



*A Themed Devotional Series
For CVF Students
By CVM Staff*

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This series of devotionals was created around CVM's annual theme of "Abounding Love" from Philippians 1:9. We hope you enjoy getting to know the CVM staff better while learning to love like Jesus. We encourage you to prayerfully journey through the study together as a CVF group with your Bibles open, looking up the *scriptures* (in italics) and discussing the **questions** (in bold). The devotionals are really just intended to be a jumping off point for your group to go deep in conversation about God's Word.



Abounding Love

First Love

What kind of things would you say that you love?

So, unless you were cheating and being super spiritual, I imagine your list was a lot like mine. “I love cupcakes! I love the mountains. I love a good filet mignon medium rare. I love sports. Ooh, I love sushi. I love sunsets. I love my family. I looove my husband. And of course, I Love Jesus.” Love may cover a multitude of sins, but we use the word “love” to cover the entire spectrum from fast cars to our kids, from our favorite color to our favorite scripture, and from our pets to Jesus Himself.

Do you remember your first love?

Not like a middle school crush, but like the very first thing you loved. For most of us it was probably our parents, or if we took them for granted, we definitely appreciated a special blankie, pacifier, or in my case, my thumb!

Do you know what the first mention of the word love was in the Bible?

No, it wasn’t when Adam saw Eve naked and unashamed, nor when God saw His creation and it was good. The first mention of “love,” what goes on to become the theme of the entire Bible, the word that best describes God Himself, did not come in the first couple chapters, nor the first dozen, it is first found in the Bible’s 22nd chapter:

*“Take your son, your only son—yes, Isaac, whom you **love** so much—
and go to the land of Moriah. Go and sacrifice him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains,
which I will show you.” -Genesis 22:2 NLT*

What a perfect time to introduce the word “love,” at the same moment God foreshadows the world’s utmost act of love through the sacrifice of His only Son for us. The way Abraham felt about Isaac was an emotion, he felt love for the son he had waited and prayed so long for. But the love Abraham expresses by putting his dearest possession, Isaac, on an altar in order to honor the Lord above all else, is not a feeling, but an action.

For the next 12 weeks, explore with us what Paul meant when he prayed for Christian’s love to abound more and more in Philippians 1:9:

*“And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more
in knowledge and depth of insight.”*

Most of you probably don’t have children, but I’m sure you’ve heard many times how much one learns about love by becoming a parent. When I adopted a little 8 year-old girl, my concept of love was completely blown to pieces. After more than 3 years with this broken pre-teen I still have no way to put what love is in to words. Not because the warm fuzzy feelings overwhelm me, but because the gravity of really knowing someone, someone who rejects me regularly and with everything in her, makes love a very confusing idea. I pray as Paul did, that my love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, not just in cuddles and tickles and Hallmark moments, because love isn’t just about feeling good toward someone, it’s about putting their interests before your own even when you can’t muster good feelings for that person.

Abounding Love

First Love

"Jesus looked him hard in the eye—and loved him!" Mark 10:21 TM

What if loving people--those we consider our neighbors, those who drive us crazy, and those who we might even think of as enemies--means looking at them really hard. Instead of seeing the front they put on, what if we took the time to really see people, to learn their story, to accept them as they are, to see the image of God in them... And what if by doing this, we *are* loving them.

I think Paul is possibly referring to three types of abounding love in Philippians 1:9.

- 1) That our knowledge and depth of insight increase about what love truly means.
- 2) That we come to a deeper understanding of God's love for us, *how wide and long and high and deep* it truly is (Eph 3:18.)
- 3) That from those first two, we are able to then overflow into others with a better, more discerning love, that truly sees people, knows them, and loves them fully.

For just as our children teach us about love, we should imitate little children and learn about love from our Father, who's Son was the ultimate example:

"Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with Him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of Himself to us. Love like that."

—Ephesians 5:1-2 TM

This week how can you extravagantly love?

Who might you really look at and see as God intends them to be, a classmate, a professor, a family member?

How can you give all of yourself, expecting nothing in return?

ACTION: Discuss this with your group and then live it this week!



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Abounding Love

Overflowing Love

When I was a kid, I had a very inquisitive mind, to this day I continue to wonder how things work. That is probably the reason that I love veterinary medicine; there is a problem, it must be identified, then solved. The other day I was watching TV and I saw a commercial with a guy pouring coffee from a full coffee pot into a cup and it never ran over. Now I am not totally dumb, but I knew this was TV and they can make anything happen. But it got me wondering -- how did they do that trick? It also made me realize it was a great illustration of how our life with God is.

In Phil 1:9 Paul says, *"I pray that your love will overflow more and more, and that you will keep growing in knowledge and understanding,"* (NLT). I picture God having a pitcher that never runs dry on love and that He continues to pour it out into us even when we don't deserve it. He never depletes the reserves all the while He is filling us with it. His love is never ending. Then as we grow in His love, He gives us knowledge and understanding of who He is and the purpose He has for us as we are in His Word and fellowship with Him.

As I thought about this, I thought about how much "love" is mentioned in the bible. Depending on the translation, the count that I found was 443 to 686 times. Either way, love is an important part of God's nature. You can't talk about God's nature without mentioning L O V E. We totally get the picture of His ultimate love for us with John 3:16, *"For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."* He gave Jesus to die for our sins so that we could have a relationship with Him.

When we went camping I was younger, a metal cup was part of our gear. Being metal made it more durable so it could take a beating and last longer. It always made me think of movies where the guys in prison would rake their metal cups across the bars to create a disturbance or aggravate the guards.

I never was a coffee drinker, but on those cold days out camping, my cup would be filled with hot cocoa. You had to be careful not to overfill the cup, or the hot cocoa would burn your hands. We would fill it to the maximum and use it as a hand warmer as well as a fluid container to drink out of. Another use for those metal cups was to put it under a water spigot and use it to wash our hands. We would drill some hole in the bottom to act as a faucet making it easier to clean up. When it filled up, the overflow would help with the cleanup also.

After some time even the metal cups for drinking would start wearing out and would get holes in them. A hole made the cup not very useful for drinking hot things like cocoa or coffee. You knew that you were going to lose some of your drink depending on the size of the hole. Plus, you were likely to get burned if it leaked onto you. But it was still usable for drinking water that you were going to drink quickly or for washing your hands.

Our lives are a little like those cups, in that God keeps pouring His love into us and at some point, we start to overflow and show and share His love. Once He starts pouring His love into our lives, it never stops. He doesn't have an on/off switch depending on whether we deserve it or not. We regulate the amount of love that we receive by the condition and placement of our cup.

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Overflowing Love

You may say at times, that you don't feel His love being poured into your life. You may think that He stopped or slowed down the pouring. But it isn't in His nature to stop or slow down the flow rate. We think because we can do that as humans, that He will do that. His love is like a downpour, but we choose whether we want to come outside and get drenched in it.

Our spirit is like the cup, when it is intact and serving the purpose that it was designed for, it WILL overflow when love is continually poured into it. We can't feel or share God's love the way He wants us to unless our container is intact and not leaking. The amount of overflow is dependent on the number of holes in our cup leaking out the contents. The more the holes the longer it will take for us to be filled with His love and then be able to share it with others.

What keeps you from filling with His love? What keeps you from overflowing God's love onto those around you?

Our walk each and every day determines how fast our cup will take to fill before it over flows. I know people whose cup is overflowing LOVE onto everyone they come into contact with from the very instant they get up in the morning. They take their cup outside and get in the down pour of His love and carry that cup around all day long letting the overflow fill the lives in their paths.

Others can go hours and days before their cup fills up. Some just don't get in the down pour, or when they do, their cup has so many holes in it that it leaks, preventing it from filling up quickly, or ever.

How do we get in the downpour?

We get in touch with God. Scripture says that we are to meditate on His word day and night in Psalm 1:2. We should go to bed with the right mindset and wake up in the morning with a thankful heart to Him. The quicker we go to His word, the quicker we can feel His presence around us. In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, it says that we are to pray without ceasing. That means first thing in the morning we are to be in a one on one uninterrupted conversation with Him. When we have hurried mornings, we miss that first opportunity to have our cup filled. He is always present, it is us who move. **Take time throughout the day to be in fellowship with Him.**

Do you have worries, anxieties, pride, sins, or other things that are separating you from Him? Another thing that slows down the filling of our cup is when our life is not right with Him. These things make holes in our cups of various sizes. God calls us to love Him and our neighbor. We can't do that until we experience His love filling our own lives. What size hole do you have that is caused by, bitterness, anger, hate, jealousy, sexual immorality, selfish ambition, idolatry, dissensions, envy, greed, lies, etc? The list goes on. The longer we have these in our lives, they continue to act like rust eating away at the cup and the holes continue to grow.

Wisdom will fill those holes. Wisdom is looking at things from God's perspectives and doing what His word says about them. When He is filling us with His love, we will NOT want to keep

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on sinning. His love covers over a multitude of sins. When we read His word, we learn how to fix those holes and where to go to be drenched in His love.

Put away ALL the things that keep you from being filled to the brim with His love and overflowing. When we do that, we get a great understanding of who He is and knowledge of how He wants us to live a life of righteousness. He deeply wants us to know His will for our lives!

Our love for Him can never equal His love for us but we are called to love Him with all our heart, mind, and soul. We are asked to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are told to be His witnesses right where we are and to the ends of the earth. We are called to obey His commands. What I love about His calling is that, even though it can still be difficult, it's a joy to do when His love is running like a flood over the rim of our cup.

Discuss some ways to get drenched with His love?

Share how the cup analogy relates to your life? What holes have you had? How quickly have you filled to overflowing at different points in your spiritual journey?

ACTION: Everyone is looking for love. Look for love in the RIGHT place. Why not go out into the downpour and be showered with His love? It will change you and then you will change those all around you.

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Abounding Love

It's not About You, and That's a Good Thing

LOVE IS A LIVING SACRIFICE

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God- this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is- his good, pleasing and perfect will.(12:1-2)

Our act of worship is to offer ourselves to the Lord. What does this really mean?

"Though it tarries, wait for it..." (Habakkuk 2:3) "The proof that we have the vision [of God] is that we are reaching out for more than we have already grasped. It is a bad thing to be satisfied spiritually. We are apt to look for satisfaction within ourselves and say, "Now I've got it! I am completely sanctified. Now I can endure." Instantly we are on the road to ruin. Our reach must exceed our grasp." (Oswald Chambers, My Utmost for His Highest)

Oswald nicely sums up a difficult concept. We should never be satisfied with our life as it relates to God (for if we become satisfied, we become complacent). To be satisfied is to be so immersed in ourselves that we have stopped focusing on God.

Another important concept is that you have to know that you are pursuing an unattainable goal, and you have to be okay with that. A perfect relationship with God is not attainable on this earth, which Paul knew. He says in Philippians 3:12-14: *I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.* We often think that Paul had an ideal relationship with God. Thankfully, Paul was smarter than us. He knew the only good thing in his life was that he always pursued the goal of knowing God.

What does, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world" (verse above) mean?

Thinking about a "pattern" makes me think of knitting. When I was a new knitter, I altered a pattern myself. As I finished a hat for my friend's baby, I took it off the needles and realized that I made a hat for a squid, instead of a human. It was tall and tubular. The lesson here is that I thought I could alter the pattern to make it fit my specifications, but I wasn't qualified to do that. God wants us to be focused heavenward, instead of trying to alter things ourselves. Only when our minds are transformed can we figure out God's will. We certainly won't figure it out on our own, so we are meant to be living sacrifices that are discerning His will in this world.

LOVE IS SELFLESS ACTION

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. (12:9-13)

Sincerity is the key here. People in this world are naturally suspicious of others that are doing good things. The way to combat this is to be sincerely kind. If others observe you in recurrent situations where you treat others with the love of Christ, they will wonder what is different

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about you. The reflection of God's spirit inside of you will radiate outward. If we act in sincerity, God will be reflected. If we act for selfish motives, He will remain hidden.

The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks. (Luke 6:45)

What selfless acts can you add to your everyday life?

Now Jesus' mother and brothers came to see him, but they were not able to get near him because of the crowd. Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you." He replied, "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice." (Luke 8:19-21)

What does hospitality look like?

It's probably different for every person. For my husband and me, it's reflected in opening our home to others. We love having people over for dinner. For other members of my church, the thought of opening their homes made them uncomfortable. They prefer one-on-one meetings to connect with people over coffee. What gift did God give you, to welcome others? *Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by doing so some people have entertained angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13:1-2)*

LOVE IS NOT EASY

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. (12:14-16)

We may not be able to control what happens to us, but we can control our response. We are instructed to bless those that speak harshly to us, probably because they need Jesus. It reminds me of plenty of occasions in the veterinary clinic.

What would you do, when confronted with a belligerent client?

I had a client yell at me when I examined her dog's teeth, after informing her that the dog needed a dental. She was very angry that I would suggest such a thing. Instead of yelling back, I took a breath and told her that it's my job to identify the problems, and inform her accordingly. What she chose to do with that information was her prerogative, but it was my duty as a doctor to give her the best treatment recommendations. She did not talk to me for the rest of the exam. The only way she knew how to respond was with anger, and my calm reaction threw her off guard.

Mind you, none of us are perfect. I once had a man yell at me, angry that I would not vaccinate his dog without a physical exam. He interrupted every explanation I gave. I had a busy day, and my patience was wearing thin. Did I raise my voice back at him and inform him that there was no drive-through at my clinic? And if you want a vaccine you have to answer my simple

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questions and allow me to perform a physical exam? That if you don't want to be here, you can just as soon leave? Yes, yes I did all of those things. He yelled the whole way out the door.

When did you maintain harmony, despite the circumstances? What is a time you failed?

LOVE IS GIVING IN UNEXPECTED PLACES

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." (verse 20) Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (verse 21)

You have to give love in the last place where someone would expect love to be given. You do it because it is a beautiful reflection of the love of God. After all, he gave his only Son to come to earth, suffer, and die for our mistakes. We can show gratitude for this ultimate gift by showing love to those that don't expect it. It's a love that should be freely given.

How can you show the love of Jesus to others in your life? Who is in need of this love?

I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me. (Matthew 25:40)

LOVE ORIGINATES WITH GOD

What has Romans chapter 12 taught us? Most of all, it teaches us that love isn't about us- it's about God. We can only discern the best and abound with more love as we gain knowledge in the Word and insight from the example of Jesus Christ.

When we remember that love comes from God, we realize that nothing is unconquerable. With him inside our hearts, we share his love with the world around us. We are meant to love and enjoy this life we are given on earth, before we are called home to live in person with his boundless love. We are broken, but Jesus cares for us enough to give himself for us. That's love.

I have seen the burden God has laid on men. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live.

*That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil- this is the gift of God. I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. **God does it so that men will revere him.** (Ecclesiastes 3:10-15)*



Dr. Melissa Cheeks seeks to do God's work through her CVM ministry, "Threads of Love" (Col 3:12, 14), joyfully serving students and vet professionals in nine states. She grew up in Illinois, was at Purdue for eight years, and graduated with a DVM in 2011. She now lives in Madison, Wisconsin with her husband, dog and cat. In her spare time, she enjoys gardening, running, yoga, cooking, baking, and knitting. You are welcome to email her at mcheeks@cvmusa.org or follow her ministry: www.facebook.com/cvmthreadsoflove or best of all, grab a cup of coffee with her if you're passing through Wisconsin.

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His Love Abounds

Think about someone you would mentor and encourage in their spiritual walk. If you were to write them a letter with one specific action to take, what would that action be? What one step of obedience would draw them deeper into their relationship with God and yet allow God to be evident through them to others?

Paul chose to challenge the believers in Philippi to have *“a love that abounds still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment,”* (Philippians 1:9.) He would give a similar charge to the church in Thessalonica, *“and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all men, just as we also do for you.”* (1 Thessalonians 4:12). God’s words through Paul to these churches continue to serve as a challenge to each of us. Paul charged the church in Corinth, *“Let all that you do, be done in love.”* (1 Corinthians 16:14)

A good place to start is to remember our Lord’s response to the question, *“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”* He responded, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and foremost commandment, and the second is like it, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* (Matthew 22:36-39).

We love because He first loved us. *“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”* (1 John 4:10) We are capable of abounding love because we live in His abounding love for us.

You are only able to do so if you know and believe in His great love for you. We know of His great love in the amazing gift of eternal life, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* (John 3:16).

We know of His great love in that we were dead in our trespasses and yet were raised up because of His rich mercy and great love. *“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,”* (Eph 2:4-6).

His great love gives us eternal comfort and good hope. *“May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope,”* (2 Thessalonians 2:16). As we purpose to live in this abounding love toward others, He abides in us and His perfect love is perfected in us. His word is full of testimonies of His great love.

Paul makes clear that he is a praying man as he writes to the church in Philippi. He speaks of having a joy in prayer as he remembers and yet also as he envisions the work God is doing through the members of the church. He speaks of a confidence in the work God is doing, a work that will continue until the day of Christ Jesus. This process of abounding love for one another in the body of Christ and for others is an important part of how God works to complete the good work He began in each of us. Living and serving in this love with the knowledge and discernment of His Spirit directs us to approve the things that are excellent and results in our serving to the glory and praise of God. (Read Philippians 1:1-11)

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His Love Abounds

“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus to all God’s holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God’s grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.”

This foundation of loving relationships should equip you to love all men. Your times of reflection on His word should prepare you to be a representative of His love to others. Your profession is a tool through which His great love can be seen by those you serve. Our times of reflection can also bring to mind places where our love is not abounding. These are places of repentance and renewal.

“And He has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.” (1 John 4:21)

Consider your family, your church, or your fellowship group in veterinary school. Do your interactions with other believers reflect an abounding love that results in praise and glory to God? If not, what is wrong?

Share with the group some ways your love might not be abounding, in an effort to process through how you might better abound with His love.

What does God want you to do so that His abounding love is evident to all?

How can you love more and more in real knowledge and all discernment?

ACTION: Prayerfully consider where God is asking you to serve in His love!

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Abounding Love

Loving the Lost

What pictures do you think of when you think of abounding love? How about in the society within which we live and work?

As a vet, I tend to be around animal lovers and I have a lot of Facebook friends who love animals too. Oftentimes the dog is shared as the ultimate example of love. Check out these quotes that I found from a quick internet search:

“Dogs invented unconditional love.”

“Dogs are the most amazing creatures; they give unconditional love. They are the role model for being alive.” Gilda Radnor

“To be loved forever: be lucky enough to find a soul mate or smart enough to adopt a dog.”

“A dog is the only thing on earth that loves you more than he loves himself.” Josh Billings

What similar ideas of love do you see amongst your circle of peers?

As you know by now, CVM’s theme this year is “Abounding Love” based on Philippians 1:9, “*And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.*” That is my prayer for you! I desire for you to know about love in real knowledge and not just about how society today views it. But how can we learn about love? The best place to learn about it is in the Bible. Jesus taught often in parables (a story that teaches a truth), and so today, let’s read together one of Jesus’ parables about the lost sheep:



“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”

Then Jesus told them this parable: ‘Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.’ (Luke 15:1-7)

Who was Jesus sharing this parable with? How did this show Jesus’ love for others?

When I was serving in Ethiopia, the Borana herdsmen were great animal caretakers. They also would take the weak calves or lambs over their shoulders and carry them until they would get back to the corral or could keep up with the rest of the herd. To me, it is a great visual image of God scooping me up from the difficult places and carrying me to a point of safety.

Abounding Love

Loving the Lost

Have you met any farmers/ranchers who would go the extra mile to look after a lost or sick animal? Have you met those who have just “cut their losses” in such a circumstance and hoped that they would just come home?

How can we apply “looking for the lost sheep” to people?

What are ways that you can get out of the comfort of the sheep pen to seek those who are hurting or lost in your school or work community?

What are ways that we can rejoice with others’ good fortune?

If you are the person that feels alone, neglected, lost, depressed or unworthy (whether you just failed a test or are struggling with a deep seated past) know that Jesus is there, ready to take you up in his arms and care for you, remember the image of the man carrying the sheep over his shoulders. You can trust Him. Matthew 11:29-30 promises that he will take you alongside him and not overburden you. *“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

ACTION: Pray for insight to reach out to those around you who are lost or hurting.

Dr. Denise Thagard was introduced to CVM as a veterinary student at Iowa State, amazed that God could use her vet skills to serve Christ in missions. After graduating in 2001 she practiced two years in Iowa, then served with CVM in Ethiopia for 7 years, then in Seattle as the Short Term Missions Coordinator for 2 years, and is serving as the CVM East Region Representative. She is privileged to walk along those in the east/northeast USA as they discover God’s calling in their practices, their schools and beyond. She resides in North Carolina with her husband, Roy and their two dogs, chickens and honeybees. E-mail: dthagard@cvmusa.org



Abounding Love

Love Actually

“And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight”

I wonder as I look at our theme passage: “How can love abound in knowledge and insight?” How can I possibly learn more about love? It’s a condition of the heart. It’s purely emotion that does as it will. I fall into it or fall out of it. It’s something I can’t control. I know this because I hear about it all the time. Since the creation of man, there has been no other subject that has been talked about or written about more than love. There is poetry about being possessed by love, songs about love we have lost, pictures capturing the essence of love. We write books, we send cards, we even erect billboards. We are wholly consumed by getting it, losing it, feeling it and giving it. And with no shortage of materials that revolve around it, we still can’t seem to agree on what love actually is.

For me, my view of love was shaped by my family. Like many of us, we have good examples and flawed examples. The thing I remember most about what I learned from my family, however, is that “You don’t know love till you show love.” Seems like a simple motto, after all, talk is cheap! We have all had experiences where someone may say that they love us, but their actions don’t support their words. I often wondered how true this approach really was. Can you “*feel*” love but not “*show*” love? Can you “*have*” love but not “*express*” it?

To help sort this out, let’s head to a couple of traditional love passages that we often hear at weddings. It’s a bit cliché, I know, but I have heard these passages read even at the weddings of non-believers. So, let’s go straight to some common ground to sort this out.

The first Scripture is Ephesians 5:25, “*Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it*”

I have always found this verse to be a little obvious. After all, it’s being read to me as I’m standing in front of a large group wearing a tux, looking at my beautiful bride. I can guarantee that I wouldn’t be in this situation if I didn’t love her. Why such an obvious command? Love your wife. But don’t just love your wife, love your wife as Christ loved the church and **gave** himself for it. Interestingly enough, we see two things here in Christ’s example of love: Love is a choice and love is an action. We see this referenced again and again in many passages. Probably the most well known is John 3:16.

*“For God so loved the world that He **gave** His only Son so that whoever believes in Him should not die but have everlasting life.”*

Love is an emotion, but it becomes true love when we choose to walk it out in action. Over and over in Scripture we see it said that “God loved us so He.....” This implies that God’s love is not passive. He shows his love through action. So, we are commanded to love AND we are told to

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make the choice to show love. But how? What does love in action look like? Let's hit the most popular love passage, First Corinthians 3:4-7.

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, 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."

So there it is. Love is a lot of things. Notice how all of them are actions? They are all responses to events around us that may not be so loving. Let's face it, love hurts. And why? Because love is an unnatural response. It is a choice to act in a way that is not normal for our human nature. Think I'm wrong? Have you ever found it difficult to be patient with a sibling? Have you ever found yourself speaking out in anger to a parent? Yet, you still *love* them, right? Truth is, our human response is flawed.

We are fallen, yet we are made in the image of God who is love! For this reason, it is necessary for God to remind us that we need to love through choice and action even when it is difficult. He gave us the perfect example in Christ. When Paul prays that our love would abound in knowledge and insight, he is praying that we would not be satisfied with the worldly idea of love but rather grow into an understanding of Godly love. Godly love, as shown to us through Christ, is a love that is made by choice even in difficult circumstances. We in no way have earned it or deserve it. It is a love that acts in a way contrary to our natural state. It is patient when it has every reason to be impatient. It is kind when it has every reason not to be. It perseveres. It keeps no record of wrongs. It does so many things. In short, love is an action. Chose to love and watch it abound!

1. What are some common misconceptions about love?
2. Do we have any control over love?
3. How do these misconceptions contribute to conflict and cast a negative light over God, who is love?
4. Reread First Corinthians 3:4-7. Which of these fly in the face of the world's view of love?
5. What are some practical ways that these can be expressed in your current relationships?
6. Look at Ephesians 5:25 again. Why are men commanded to love their wives?
7. Have you ever made a choice NOT to love someone through action?

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Love Actually

8. If we are commanded to love one another, what are some practical ways to do that?
9. What is our biggest hindrance to loving one another?

ACTION: Meditate on Christ's example of love and the characteristics shown in I Corinthians. Determine where you fall short and with whom. By meditating on Christ's example and confessing your failures, your love will abound in knowledge and insight so you may more easily choose to show love in action.



Dr. Barry Schwenk began his relationship with CVM as a student at Kansas State University in 1995. He was challenged in ways that have forever changed his life. After practicing in the US for 7 years, he served with his wife Colette and three children (Emily, Jonas, and Simon) as CVM long term fieldworkers in Ethiopia for 6 years. They now serve US veterinary professionals as the CVM Regional Representative to the West and the Caribbean. Email: bschwenk@cvmusa.org

Abounding Love

Living Generously

Think about this: What is your attitude when someone cuts you off in traffic, your neighbor's dog barks all night, someone gossips about you? We are often tempted to immediately think about how our own rights have been violated and then how to get justice for ourselves. However, what is the attitude that Jesus expects us to have towards others in these situations? God loves us with abounding love. How are we supposed to allow that love to abound towards others? Let's look at Matthew 5: 38-42 (Msg):

"Here's another old saying that deserves a second look: 'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.' Is that going to get us anywhere? Here's what I propose: 'Don't hit back at all.' If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, gift wrap your best coat and make a present of it. And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously."

Live generously. What is Jesus saying here? I believe He is saying we are to consider others before considering our own rights. (Also see Philippians 2:3, Romans 12:20) Think about where the other person may be coming from before we react. We often think of generosity in terms of money. Jesus asks us to be generous with our attitudes and actions, too.

When I was living in Mongolia, I was reminded to live generously with my attitude. At the end of a long afternoon, I rode a very crowded bus to the stop near my home. I went to the corner grocery to buy a loaf of bread, opened my purse, and my wallet was gone! I looked at the clerk and said, "Yana! Holgailch!" (Oh, my! Thief!) Then I went on to explain I had just been on the bus, had been robbed, and now had no money. I'd have to come back later to buy the bread. I trudged home, rather upset that my favorite wallet, a gift from close friends, was gone. I tried to think of what was inside and realized that I probably, at most, had lost about \$15 in cash, besides the wallet and a few ID cards and documents that could be replaced. Well, the next day a friend at work got a call from someone saying they had found my wallet! They said they worked cleaning at a downtown apartment building and said they had found it on the ground. Great! So, a co-worker went to pick it up for me and then called to say that I needed to pay 10,000T (about \$8) in order to get it back. I had been robbed and now someone was telling me I had to pay to get my own stuff back. I became somewhat suspicious that they were working with the pickpockets and hadn't really found my wallet at all. My co-workers agreed that this was known to happen. Maybe they weren't working with the thieves, but, at the least, they were trying to take advantage of me.

But then I stopped to consider their situation. The Holy Spirit brought the above scripture to mind; *"If someone wants the shirt off your back, give him your coat, also."* Someone had dishonestly taken something from me, and now someone else was unfairly demanding more. How should I respond? I considered how poor these people might be and why they might be asking for the money. The 10,000T they wanted from me might equal a day's wages for them as

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stairwell cleaners. They likely had a tough life and probably really needed that money. My attitude towards them changed. I asked my friend to give them the money and to be sure to tell them how grateful I was for them returning the wallet. I said a few prayers for them, too, which might be part of what God had in mind for allowing the experience all along.

Now let's look at Matthew 5:43-48 (Msg):

"You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best - the sun to warm and the rain to nourish - to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that. In a word, what I'm saying is, grow up. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you."

Again, Jesus tells us to live generously toward others. Our Father loves us with an abounding love. Knowing that we are loved in this way should give us the courage and freedom to have generous attitudes toward others. Let's love those who don't show love towards us. Pray for those who violate our rights. Make an extra effort to reach out to those who give us a hard time. Live like we are the Kingdom subjects God created us to be.

What situations cause you to struggle with living generously?

Share an example of a time when God asked you to live generously?

What are some specific ways we can live generously towards others?

ACTION: Take time to pray now and throughout the week that God would give you opportunities to allow his abounding love to flow through you by living generously towards others.

Dr. Heather Heisey worked in private practice for thirteen years before she and her husband, Leon, and their family served with CVM in Mongolia from 2008 to 2013. They now make their home in Lancaster County, PA along with their three children. Heather continues to serve with CVM as a Regional Representative in PA, OH, and MI. Heather's current position with CVM also involves continuing to work with Mongolian veterinarians to help them complete a Distance Learning Master's degree course through V.E.T. Net NGO in Mongolia. Email: hheisey@cvmusa.org



Abounding Love

God is Love

Throughout the Old Testament, we find an ancient Hebrew liturgy about the character of Yahweh God. This liturgy reminded God's people that He was "*compassionate and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and truth.*"

Read the liturgy above and take a few moments to think about and talk about what you believe about God's character. What has shaped your understanding of who God is? How does that compare to what the ancient Hebrews believed about God's character?

Of the six times this liturgy is repeated in the Old Testament, we see it used in a variety of contexts. The first time as God Himself is dictating the words to Moses as he re-writes the broken tablets of the Law.

"Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth..."
-Exodus 34:6

These words were the foundation of the law and covenant between God and the newly formed nation of Israel. God tells His people how He will interact with them – in mercy, graciousness, love, and truth.

The second time we see this verse is Moses reminding God of His promise. As we will see throughout the Old Testament, God's people continually forgot His instruction and rebelled against Him. When God does finally decide to punish Israel for their rebellion, Moses reminds God of His covenantal character - that He "*is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression.*" (Numbers 14:18) God didn't need reminded about who He was or how He wanted to relate to the Israelites. However, since this truth was such a part of Moses' understanding of how God related to His people, Moses knew that God would keep His promise to His people and interact with them out of His love.

In the Psalms, we read the reminder of Yahweh's character three different times:

But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. -Psalm 86:15

The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. – Psalm 103:8

The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love.-Psalm 145:8

These Psalms have different emotional sources – concern and praise. In this, it is clear that no matter what the author of the psalm is feeling or experiencing, they are reminding themselves and their audience of the character of God, the God who knows and loves. His lovingkindness, grace, mercy and compassion are abundant, rich and readily available no matter the situation or struggle.

In the prophetic writings of Joel and Jonah, we see each of these prophets utilize their knowledge and trust in God's character in wildly different ways. In the book of Joel, the people will experience extreme desolation and calamity due to their disobedience and rebellion. Joel's exhortation to Israel is to repent of their sins while the time is still available – and who knows?

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Since God is “*gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and relenting of evil*” (2:13), perhaps He will turn the tide of their wicked choices and rescue them from the coming calamity? (Spoiler alert: He does, but on His timetable, not theirs.)

In stark contrast to Joel, the prophet Jonah, after prophesying to the people of Ninevah that God will destroy them if they do not stop their evil ways and repent, sulks in the desert. He was reluctant to preach this message of repentance to the Ninevites because he knows that God is “*a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.*” (Jonah 4:2) As Ninevah was a mortal enemy of Israel, Jonah longed for God to operate differently so the Ninevites would get the righteous judgment “they deserved.”

Personally, what I see in this repeated liturgy of God’s character is that He’s not looking to give people what they “deserve.” What a radical thought! God’s love for His people – for Israel, for the world, and for each of us – is reflected in His commitment and characteristic nature to be gracious, merciful, slow to anger, relenting of calamity, and abounding in lovingkindness. If I were God, I would *only* give people what they deserve! My justice would flow like a river – straight towards the people who drive me crazy!

Yet, as believers in God through Christ, we are called to emulate God’s characteristics, to love as He loves. The apostle Paul prays for the Philippian church that their “*love would abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment.*” (Philippians 1:9) This is the same prayer we need today – that our love would abound more and more. The ability to love at all is only made possible because of the Spirit of God that empowers us to react to others in graciousness, mercy, compassion, truth, kindness, and forgiveness. It takes practice – over and over and over.

I’ve never spayed or neutered anything, but I guarantee I would muck it up on the first try. But you all have practiced, or will practice, diligently, fervently, the ability and skill needed to perform a surgical procedure well. In this practice, you have emulated the characteristics of what it means to be a good veterinarian. Likewise, we practice emulating the characteristics of a loving God so it eventually becomes part of our own foundational character. Paul’s prayer to the Philippian church is not that we will love blindly, but that we would love in true knowledge and discernment.

This means, no matter the situation, the Spirit has empowered us to love truly and deeply. God gives us the ability to love as He does. Sometimes we will love others well. Sometimes we will not love others well. When we fail to exemplify God’s character to those around us, we can remember and rely on the same ancient Hebrew liturgy that our ancestors did: “*But You, Oh Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, Slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth.*” (Psalm 86:15)

Who do you know that emulates God’s characteristics as seen through this ancient Hebrew liturgy?

Which of God’s characteristics stand out to you as you read these verses?

How have you experienced God’s love in these ways?

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God is Love

In what situations, or with whom, do you find yourself struggling to love well?

What are some ways you can practice loving as God loves?

ACTION: Post this liturgy somewhere that you will see it regularly this week. “*The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.*” Meditate on it, memorize it, and emulate Him.



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Abounding Love

Praying With Scripture

And this is my prayer:
that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,
so that you may be able to discern what is best
and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,
filled with the fruit of righteousness
that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.
Philippians 1: 9-11

So, I'm driving to vet school, and I pray, "Lord, please keep me safe as I travel."
I'm pushing through vet school, so I pray "Lord, help me retain this material I'm studying for the exams."
A friend is starting a business endeavor and asks everyone to pray for blessing.
I just found out my mom has lung cancer, so I beg, "Lord please heal her!"

What are some common prayers you pray?

But God sees a bigger picture. His ultimate sovereign will is Heaven, the Peaceable Kingdom, where the lion rests beside the lamb instead of feasting on mutton, where tears and darkness and sickness are no more.

But in this fallen world, bad stuff happens. God turns it for good, shapes us and molds us. Some of the most mature, amazing people I have ever known are those who have suffered the hardest trials. He allowed Job to be tested beyond belief. A man was blind from birth, for 22 years—just for God's glory. He willed our sin to rest on Jesus, suffering incredible agony on the cross out of love for us. Jesus said, "I'm sending you out as sheep among wolves. Take up your cross, follow me, lose your life for My sake to find it."

Praying for safety is not wrong. Praying for healing or blessing is not wrong. But our prayers shouldn't stop there. Look how much deeper is Paul's prayer for the church at Philippi! What if God wanted to allow me to have an accident—for greater purposes than I could see? What if God would use my Mom's lung cancer to save a soul? What if God knew that if my friend succeeded in his business, he would seriously hurt others, or walk away from God's Kingdom?

Joni Erickson-Tada thanks God for the accident that left her quadriplegic. More accurately, she thanks God for how He incredibly turns things for eternal good, so that countless disabled people could hear about the hope in Jesus Christ, could hear the Gospel for eternal salvation. I'm convinced that if my death would result in someone coming to eternal life—it would be SO worth it!

So look at how much deeper is the prayer of Paul, and many other prayers in Scripture. Memorize it. It helped me to divide it into the four phrases above: love, discern, pure & blameless, filled with fruit. One author suggests reading a Scripture text aloud 50 times, then you'll know it. That's about twice at each meal, or 7-8 times spread over the day. I read my memory verses while my computer boots up.

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Praying With Scripture

Then pray it. I pray this prayer for my family and friends many times a week. I pray it for believers in other places, for those in persecution, for university students seeking the Lord's will for their future career and family.

I don't have to only pray for a student to do well on exams; if he or she has abounding love, discerning what's best, living in purity before God and blameless before men, and filled with the fruit of righteousness—he or she will do well on exams, or if not, it was best the other way.

When these four are happening, everything else falls into place. What if I had an accident? What if my Mom had lung cancer? What if my friend was starting a business? With abounding love that is wise and understanding, I'd share the heart of God in how I responded. I'd forgive. I'd care about their spiritual and physical well-being. I'd discern what's best in every way, in every treatment, in every decision, in every word spoken. I'd be pure in my heart where God sees, and blameless in my actions before others. I'd have the fruit of righteousness—walking rightly with God in genuine integrity

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness."
—Galatians 5:22

Can you see it? If Paul's prayer is happening, it covers reactions and outcomes of everything that could possibly happen to you, your friends, or your family.

Think of some things you've prayed for recently. What types of things do we usually pray for? Is it wrong to pray for them?

Discuss how Paul's prayer could impact these prayers—how would you pray differently?

Share your thoughts about the value of memorizing the Eternal Word of God. What are some methods of memorizing verses that work for you?

ACTION: Memorize Philippians 1: 9-11. Pray it for each other, or anyone God lays on your heart to pray it for.

One month after vet school graduation in 1983, Fred Van Gorkom went to Ethiopia with Christian Veterinary Mission. While working in veterinary, famine relief, refugee and discipleship ministries he met Vicki, also a veterinarian. They married in 1986, returning immediately to remote southwestern Ethiopia where they raised their four children while doing community development and church planting. In 2008 they moved to CVM Seattle where they both serve to help mobilize others for the privilege of international missions. Email: fvangorkom@cvmusa.org



Abounding Love

An Issue of the Heart

Hopefully you have noticed in both your life and your Bible reading that Jesus makes all things a heart issue, meaning He will always take us to the depth of our heart in order for us to discover our utter destituteness so that we can grasp our absolute need for Him. Undoubtedly, you each have examples in your own lives where Jesus has taken you to the depths of your heart showing you the roadblocks that keep you from being fully in Christ. It is always a heart issue! Yet a heart that responds with Godly remorse will be a heart that shines in Hope & Abounding Love! Out of immeasurable gratitude will be a heart that wants to know Jesus more and more! It will be a heart that says "Nothing else in the world matters! I have nothing to lose and everything to gain!"

Let's look at a story of a woman who really grasped the gift Christ gave her through the forgiveness of her heart issues and subsequently, abounding love. There is also another character in the story worth noting. He happened to have gotten lost in comparisons which kept him from that same love.

But before we read the passage, I would ask you to take a moment or two and think back (maybe no further than today) to a time when Jesus caught hold of you and the heart issues He exposed, showing you your absolute need for Him, the Savior & Sanctifier. And then remember how you responded (in a positive or negative way) or maybe, how you are going to respond.

Hold those remembrances and read Luke 7:36 – 47 (NIV).

"Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so He went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind Him at His feet weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

When the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, He would know who is touching Him and what kind of woman she is — that she is a sinner." Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said. "Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said. Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven — for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little."

Reflecting back on your Heart Issues that Jesus revealed to you and your response – with whom do you identify in this passage? Is it the "sinful woman" or Simon the Pharisee? Or maybe a little of both? Or maybe something totally different? If you can, please share with one another your answer and why.

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An Issue of the Heart

Now, continuing to reflect on your Heart Issue that Jesus revealed; do you see your HI as a debt? Why or why not? If you do view it as a debt, which do you resonate with: the \$50, the \$500 or maybe something different? What about the concept of not being able to pay back a debt. Are all debts to God not able to be paid back? Even though you might say you can't pay back a debt owed to God, do you find yourself still struggling to find a way to pay Him back? If so, why do you think you or others might be struggling with wanting to pay a debt back? How does our desire to pay back keep us from lavishing on the LORD our abounding love? In the letter to the Ephesians (2:8-10) Paul writes that it is by grace we have been saved, through faith and that none of this (salvation, grace or faith) has anything to do with our efforts. Can you find any comfort in this passage, and if so can you share why?

And now, would you share together how this passage in Luke 7 and our theme Philippians 1:9 – 11 might go together? How is a love like this “sinful woman” lives out the answer to Paul’s prayer that our *love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight so that we may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God?*

When I was “wonderfully saved” in Jesus, one of my heart issues (one of many) was that I did not know love as it is truly designed by God. I knew a love that was all about me – though it may have served, given, and even sacrificed for others, it was still about me. Jesus showed me that a Heart that loves wants the object of its love to be the one and only thing that matters. In growing in God’s love, I learned that my “love” was about idolatry, and inappropriate worship. No wonder I didn’t really know God or His peace. So my prayer at that time, even still today, is “Lord, teach me to love as you love!” For I have realized that no matter whether I have been forgiven “a lot” or “a little”, the common denominator is that neither can I repay. And in comparison to God’s standard of Holiness, my debt is well beyond the US Debt of trillions. So I need to acknowledge with the Apostle Paul that I too am “the worst of sinners.” Therefore, in view of God’s incredible mercy, I will choose to live a radical, reclaimed life that parallels the woman who poured her love upon Jesus! I was forgiven LOTS so I am compelled to love lots – we all are. In so doing I will come to know God more and more, that will increase my depth of insight to what His will is, what is God’s best, and what is pleasing to Him. And then I can experience the fruit of Christ’s righteousness flowing through me to His glory and praise!

Drs. Monty and Shelley Mathis graduated from Washington State University’s veterinary program in 1988 and 1986 respectively. Through CVF at WSU, they came to know the Lord. For the next 10 years, Christ had them work for Him in a vet clinic in Redmond, WA. They later served with their two children and cat in Nepal and then China for 15 years with CVM. Currently, back in the US, Shelley is returning to clinical medicine and Monty is working at the CVM Seattle office, as the Long-Term Mobilization Coordinator. Email: mmathis@cvmusa.org



Abounding Love

Neighborly Love

The Bible talks about two kinds of love, the horizontal kind and the vertical variety. Both are hugely important. The first four of the Ten Commandments refer to our vertical relationship, between man and God. The last six laws talk about our horizontal interactions, among us humans down here on Earth.

Which do you think you are better at, or spend more time and energy on, loving vertically or horizontally?

Read this popular Bible story together and see what Jesus had to say about the two and how integral they are: (Luke 10:25-37 NLT)

One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: “Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus replied, “What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?”

The man answered, “‘You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.’(vertical) And, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’(horizontal)”

Love God and love people, simple as that.

“Right!” Jesus told him. “Do this and you will live!”

The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor? The Message version says it this way: “Looking for a loophole, he asked, “And just how would you define ‘neighbor’?”

Jesus replied with a story: “A Jewish man was traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho, and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road.

“By chance a priest came along. But when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. A Temple assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side.

“Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. The next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, ‘Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I’ll pay you the next time I’m here.’

The road to Jericho was similar to a dark alley in the worst part of a modern city, except that it was many miles to the nearest streetlight. The steep path was lined by crags and caves allowing thieves to conveniently hide, strike, and escape. It’s easy for us to quickly condemn the priest

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and the Levite, and maybe we should, but are we sure we would be as brave and selfless as the Samaritan? Now add the history between Jews and Samaritans, sworn enemies in every way, the Samaritan's training and experience should have led him to step *on* the victim, not just over him! Who would risk his personal safety, destroy his schedule, become dirty and bloody, and offer his own wallet to help a needy stranger of another race and social class?

"Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?" Jesus asked.

The man replied, "The one who showed him mercy."

Then Jesus said, "Yes, now go and do the same."

Like the wounded man on the Jericho road, there are needy people in our path; a lonely classmate, the struggling single mom next door, a homeless man down the street, and the hungry family on your short-term mission trip. God calls us to show compassion and mercy for those all around us. Who could you love better today?

What was Jesus' strategy when he replied to the law expert "Do this and you will live." Why did he not say, "Receive me as your personal Savior and you will have eternal life" or something to that effect? It sounds like he's suggesting to the man that the way of salvation is through good deeds, but instead Jesus is emphasizing the man's powerlessness to fulfill the law. When we look at the regulations of the Old Testament individually, we see many that are possible to keep. But if we look at the principles beneath the particulars and at the kind of life that the law is really after, then we see how we fail utterly to reach it. Jesus is saying, *If you can do that you will live, but if you see clearly you will see that the righteous requirement of the law must be fulfilled in some other way...*

The man asked Jesus who his neighbor was because he wanted Jesus to define the second commandment in such a way as to make its requirements reachable. Jesus instead responded with a parable that expounded the second great commandment to completely out of reach. Jesus is not telling us that we can be saved by imitating the Good Samaritan, even though He is clearly charging us to follow his pattern. Rather, Jesus is seeking to humble us with the love God *requires*, so we will be willing to receive the love God *offers*.

I wanted to conclude our series with this upside down way to look at this common parable. When we hear this story, we so often see the teaching that we should love our neighbor, but do we see Jesus' emphasis that we are actually incapable of loving well? Each of these 12 devotionals has focused on loving better, but don't think that you can do that on your own. True love can only abound from you if you have the love of Christ abounding in your heart because *God is love*. And remember that grace abounds to you through Christ, because we will

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all fail at loving perfectly horizontally and vertically every day, so don't rest in your own efforts, but in the grace offered to you through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.

Who might some of your neighbors be specifically? How might you take risks to show them mercy?

Have you recognized your need for God's grace? Does your heart abound with His love? Take this time to find out about grace from others in your group if you want to know more.

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