

8 – Greater Love
Pastor Deborah Oakley – GFC – Feb. 18, 2024

We are in a sermon series called “Greater” and since Valentine's Day was this week, we thought it would be good to preach on Greater Love. Valentine’s Day is a day that we celebrate love. But love has become such a misunderstood word that we forget its true meaning. 1 John 4:8 says:

Whoever does not love does not know God because God is love.

God’s love is different than our kind of love. That’s because God IS love. Love comes from God and that is why it is the greatest love ever known to mankind. It’s a far superior love to any love anyone has ever experienced. Apart from God, love would not exist because He embodies love. 1 John 4:16 says:

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.

Love is only found in God. We cannot separate the two. So, let’s begin by looking at the different meanings of love. In English we are limited to one word for love. So, I can say, I love to travel and to read. I love movies, chocolate candy, my family, and God. The word becomes almost meaningless because my love for God is obviously greater than my love for all other things.

Here’s how Webster’s dictionary defines love:

Love is: A deep and tender feeling of affection
 Attachment or devotion to someone or something
 A strong liking or interest in someone or something

You can see that our word love is limited to the feelings and attachments we have.

The New Testament was originally written in the Greek language. The Greeks had four words for love—

Eros-	physical love – passion – it’s where we get the word erotic This is the physical love reserved for marriage between a husband and wife.
Phileo-	affection – fondness - love between friends – This love is reciprocal – I love you because you love me.
Storge-	family love – blood is thicker than water.
Agape –	God’s kind of love – a deliberate desire for the highest good of another, which reveals itself in sacrificial action towards others regardless of their condition or worth.

The first 3 Greek words for love are similar to our word for love. They involve affection, personal attachment, and feeling. However, **agape is greater love, involving the deliberate choice of the will and sacrificial actions.**

In other words, **greater love can only be known by the actions it prompts.** It's active, not passive.

Agape love contains the essential nature of God and is selfless and unconditional. God's love is a giving kind of love. It is seen in the gift of His Son. It is not I'll love you if, or I'll love you because but, I'll love you period.

Most of what we consider to be love is conditional. We tend to give love if we receive love and withhold love if our needs are not met. But agape love creates value in the object of its love.

Agape creates value in seemingly valueless people.
 Agape creates beauty in seemingly unattractive people.
 Agape creates significance in seemingly insignificant people.

God doesn't love us because we are so great or deserving. God loves us in spite of what we do, not because of what we do. Romans 5:5-8 says:

God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us. You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Think of the worst person who ever lived, and Christ loved them enough to die for them. In John 3:16, we see the greatest act of God's love as He sends His Son, Jesus, into the world to die on the cross for all our sins.

His greater love saves us, forgives us, cleanses us, fills us with His spirit, heals us, changes us, delivers us, gives us grace, shows us mercy, endures with us, pursues us, guides us, is patient with us, corrects us, speaks to us, protects us, and on and on it goes. He does all this and more because of His greater love. We don't deserve any of it, but He does it anyway.

God's love is greater because it is an unconditional love that is motivated by the higher good of others. It's a selfless love that is focused on giving love.

Pastor Joe and I will celebrate our 50th wedding anniversary in June. We've been working on selecting pictures for a video for the event. Just an aside...how are we supposed to reduce 10 thousand or more pictures down to 150 or less?

Listen, it took me 5 months to go through every picture we've ever taken. Ok so here's the thing. Looking at our entire lives together has made me fall in love with Joe all over again. Not that I ever fell out of love, but I'm like all about him.

I mean 50 years is a long time and we never would have made it without MY...I mean Joe's love. But those pictures made me realize all the things I love about him.

I love the times we've spent together and the memories we've made.

I love how kind and giving He is.

I love his selflessness.

I love him because he gets me.

Do you notice anything about my love? It's all about me. It's all about everything He does for me. The Bible calls that phileo love. Or brotherly love. It's a reciprocal love. But agape love is the God kind of love. It's selfless. It lays down one's life for the other person. It's the greater love.

So, I'm not looking at those pictures thinking: "Oh, I remember that picture. That was the time we lived in a rented run-down house because Joe wanted to wait until we saved more money to buy the house I wanted. I remember those 8 grueling years waiting for Joe to "be ready." I love him so much for making me wait."

No, I'm not thinking I love him so much for making a wise decision that meant I had to lay down my life. But guess what? My act of laying down my life and waiting WAS greater love. John 15:12-13 says:

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

This doesn't just mean that you would physically die for someone - but that you would daily die to yourself for them. You put them before yourself and sacrifice for them. Usually when we say we love someone, what we really mean is we love what they do for us. I gave up what I wanted for Joe's sake. I had to wait until he felt financially comfortable buying a house. That was greater love.

So, I started thinking about people in the Bible who had greater love. The first and greatest love story in the Bible is between God and man. Obviously, God's love is supreme. John 3:16 says:

For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son.

Love is spelled GIVE and God gave the greatest sacrifice known to mankind. Jesus also gave. He gave His life so we could live in eternity. It's also compelling to note the greater love of the disciples as they literally gave their lives to follow Jesus.

Matthew was killed by a sword wound.

Mark was dragged by horses through the streets until he was dead.

Luke was hanged in Greece.

John was boiled in a huge basin or caldron of boiling oil but still lived.

Later he died as an old man, the only apostle to die peacefully.

Peter - was crucified upside down on a cross.

James - was thrown down over a hundred feet from the Temple. When they discovered that he survived the fall, his enemies beat James to death with a club.

James the Son of Zebedee was beheaded in Jerusalem.

Bartholomew was martyred for his preaching in Armenia where he was beat to death by a whip.

Andrew was crucified on an X-shaped cross in Greece.

Thomas was stabbed with a spear.

Jude was killed with arrows.

Matthias was stoned and then beheaded.

Paul was imprisoned, tortured, and then beheaded.

Let me read John 15:13 again:

Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

Also keep in mind we don't have to die to lay down our life. Since it's Black History month I'm reminded of Harriett Tubman. Although she did not die doing it, she risked her life for 10 years as she rescued approximately 70 enslaved people from slavery taking 13 life threatening trips to help them escape. It's reported that whether or not she could hear the footsteps of the bounty hunters gaining on her for the reward, Harriet Ross Tubman was driven by love. Had she been caught she could have been killed. But she was motivated by a love greater than her fear of dying.

So, as I considered the characteristics of love, I began thinking of biblical examples I could preach on. Fortunately, the Bible provides excellent models for us to follow: I chose three to highlight today:

The first is JACOB AND RACHEL. It begins when Issac, Jacob's father sends him to his brother Laban's home where he falls in love with Laban's daughter Rachel. In order to marry Rachael, Laban tells him he must work 7 years.

Genesis 29:16-18 says:

Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel was lovely in form, and beautiful. Jacob was in love with Rachel and said, "I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel."

And that's what he did. Genesis 29:20 shows us a glimpse of this greater love.

Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.

Some of us complain if we have to serve others for 10 minutes. Then something terrible happens: On the wedding night Laban secretly switches Rachel for his older daughter Leah. Then he agrees again to give Rachel to Laban if he works

another 7 years. Jacob agrees to another 7 years for a total of 14 years to be with the one he loves.

This story exemplifies greater, sacrificial love. Jacob was willing to wait and to work to get the woman he loved. He could have given up and decided it was too hard. But he endured injustice and difficulty to give his love to Rachael.

Then there's love between friends exemplified by Jonathan and David. Jonathan's father was Saul, the king of Israel. Jonathan was next in line to be king, but God chose David to be king. After David killed Goliath - Saul initially loved David - but he became jealous of David and tried to kill him so he would not be king.

What David needed at this point was a true friend. And he found it in an unlikely person - Jonathan - Saul's son who was next in line for the throne! Instead of fighting against David - Jonathan fought for David. He even warned him when his father was going to try to kill him. 1 Samuel 23:16-17 says:

And Saul's son Jonathan went to David and helped him find strength in God. "Don't be afraid," he said. "My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this." The two of them made a covenant before the Lord.

This is a beautiful example of greater love.

Greater love is willing to be second fiddle so you can find your destiny.

Greater love is loyal even when it's hard to be loyal.

Greater love is the first to be there in good times or in bad.

Greater love believes in you when no one else does.

Greater love loves others as they love themselves.

1 Samuel 18:1 says:

Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself.

Jonathan and David had a greater love because each of them considered the other above themselves.

Then there's RUTH AND NAOMI. The story of Ruth and Naomi is about a mother-in-law named Naomi and her two daughter-in-laws named Ruth and Orpah. When all three of their husbands die Naomi decided to return to the land of Judah.

On the road to Judah, Naomi tells her two daughters-in-law to return to their home country believing it would be better for them. Orpah decided to return home, but Ruth did no such thing. Instead, she begged to continue with Naomi. Ruth did not even know if Naomi was going to a better or worse place. All she could think of was not leaving Naomi to go through life alone.

Both of these women show greater love. They both wanted what was best for the

other with little or no thought for themselves. Ruth 1:11-13 says:

Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me — even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons— would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me!"

In these words, Naomi's greater love for Ruth and Orpha demonstrates the power of sacrificial love. We see this in Ruth's endearing poetic response to Naomi's plea for her to go back home. Ruth 1:16-18 says:

Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

Ruth's unwavering loyalty highlights the power of sacrificial love. She pledged to stay by Naomi's side, even if it meant leaving behind her own family and home and never marrying again.

In closing, I'd like to talk about 1 Corinthians chapter 13 commonly known as the love chapter. First, I want to give some background which is found in 1 Corinthians chapters 1-12. In these chapters Paul admonishes the Corinthians because they were being proud, self-seeking, and in the flesh. He is correcting and re-directing them. Why? Because they had the gifts of the spirit but lacked the fruit of the spirit. They wanted the gifts without the fruit of the spirit of which love is the first and greatest fruit.

So, Paul ends the first 12 chapters of Corinthians by making this spectacular transition and conclusion in 1 Corinthians 12:31:

Eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way.

Notice Paul didn't say a slightly better gift, or an improved gift. Notice He didn't say a better way, or a preferable way, or an optional way. No, he said love is a greater gift and love is the most excellent way.

Then, Paul goes from correcting and admonishing for 12 chapters to a beautiful, poetic love chapter. His entire style changes to beautiful imagery as he elevates the fruit of the spirit of love. Listen to 1 Corinthians 13.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails... And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

I want to draw your attention to several things here. First Paul uses some very strong language to point out that the gifts and faith without love are useless. Without love “I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.” Without love “I am nothing,” and “I gain nothing.”

You see a lack of love doesn’t diminish our effectiveness; it eliminates it! Everything in our lives – including the gifts and faith – must flow from the first and greatest fruit of the spirit, which is love. Love is the all-encompassing, and greatest fruit.

God’s love is the greatest love of all and when we have a revelation of the greatness of God’s love, it enables us to have greater love for others.

God’s love for us is so great that nothing can stop it!

Romans 8:38-39 says:

Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God’s love for you is so great that nothing can separate you from it!
 Even when you’ve made a huge mess of things, God still loves you!
 Even though others forsake you, He will never leave you or forsake you!
 Even though others’ love is conditional, God’s love is unconditional!
 Even though other people’s love has limits, God’s love has no limits!
 God loves you at your best and He loves you at your worst!
 God loves you when you’re up and He loves you when you’re down!
 God loves you when you succeed and He loves you when you fail!

However great you think God’s love is – it is actually much greater!