

Path to Greatness: Love God and Others
Pastors Chris Farmer and Bonita Wood
Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 12:30, 31; Romans 12:13b

Jim Collin's book, *Good to Great*, has inspired business and church leaders. Collins leads a team of researchers on an investigation of 28 good companies that became great as measured by their outperforming the stock market by at least seven times over a 15-year period. Many companies are now applying the "hedgehog concept" and other principles from the book to walk the path to greatness.

Likewise, many good churches are seeking to become great churches. Hundreds of para-church and mega-church industries exist to help local congregations walk the path to greatness. They provide resources to help them with fund raising, facility development, creative worship resources, and programming. Most areas have at least one "great" church as measured by measured by numbers and facilities.

However, large churches are discovering that size of one's worship attendance, facilities, and staff, does not always equal significance. Large or small churches alike need something better than mere success in numbers. Many people in mid-life build their lives around success and find themselves empty. So, they go through a season of rethinking and realignment of their lives around significance. Churches follow a similar path. They too realize that the true path to greatness requires a realignment around the significant purpose of Christ and following in his steps. The Bible says, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and ... he went around doing good and healing all those who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him" (Acts 10:38). Jesus' greatness is summed up, "he went around doing good & healing." Maybe from God's perspective, a great church focuses upon doing what is good and healing.

We, at Tipp City UMC, desire to follow Christ along his path to greatness. Like Jesus, we're dependent on God's anointing to walk around doing good and healing all the oppressed. We're called to reach people far from God and to develop radiant followers of Christ.

A ferocious barking caught my attention on snow-covered Saturday. I quickly rose from my chair and walked to our back patio. I found our dog's tail standing straight up and fur bristling. He glared out toward the front of our house. I walked to a window facing our driveway and saw no parked cars. Returning to our dog, Albert, I saw that he was barking at a stray dog that had wandered onto his turf. I pulled him inside the house to keep him from this intruder.

Albert's persistent barking called Ilea from the computer to see what was going on. I told her that a stray dog had walked into our back yard. She insisted that we lure the stray to our home and find it's master. I tried to assure her that it would eventually find it's way home. She said, "Dad, where's your heart. Some owner is looking for it and we must help." So, off she went into the back yard. By this time, the stray had wandered off to some unknown land.

About ten minutes later, Ilea and I got in our SUV and started backing out our driveway for Troy. We noticed a car driving slowly in our neighborhood. Ilea said, "Dad, I bet that is the dog's owner, let's go and see if he needs some help finding his dog." Reluctantly, I said, "OK." The older man driving the car said that he was looking for his Shetland sheepdog, Smokey. We said that we would be glad to help him find his lost dog. We drove around the block and saw no sign of Smokey. Then, all of a sudden, Ilea said, "Dad, there he is. Stop the car." Before I had our vehicle completely stopped, she was out of the SUV and running after the lost dog. Love compelled her to immediate action with no regard for her self. She had a light jacket on and

some high top gym shoes. It didn't matter that the sub-freezing temperatures and the icy snow would threaten frostbite. Love drove her to seek the lost.

I went home, retrieved a dog leech, and dog treat to secure the dog once we found it. When I went back to the area where I dropped off Ilea, I couldn't find her. Now we had Smokey the lost dog and a lost teenager. Neither could be found.

I walked around the neighbor's yards, following human and dog tracks in the snow. Still no Smokey, no Ilea. I noticed another neighbor driving slowly in the neighborhood. I approached him and asked if he had seen the lost dog and my lost daughter. He hadn't. He asked me, if I had seen his lost teenage son. I said, "No, I hadn't." He said that his son saw the stray dog and left the house immediately with no jacket or coat on. Now we had Smokey the lost dog, and two poorly dressed lost teenagers seeking him.

Eventually, we caught up with Ilea and the other teen. They had chased Smokey all the way home into the loving care of his Master. We rejoiced that Smokey the lost dog had found his way home. On the way into Troy, Ilea and I talked about how significant it was to set aside our shopping in order to walk around doing good, seeking for the lost.

I learned that day that love forgets about oneself to go and seek after that which is lost. Love finds significance in helping the lost find their way back home. Radiant followers of Christ walk in such steps of love.

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I learned that day that love forgets about oneself to go and seek after that which is lost. Love finds significance in bringing the lost back home. Radiant followers of Christ walk in such steps of love.

As we fulfill our purpose of **reaching people far from God and developing radiant followers of Jesus**, one of the main steps we take in that journey is to **Love God and Others**. Because as Pastor Chris said – Radiant followers of Christ walk in such steps of love.

The problem we run into is trying to figure out what that kind of love is. Love is such a popular word in our society. It is one of the deepest of all human needs yet it is also a very misunderstood and misused concept. People will say I love pizza or I love that movie as easily as they say I love you to their spouse or child.

Consider the following love letter:

Dearest Jimmy, No words could ever express the great unhappiness I’ve felt since breaking off our engagement. Please say you’ll take me back. No one could ever take your place in my heart, so please forgive me. I love you, I love you, I love you. Yours forever, Marie
P.S. Congratulations on winning the state lottery.

Genuine love is a powerful reality, it is a biblical reality and it is a transformational reality. The Bible has a lot to say about love – the word appears over 650 times. So today I want

to take a look at one of the most beautiful sections of God's word – the great love chapter – I Corinthians 13.

Corinth was a most important city in Paul's day. It linked 2 harbors so that made it an important trade city. It also meant that traders from all over the world came to Corinth: Romans, Greeks, Jews, Asians. This made Corinth a rather tough town as well, with drunkenness, prostitution, thievery, and murder abounding unfortunately. Sounds like many of our cities today doesn't it? Yet as Paul preached the gospel there, he experienced great success.

After he left however, the Corinthian Christians struggled with this environment. How do Christians live in such an environment and not adapt to all the sin? You see Christians are new creations – born from above and changed from within – with values and life-styles that confront the world and clash with accepted morals. In other words, true believers DON'T blend in very well. The Bible says we are not to conform to this world but to be transformed – transformed by God's love. So Paul writes this letter to address some of the Corinthians problems – to help them stay on track with God. The chapters before and after 13 are about God's family using their spiritual gifts to build up the church family. Sandwiched in this letter is Paul's magnificent description of the greatest gift – this gift of LOVE, transforming, biblical love.

READ I Corinthians 13: 1-8

The word for love used here is *agape*. The Greeks had different words that described different kinds of love. The word *agape* means to have a deep, abiding, self-sacrificing love – the kind that looks out for the other person or even dog first. God requires his people to have *agape* love for one another. Love is what connects every act with God and makes our actions and spiritual gifts useful.

The words used in this chapter to describe love actually describe God's character. These are not just sugary claims. They are hard-edged descriptions of God's perfection-in-relationship. Paul writes a breathtakingly beautiful description of the nature of God. And only God can put this character, His character in us.

God's kind of love is directed outward toward others, not inward toward one's self. It is utterly unselfish. This kind of love goes against our natural inclinations. Because let's be honest with one another, we want what we want. I mean I am all for you having what you want too, so long as it doesn't interfere with me getting what I want first. Come on now, that does sound a little familiar doesn't it?

It is possible to practice this kind of love, *agape* love, only if God helps us set aside our own desires and instincts so that we can give love while expecting nothing in return, just as Ilea did with Smokey. So the more we become like Christ, the more love we will show to others.

In God's mind, love is the greatest thing. When Jesus was asked which of the commandments was the most important he replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. And the second is this, Love your neighbor as yourself."(Mark 12:30-31)

These two commandments sum up all of the 10 commandments.

Priority #1 – Love God. The first 4 of the 10 commandments drive us to put God first. God created you and me out of His great love for us. He has given us life and set his love upon us. Jesus purpose in the first part of his answer was to show that a person's total being must be involved in loving God. Nothing must be held back because God holds nothing back from us. To love God in this way is to fulfill completely all the commandments regarding our **vertical** relationship with God.

Priority #2 – Love others. The last 6 of the 10 commandments drive us to love others, to love the people that God created, our fellow human beings. This commandment focuses on our **horizontal** relationships with other people. Loving others is the outflow of embracing God's love for me. And God's love is all about relationships.

Paul ends chapter 13 with these words, "There are three things that will endure – faith, hope and love – and the greatest of these is love.

In morally corrupt Corinth, love had become a mixed-up term with little meaning. Today people are still confused about love. **God is not.** Love is the greatest of all human qualities and is an attribute of God himself. Love involves unselfish service to others.

Faith is the foundation and content of God's message; Hope is the attitude and focus; love is the action. That's why it is the greatest of these three. Faith informs action; hope influences action; love is action – it is the verb.

When faith and hope are in line, you are free to love completely because you understand how God loves.

There is a poem called *Still He Walked* that I believe sums up this step of **Loving God and Others:**

He could hear the crowds screaming "crucify" "crucify" ...
 He could hear the hatred in their voices,
 these were His chosen people.
 He loved them,
 And they were going to crucify Him.
 He was beaten;
 bleeding and weakened... His heart was broken,
 but still He walked.

He could see the crowd as He came from the palace.
 He knew each of the faces so well.
 He had created them.
 He knew every smile, laugh, and shed tear,
 but now they were contorted with rage and anger...

His heart broke,
but still He walked.

Was He scared?
You and I would have been.
So His humanness would have mandated that He was.
He felt alone.
His disciples had left, denied, and even betrayed Him.
He searched the crowd for a loving face
and He saw very few.
Then He turned His eyes to the only One that mattered
and He knew that He would never be alone.
He looked back at the crowd,
at the people who were spitting at Him,
throwing rocks at Him and mocking Him
and He knew that because of Him,
they would never be alone.
So for them, He walked.

The sounds of the hammer striking the spikes echoed through the crowd.
The sounds of His cries echoed even louder,
The cheers of the crowd,
as His hands and feet were nailed to the cross,
intensified with each blow.
Loudest of all was the still small voice
inside His heart that whispered
"I am with you, My Son",
And God's heart broke.
He had let His Son walk.

Jesus could have asked God to end His suffering,
but instead He asked God to forgive.
Not to forgive Him,
but to forgive the ones who were persecuting Him.
As He hung on that cross,
dying an unimaginable death,
He looked out and saw,
not only the faces in the crowd,
but also,
the face of every person yet to be,
and his heart filled with love.
As His body was dying,
His heart was alive.
Alive with the limitless, unconditional love
He feels for each of us.
That is why He walked.

When I forget how much My God loves me,
I remember His walk.
When I wonder if I can be forgiven,
I remember His walk.

When I need to be reminded of how to live like Christ,
I think of His walk.
And to show Him how much I love Him,
I wake up each morning, turn my eyes to Him,
And I walk. (anonymous author)

Let me encourage you as you walk - out in the Gathering Area, if you see an unfamiliar face – go and introduce yourself. Tell that person how glad you are they decided to come to this church today. Offer them some treats from the hospitality table. Give them a tour of the church. Introduce them to some of your friends. Sit with them next week. Share God’s love with them.

As you walk through your week this week, share a smile with those you meet. Hold back an unkind comment to the person who cut you off in traffic. Thank the clerk at the store for checking you out instead of being irritable with him. Tell you spouse you love her or him, hug your child, spend time with God in prayer.

Love God and love others so that you may continue to reach people far from God and develop into a more radiant follower of Christ.