

## Whom to love

We've all heard the truism: "Two things are certain in this life — death and taxes." You can add a third certainty — conflict.



**Michael Olmsted** Faith can transform our ideas about death. Patriotism can shape our views on taxes. Love can turn conflict to resolution and a healthy relationship. The church is the one place where love should be obvious and conflict rare.

Yet, in the church we often see the tragedy of broken relationships. How can this be? I thought Jesus answered the question about the greatest commandment: "*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your mind.* This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is like it. *You must love your neighbor as you love yourself*" (Matthew 22:36-39, Common English Bible). Get that straight and life will be remarkable.

The complication, what the Bible describes as our "fallen" state, is that we have trouble loving God with all that we are and we are selective in our love for others.

Enter grace: God loves us as we are and offers us a very different life built on his love. In 2 Corinthians 5:18, Paul explains, "All of these new things [a new life] are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ who gave us the ministry of reconciliation." So there you are. Need I say more? Jesus did!

Being a "born again" Christian does not mean that once you make your faith decision you just hang on until you go to heaven. Faith is not a waiting game. It is a significantly different life that Jesus clearly

modeled and described plainly as living according to God's love.

Love is no sugary concept in the Bible. Have you found it easy to "love your enemies and pray for those who harass you" (Matthew 5:44)? To be sure we are hearing clearly, Jesus points out we are no better than the hated tax collectors or Gentiles of his day if we only love our brothers, sisters and like-minded friends (Matthew 5:46-47).

Then comes the clincher: "Just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also must you be complete" (Matthew 5:48). Again Jesus says: "I give you a new commandment: love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other" (John 13:34).

We use the word "love" loosely in our language. You may say you love barbecue or the color blue or fast cars. But the gospels are written in Greek, which has several words for love.

Today's passages use the very specific word *agape*, which is selfless love, concerned for the welfare of another, a caring that ignores obstacles to express itself in actions. When the Bible speaks of God loving us, it reveals that God knows about our failures, rebellion and selfishness. But God still sent his Son to die for us. Only God's love has the power to change us as we trust our life to him.

The sticking point is how we define "neighbor." Jesus quotes the "second commandment" from Leviticus 19:17, which actually deals with how God's people should relate to family members and neighbors, or Israelites outside actual family. But in John 13:34-35, Jesus calls for *agape* within the Christian family, a fellowship that includes non-Jews. Jesus constantly

## Formations

August 2 2015

Scripture: Matthew 5:43-48, 22:36-40; John 13:34-35

modeled God's love for those outside Judaism — tax collectors, Samaritans and Gentiles. Did Jesus change the law of God? No! He tore away the traditions and shadows of legalism that had become barriers to those outside Judaism.

This is exactly what we must do. Jesus says, "Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so also you must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciple, when you love each other" (John 13:34-35). Human nature says we will love others if they are like us, conform to what we expect, look like us, think like us and talk like us. Do any of "us" think we could even come close to those requirements to receive God's love? Sometimes we have trouble loving other Christians, yet we insist we are God's people!

How can we model *agape* with those who are different from us? In Matthew 5:44, Jesus commands us to "love your enemies and pray for those who harass you." God's kind of love offers hope, life and blessings to people unlike us, even those we may fear. When you pray for someone you do not trust or like, someone you call "enemy," someone who seems hopeless, then you are beginning to witness and become an agent of *agape*.

If you are to love as Jesus teaches, you must practice love inside the church family and outside it. This is the "greatest" commandment.

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