

February 12, 2023

Love is Messy

OVERVIEW OF TODAY'S STUDY

Generally speaking, life's most exhilarating, heart pounding highs and life's most gut wrenching, painful lows come from relationships. When you walk into somebody's home and look at the photographs hanging on the wall or a fireplace mantle, they are NOT photos of houses, cars, jewelry or a bank. They are photos of people. It is a vivid reminder that life's meaning is largely derived from relationships. But loving people well is not easy. It takes skill and time and unselfishness and sacrifice. But it is so worth it; it is what gives our life richness and meaning. In today's lesson we are going to explore how we can "love well" the people in our sphere of influence.

GET READY

- ▶ In the book *Your ONE Life* read chapters 21-25 and the conclusion in the section called "Practicing the Presence of People".
- ▶ On a scale of 1-10, rate your satisfaction with your relationships. Put an X on the line that reflects your level of satisfaction.

Very Unsatisfied

Extremely Satisfied



- ▶ Who is someone that has added value to your life? Consider dropping them a note this week to express your gratitude to them.
- ▶ What is one relationship that you need to work on? What is one practical step you could take to invest in that relationship?

START HERE

In Romans 12:10 (NIV), the apostle Paul says *Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.* Those words are a mandate to every Christ-follower. We are to be committed to one another. According to Paul, our devotion isn't only to Christ, but also to each other. In many ways, it is much easier to love God because He is perfect, just, loving, and always consistent. But people are needy, manipulative, insecure, and unpredictable.

The last part of Romans 12:10 challenges us to honor one another above ourselves. What does it look like practically for us to honor others above ourselves? The English Standard Version translates this phrase "outdo one another in showing honor." Normally, when we compete, we do so to show that we are the best. But, Paul, flips the script. He basically says that if you want to be competitive, compete in showing honor to others.

Discussion Question

What are some practical ways that your group could be “devoted to one another in love”?

GO DEEPER

1. Relationships are in the DNA of creation

In the genetic code of how God created the universe is the DNA of relationships.

- Relationships are hard-wired into the trinity

The original small group was the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. From eternity past, they have lived in community. They are three distinct personalities, but they live in perfect harmony and interdependence. Even in the Godhead, the value of relationship is demonstrated.

- Relationships are hard-wired into us personally

In Genesis 2, for the very first time, God looks at something he made and said “It is NOT good”.

And the Lord God said, It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a companion who will help him. Genesis 2:18 (NLT)

This isn’t just a verse about marriage. It is about the universal need of all humans for companionship. We all long to belong and it is hard-wired into us. You can’t help it. Even when people come and visit Oakwood, they are quietly asking... “Will I fit here? Will I be accepted? Is this a place where I can make friends?”.

- Relationships are hard-wired into the church

When you were born again, you were given a family called the body of Christ, the church. Your immediate spiritual family is the congregation at Oakwood and your small group. Hopefully you can say that you “belong” here and that you are in relationship with a few people at Oakwood.

Listen to these words that describe how the early church functioned when it exploded on to the scene in Acts 2.

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer...Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, Acts 2:42,46 (NIV)

They met for corporate worship where there was praise and prayer and teaching. They met together in large groups for inspiration and instruction.

But the body life of the church was lived out in small groups as they met from home to home. They didn't just meet for an hour on Sunday and then scatter to the winds only to return next Sunday for another hour. They did life together. They spent time together. They were involved in each other's lives.

It was in the homes that people developed a sense of community and belonging. It was in the small groups that people learned to pray. It was in the small groups that people ministered to one another and supported one another. It was up close and personal. You see, these small group experiences were like the laboratory of the Christian life.

Discussion Questions

What are the qualities of a life-giving small group? What do you enjoy most about your group?

It is hard for us to visualize what early Christianity was like. Certainly it was very different from the Christianity we know today.

- There were no big buildings.
- There were no denominations
- There were no theological seminaries.
- There were no Christian colleges.
- There were no Christian radio stations and bookstores.
- There were no choirs or Christian concerts.
- There were only small families of believers.
- There were only small fellowships.

All they had was the Holy Spirit and God's word and each other... and it was ENOUGH.

So, in Acts 2 we have this model of how the early church did life together in authentic community. When you go to Romans 12, we get the mandate from the apostle Paul.

And since we are all one body in Christ, we belong to each other, and each of us needs all the others. Romans 12:5b (NLT)

Discussion Questions

What do you think Paul means when he says we belong to each other? What does that look like practically?

As North Americans, we pride ourselves on our spirit of independence and rugged individualism. We even brag about “self-made” men and women. Sometimes you will hear Christians say “Religion is private. What I do is only between me and God.” That is very North American, but very unbiblical. The truth is you can’t live the Christian life on your own. Your faith is PERSONAL, but it is NOT PRIVATE.

“God alone is not enough.”

That statement may sound odd... even wrong... and heretical. But it is absolutely biblical.

When God made humans, he could have engineered us so that we only needed a relationship with Him. He could have created us as adults and made us so that we didn’t “NEED” anything else more than our relationship with him.

But he didn’t—he made us to need people. In fact, it is not a stretch to say that you wouldn’t have survived as an infant if it were not for other people. Yet, as a society and as Christians, we are struggling to feel connected in relationships. People are lonely and many are choosing isolation over relationship.

2. Relationships are the laboratory of the Christian life

Relationships are messy and often hurtful. There are probably some in your group who right now are navigating a dysfunctional and painful relationship.

And the reality is, along life’s journey, we will all experience the pain of broken relationships. C.S. Lewis said, “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.”

While there is risk in relationships, it is relationships that make life worth living. Let’s explore some practical ways that we can love people well in our sphere of influence.

- See people as God sees them.

One way you can do that is to put a “10” on everybody’s forehead. This is about training ourselves to see every person as Jesus sees them. If we are going to be like Christ, we have to learn to value EVERY person.

One of the marks of real Christian love is that it is made available to all. Everyone you meet is made in the image of God. You never lock eyes with another person that doesn’t matter to God. You never shake hands with someone who wasn’t made in the image of God. You never walk by anyone that Jesus didn’t die for.

As Christ followers, we appreciate the beauty of diversity. This is beautifully illustrated in 1 Corinthians 12:21-23 (NIV). *The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor.*

Discussion Question

Take a few moments to share what you see in somebody else in the group. What role do they play and how do they make the group better?

Paul says that those in prominent positions should take special care to show appreciation and honor to those who hold less prominent positions in the body. Prominence does not equal significance, and visible doesn’t mean more valuable. Any sensible person is more concerned with their heart than their hair. In a loving church, the most visible people aren’t any more important than the least visible person.

Paul says that we treat people with value *so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other* (1 Corinthians 12:25 NIV). When we love people well, it maximizes unity and minimizes division.

- Pay attention and be “present”

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Matthew 9:36 (NIV)

Jesus noticed. He was moved by their need. He slowed down long enough to pay attention.

One of the great miracles of life is that God pays attention to us. *When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers— the moon and the stars you set in place— what are mere mortals that you should think about them, human beings that you should care for them?* Psalm 8:3-4 (NLT)

Earlier in the Old Testament, in Numbers 6:24-26, we read *the Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.*

To turn your face toward someone is to give that person your complete, undivided, interested attention.

Discussion Question

What is your biggest distraction from being able to pay attention and be “present” with others?

There are all kinds of people just waiting to be noticed, to have someone just pay attention to them. Every day you pass people who stand up straight, smile, shake your hand, and make small talk, but inside they are wondering if anyone really cares about them. They often try to hide it, but inside they are dying for someone to pay attention to them. They have put up walls, but in their loneliness and quiet desperation, they long to be noticed, to be loved.

You must slow down to really see people. Jesus never seems to be in a hurry. Have you ever noticed that you can't pay attention in a hurry. When you are moving fast, you miss the details. Think of it this way. If someone was standing on the side of the road, would you notice more if you flew by them at 75MPH or if you walked by them on the sidewalk? The speed of our lives causes us to miss many people who God wants us to notice.

LIVE IT OUT

One of the biggest barriers to us being “present” is the constant distraction of smartphones. Have a conversation with someone this week about what you can do to be less distracted and more “present.”

► Speak words of blessing

Blessing is all about how we talk “to” people. This practice is about the words that flow from us into the lives of others. Here's the great news. Anybody can be great at blessing. It doesn't require a certain level of skill or education. And it's not dependent on your title or position in the church. The ROI (return on investment) on this is huge. For minimal investment, there is amazing return.

Luke 24 records the final moments that Jesus spends on earth. He has been crucified, resurrected, and is now ready to return to His rightful place in heaven. It is not surprising that he is spending these final hours with his band of brothers.

Jesus obviously knows that His ascension is imminent. If you were Jesus, and this was your final time to be with the disciples, what would you share with them? Perhaps Jesus will give them his three-year strategic plan for his global vision. There had regularly been infighting and jockeying for position among the disciples, so perhaps he will hand out an org chart so the disciples would have clarity on lines of authority. Since the church would be launched soon at Pentecost, perhaps it would be wise for Jesus to pass out bylaws for how the church should function and be governed.

As important as each of those things might be, that is not what we find Jesus doing in these final moments on earth. Verse 51 of Luke 24 says, *While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.* The very last words from the lips of Jesus on this planet were words of blessing.

Every one of us can remember occasions where somebody spoke blessing into our life. They affirmed us, believed in us, encouraged us, and it gave us confidence and hope. Words of blessing have great power. That's why Solomon said, *The tongue has the power of life and death.* Proverbs 18:21a NIV

Discussion Questions

Who has been a great encourager in your life? Who in your world needs encouragement from you right now?

Don't underestimate the power of your words. Your words have staying power. They stick in people's soul. Your words have the power to breathe life and grace and hope and love, or they have the power to cut and slice and poison and destroy. That's why it's so important that life-giving words flow freely and frequently from our lips.

Mother Teresa once said, "Kind words can be short and easy to speak but their echoes are truly endless."

In a world where people are beat up and put down, we have the unbelievable privilege of looking them in the eye and saying to them, "you matter, your life counts, God loves you, you are valuable, and the God of the universe is intimately interested in you."

So, how are you doing at speaking blessing? What kind of grade would you give yourself? How are you doing at speaking blessing to people in your family, at work, in your community? And how are you doing at speaking life-giving words to those in this group? Take the challenge to consistently make deposits in people's emotional bank accounts through words of blessing.

LIVE IT OUT

Make it your goal this week to intentionally encourage five people

Here is a short list of practical ways that you can bless people.

- listen attentively
- be fully present in a conversation
- ask people to share their personal story
- be interested in people's family
- celebrate someone's success victory
- see the good and God in them
- notice the little things
- personally care for them in a crisis

Which one of these are you doing well? Maybe consider circling the one that you want to work on in this coming week.

LIVE IT OUT

Pick one of the items from the list above and commit to put it into practice this coming week.

Hebrews 3:13 (NIV) is a timely challenge for all of us. *But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.*

➤ Seize the moment

One of the major themes of the book *Your ONE Life* is that we have no guarantees about our future. None of us know how many more days we have on this planet. So, we must seize the moments that God gives us today to love well the people around us.

There is a beautiful picture in the Old Testament of loving someone well. One day king David remembers a conversation he had twenty years earlier with his good friend Jonathan. In that conversation they promised they would always show kindness to each other and each other's families. But Jonathan had been tragically killed in battle years earlier, and in those days any remaining family members of a deposed king were quickly executed to put down any chance of an uprising.

After Jonathan's death, everyone in the palace had begun to flee, fearing for their lives. A nurse picked up Jonathan's five-year-old son Mephibosheth and tried to run out of the palace. However, in the confusion and panic, she fell, and young Mephibosheth was crippled for life (2 Samuel 4:4).

On that fateful day of his father's death, this little boy's entire destiny changed. One day he was running around the palace like any other five-year-old. The next day he was an orphan and a fugitive who was now crippled for life.

Twenty years later David finds Mephibosheth and has him brought to the palace. Mephibosheth is terrified. Before David can say anything, Mephibosheth falls to the floor and says, "I am your servant." But David's first words to him are filled with grace, "Don't be afraid." Then David surprises him with lavish grace.

But it still doesn't add up. So, Mephibosheth says, "What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?" This unexpected display of honor has left him reeling. It's surreal. He is a nobody. He is a fugitive. He is crippled. He has absolutely nothing to offer.

David tells him he will always be provided for, and that Mephibosheth will always eat at the king's table. Mephibosheth, a crippled fugitive, is now being included in the royal family.

Imagine this scene a few months later. The dinner bell rings through the king's palace and David comes to the head of the table and sits down. Each family member quickly takes their seat. But there is still an empty seat. They wait. They hear the shuffling of the feet, the slow movement of crutches. It is Mephibosheth slowly making his way to the table. He awkwardly slips into his seat and eats as one of the king's children. Mephibosheth knew what it was to be lavished with grace and unconditionally loved.