## **Week 6 - Love in Action (20 – 26 March)**

This is the last week of the Lent course. As the title suggests, we are looking at love and encouragement *in action*. The emphasis is on putting what we have been studying and thinking about during this Lent course into practice.

1. What do you learn from the verses below? What practical steps do they call for?

**James 1:22-25** - *But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.****23****For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror;****24****for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.****25****But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.****26***

**James 2:14-17** - *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?****15****If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food,****16****and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?****17****So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

**1 John 3:16-18 -** *We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.****17****How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?****18****Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.*

**The Example of the Early Church**

The early church demonstrated their willingness to put their faith into practice, sharing meals together and redistributing their possessions and resources for the benefit of those who had need.

1. What very practical acts of love do you see in the verses below?

**Acts 2:44-47** - *All who believed were together and had all things in common;****45****they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.****46****Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at homeand ate their food with glad and generous hearts,****47****praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

**Acts 4:32-37** - *Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.****33****With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.****34****There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.****35****They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.****36****There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means ‘son of encouragement’).****37****He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.*

1. How much of what you read about the early church in these verses do you see reflected in our own church or organisation?
2. Where might more practical acts of love be needed?
3. What can we/you do about that?

**Becoming mature in Christ**

According to theologian and teacher David Heywood, the goal, or endpoint to which all Christians are to aspire it to conform to the image of Jesus[[1]](#footnote-1). In other words, to become like Christ.

1. What does Paul say in the verses below about how we reach maturity?

**Ephesians 4:11-16** - *The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,****12****to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,****13****until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.****14****We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.****15****But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,****16****from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.*

1. How mature in Christ is our church or organisation?
2. What might we need to do to become more mature in Christ?

**Closing Comments**

How do we become the community of saints God is calling us to be? This is partly down to us and our individual responsibility. Paul writes to the Galatians to point out they can use their freedom to harm others or ‘through love become slaves to one another’. He adds, for emphasis: ‘For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”.’

But it is also partly down to the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit’s gifts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are extraordinary antidotes to all the behaviours that can fracture and damage our fellowship. This same Holy Spirit, Paul notes, can assist us to gently help those who mess upI. It is also the Holy Spirit who transforms us ‘from one degree of glory to another’, as we become more conformed to the glory and likeness of Jesus Christ.[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. What one new thing will you begin or have you begun to practice to deepen your love for others in your church or organisation?

**Pray**

Ask for the grace and power of the Holy Spirit to love one another as Christ has loved us.

**For Further Reflection**

If you remember as far back as Advent, many of the Lectionary readings from Matthew’s gospel underscored that what matters to God is whether we live what we say we believe. Perhaps the most powerful of these accounts is in Matthew 25:31-46. This story mirrors Jesus’ words earlier in Matthew 7:24-27. You might like to look these two passages up. Although about a rather different issue, Jesus’ story in Matthew 21:28-32 also bears on this.

These are far from being the only passages in the Bible. The Old Testament has many references to God being interested in what the people of Israel actually did (for example: Jeremiah 7:1-12). Their practice was even more important than their nominal worship of God (see also Micah 7:6-8). In the New Testament the authors of James and 1 John reiterate this theme.

Neither James nor John mince their words about the dangers of lip-service. Both of them suggest the true test of our Christian belief and love is whether they lead to action. John states: ‘Little children (another term of endearment) let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.’ James says where no action is evident, self-deceit is likely to be in play and that person’s ‘religious’ pretensions are ‘worthless’. James lists a number of other areas for attention under this general heading – eg James 2:1-13, James 3:1-12, 13-18 and James 4:11-12

Martin Luther was famously not fond of the book of James. He called it a ‘strawy’ book, meaning it did not have much substance. This was partly because it contains no reference to soteriology – God’s plan of salvation, unlike most other New Testament books. It was also because Luther railed against any sense that by our works or deeds, rather than faith in Jesus Christ, could we be put right with God. I am not certain that Luther realised James was making a different point, namely that the true test of the faith we say we believe is whether we are prepared to do things differently as a result. You may want to refer back to James 2:14-26. James concludes this section by stating starkly; ‘faith without works is dead.’

As well as the accounts about the early church in Acts 2:43 – 47 and 4:32-37, Acts chapter 6 shows them taking practical steps to address the concerns of the Gentile widows. The Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 is another example of the early Church finding practical ways to resolve differences that threatened to divide the Jewish and Gentile Christians.

There is an old ditty that goes like this:

’To dwell above with the saints we love, that will be glory. But to dwell below with the saints we know, well that is a different story.’

This is no new issue. On more than one occasion Jesus had to intervene with his disciples who were potentially at odds, or vying with one another. Matthew 18, for example, was written in part because of disagreements and indeed disagreeable people in the early church. Remember Peter’s question about forgiveness in Matthew 18:21-22 and Jesus’ story in reply (Matt. 18:23-35)? The same chapter contains practical advice to deal with persistent offenders, and the epistles also give evidence of conflicts that required resolution. Indeed, it is probably no exaggeration to say that we might not have as big a New Testament as we do have were it not for some of these conflicts the writers needed to address. By the same token, as we have been looking at in this course, the same writers took enormous care and trouble to describe how Christians should think and behave towards one another very much in keeping with Jesus’ remarkable prayer in John 17. The following brief section from Ephesians is just one of many such passages we have looked at:

‘And do not grieve the Holy Spirit with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore, be imitators of Christ, as beloved children, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.’ (Ephesians 4:30 – 5:2)

Back in the day, the neighbouring Rector, in adjoining parishes just south of London, was the Revd David Heywood. He since became a lecturer and writer at Cuddesdon Theological College. In one of his books, about preaching, David observed that in the New Testament the transformation of the Church to become progressively like Jesus takes centre stage. He added: ‘The conformity to the image of Jesus is the *telos* – the goal or endpoint to which all Christians are to aspire. Reaching this goal is described as *teleiosis* which denotes “maturity”.’

Heywood suggests that the Beatitudes and the ‘fruit of the Spirit’ are both examples of this maturity and represent a radically different lifestyle. Paul is among other New Testament writers who urge the believers to ‘lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.’

When you think about the Beatitudes and the fruits of the Spirit, they are manifestly Christ-like. Moreover, they are all about the attitudes and priorities that underpin and motivate Christ-like action.

This maturity and lifestyle in Christ is not just for individual Christians but is also addressed to whole churches. David Heywood again:

‘… All the New Testament letters go into detail about Christian behaviour. Within the church Christians are to display humility, gentleness, compassion and mutual love. Their roles as husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves were to be governed by an ethic of mutual submission. They are to learn and put into practice the ‘ministry’ of Christ himself, characterised by love, humility and self-sacrifice.’

John Henry Newman (1801-1890) wrote a prayer along these lines:

‘Help me to spread your fragrance everywhere I go – let me preach you without preaching, not by words but by my example – by the catching force, the sympathetic influence of what I do, the evident fullness of the love my heart bears to you.’

1. Romans 8:29, 1 Corinthians 15:49 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2 Cor. 3.17-18 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)