat each other is a deciding factor in people believing in Christ. We can believe right, preach right, sing right, do everything right, but without love and unity, no one will believe us.

Love among Christians is a key to changing our world. We want to touch heaven and change earth – but it starts with us loving each other. Remember 1 John 3:16 says:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

Love requires us to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters in Christ. We do this by sacrificially meeting the needs of those around us. If Christians do not get along and don't love each other - is it any wonder unbelievers want no part of Christianity? One of the main things that repels unbelievers is the way that Christians treat each other!

People in the world know how hard it is to make marriages work and friendships last. They know they need help and many times they turn to the church. And when they see that we are no better at relationships than they are – it drives them away. That's why the way we love other believers is the key to reaching unbelievers!

In a world where people unfriend each other very easily - people need to see us love one another enough to work through our differences.

In a world full of racial strife – people need to see different ethnicities in the church loving each other.

In a world full of political hatred – people need to see Christians of all political persuasions loving each other.

Listen, I know that relationships are difficult and messy. I know it's nearly impossible to love some people. That's why Romans 5:5 says: *The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us.*

Sometimes we just have to pray – “Holy Spirit, love them through me because I can't love them by myself!”

God does not command us to have loving feelings toward other people – He commands us to do what Jesus did. He loved enough to die to Himself and meet the needs of others!

So, you can say you love people in your heart all day long – but if it's not seen in actions it's not love. And actions require closeness, relationship, togetherness! In other words, true love can only be known by the actions it prompts. In the Bible, love is always active, not passive. It is a verb. I John 3:18 says:

My children, our love should not be just words and talk; it must be true love, which shows itself in action.

We know God loves because He did something – He gave His Son. It is not I'll love you if, or I'll love you because but, I'll love you period. In other words – God's love is "in spite of" not "because of." God loves us in spite of who we are, not because of who we are. God loves us in spite of what we do, not because of what we do.

And when we truly love, we will do what is best for the other person whether they deserve it or not. This is the kind of love that God commands us to have for each other!

So that leads us back to the question I posed at the beginning of our time together today: How can we create an inseparable association between church and love? What does that look like to us and to the world outside? How do we experience world-changing love together? There is no single right answer, but for today I'd like to suggest three ways that can serve as starting points for us as we experience God's love together.

1- Connection: We experience love together by being connected

Ephesians 3:18 says:

I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.

The prayer is not that we would simply experience the love of God personally, but that we would experience it together! A love for God results in a love for God's family.

It may seem obvious, but it's important to realize that love can't be experienced alone. There are many people today who have problems with church. They claim to be believers in Christ, but they want nothing to do with His family. They say their relationship with God is a personal thing and they do not need any church or other believers. Nothing could be farther from biblical truth! 1 John 4:7-8 says:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

Don't tell me you love God, but not people.
 When we love God we also love God's family.
 We were not created to live the Christian life alone.
 We need each other. We are connected to one another.

This is why it bothers me when people say things like, "I can still be a Christian without going to church. Yes, that's possible, however, it is something like being:
 A student who will not go to school.
 A parent without a family.
 A salesman without customers.
 An author without readers.
 A football player without a team.
 Love is something that we experience together!

That's why our church offers many opportunities to meet other people. We offer small groups, study groups, classes, family outings, and more. Relationship is always a goal, but we can't build relationships for you! You must initiate that yourself!

Let me challenge you today: If you're just filling a chair on Sunday morning, plug in, try a class, show up at a men's or women's breakfast. I'm confident that you will find a place of belonging where together we can experience love and spiritual growth.

If you are already involved in some way, let challenge you to reach out to those who are seeking their place of belonging. Let's all look for ways to better love each other and to share that love beyond ourselves.

2- We experience love through Comfort

Life isn't easy, and all of us have stories of pain, struggle, and heartache. We all have difficult seasons when we need each other even more. As a church, we want to be there for each other, whether it's a shoulder to cry on or the support we give through ministries like our widow's ministry or grief ministry. Love binds us together and gives us opportunities to care for each other in times of need.

3- We experience love through Collaboration

Christianity is not for lone rangers – we need each other. From meeting others' needs like we just mentioned to harnessing our skills and abilities toward a common goal, we have the ability and opportunity to serve and to make a real difference in others' lives.

We have people who collaborate in our small groups, ministries, creative arts, missions, community outreaches like Taking Jesus to the Streets or getting involved in our city's community projects. In collaboration, we are greater than the sum of our parts. We are able to find fulfillment together when we use our God-given gifts and talents to work together.

Whatever way you choose to plug in, it is love that guides and unifies us. And it is Christ living in us that allows His love to grow in us and flow through us. It has always been God's plan for His people to live in unity and to experience love together.

I know it's not easy because some people are difficult to love. But, Jesus did not say, "Love people when they're loveable. Love them when you feel like it. Love them as long as they meet your needs." NO! Jesus allows no excuses. He says, "Whatever they do to you, you love them anyway!"

Jesus gave the world His best and they killed Him - yet He loved them anyway. That's the radical way Jesus loves. He loves anyway. Aren't you glad He loves you anyway - In spite of yourself? We have all sinned, but Jesus loves us anyway! We have all failed, but Jesus loves us anyway! We all are less than perfect, but Jesus loves us anyway! We are all unlovable at times, but Jesus loves us anyway! This is totally opposite of how the world loves - but this is how we are loved by God and this is how He wants us to love others.

People are sinful. *Love them anyway.*
 People will fail you. *Love them anyway.*
 People are illogical, unreasonable and self-centered. *Love them anyway.*
 People can be everything from inconsiderate to outright mean and cruel. *Love them anyway.*
 People will take advantage of you and hurt you. *Love them anyway.*
 People you're counting on will let you down. *Love them anyway.*
 People won't always love you unconditionally. *Love them anyway!*
 People won't always meet your needs. *Love them anyway!*
 Love people regardless of their condition or their worthiness.
 Love your family, love your friends and love your enemies!

I'm telling you right now, none of us can do this in our own strength. We all fall short in loving others, but we can no longer excuse it. We need to cry out to God to change our hearts and ask for God to love the unlovable through us and forgive the unforgivable through us!

We need to die to ourselves and unselfishly meet the needs of those around us - because then - together we will experience love that will touch heaven and change earth!