

Imitation Love – The Real Thing 3-20-22

In *The Princess Bride*, there is a great line about the value of true love. The movie is all about true love and its enduring power. At one point, the character played by Billy Crystal, a character named Miracle Max, says, and I quote: *True love is the greatest thing in the world.* Now, you may know that is not the entire quote. He actually says, *True love is the greatest thing in the world - except for a nice MLT - mutton, lettuce and tomato sandwich, where the mutton is nice and lean and the tomato is ripe.* Great line, but today I am going to present a new idea for our consideration and that is this: Imitation love is the greatest thing in the world and is, in fact, the real thing. Ephesians 5:1-2 *Be imitators of God, as beloved children; ²and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.* The first thing this passage calls us to is the imitation of God. We are made in His image. We spoiled it through sin, but redemption comes to restore that image and make us over again, like the Lord who fashioned us in His image. That provides us with a profound sense of purpose, but our focus this morning will be on verse two and the exhortation to walk in love just as Christ also love. We imitate God and what does that mean? In large part, it means we walk in love. I like the sermon title this week. My titles usually don't do much for me but this one communicates. "Imitation Love - the Real Thing." You get it? God calls us to an imitation love, not a phony love, but a love that copies the pattern that is set for us by the Lord. So, let's look together at this imitation love, this call to walk in love. What does it look like?

According to our text love express itself by giving? It says, "walk in love, just as Christ also loved you," and did what? "And gave Himself for us." That verse you know in John 3 says that God so loved the world that He what? That He gave. You spell love G-I-V-E. And we aren't talking about things you can wrap. What does Jesus give as an expression of His love? Himself, and that is our calling as well. Here is another John 3:16. This one though is I John 3:16. Look at this 16 *We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.* Are you a follower of Jesus? If so, this has to carry enormous weight in your thinking. This is God's word on the meaning of true love - not romantic love, not sloppy sentimental love, but true Christ-like, biblical and Christian love. It means a laying down of your life. A self-sacrifice, a giving of self. Jesus said, John 15:13 *Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.* John 10:11

I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. For many years, our family, on the first Saturday of the month would join other disciples of Jesus at an abortion clinic to pray against the killing that would go on there, to seek God's grace for the babies and the mothers that showed up there. As we would stand with a sign along the highway a lot of cars pass by and, of course, the reactions to our presence could be varied and colorful. When folks in their cars bothered to yell at us, you know what their favorite line was? It was real clever. They would ride by and yell, "Get a life!" I would think, "that's a great idea!" Life is what we were all there for. But of course, what those folks meant is that we should be looking for something self-serving to do on a Saturday morning. But, you know what God's word says is the only way to "Get a life?" It is to give a life. You get a life when you give a life. Christ said that a person who loses his or her life for his sake will gain it. The way of sacrifice is the way of victory and the way of humility is the way of exaltation. This is the radical nature of the Lord we follow and the faith we believe. It is also the only true expression of love. We lay down our lives, we give ourselves.

So, we see that Christ loves us sacrificially, and if we are going to love others in a Jesus way, we do so sacrificially as well. What does that mean? It means you put the interest of others before your personal comforts and pleasures. Now this calls for some discernment. It does not mean that you are never to enjoy personal comforts and pleasures. Occasionally, the enemy of our souls fools us into distorting this call to Christ-like loving sacrifice. Some will sacrifice their families for some great cause. That is not the Lord's will. In some cases, you can bring your family along into the sacrificial loving of others – with some balance that may be a good idea, but your sacrificial love begins, practically, at home – with your spouse, your kids, your parents. One problem I have observed is that Joe Christian may get a lot more recognition and appreciation from those in his church or at the rescue mission than from his own family. As a result, he may misprioritize his investments of time and energy. What we want is the readiness, the heart, to sacrifice, but we also want the Lord's guidance and wisdom about the direction that sacrifice is to take. And there are many factors that help us determine that. I think of the priorities set out for us in Scripture. I think of our distinctive giftings and abilities. I think of our life contexts and circumstances.

It is also worth noting here that we are not to sacrifice personal rest and nurture either. Now, there is a sinful indulgence that we are to avoid, as we saw two weeks back in the sermon on sloth, but adequate rest, adequate attention to my

own needs and health is critical. God even commands a sabbath rest. There is nothing noble about burning out, about resisting a rest. Self-preservation of the Lord's servant only ensures more and better service in the long run. I hope you get that and can pursue a wise balance although always operating from a heart that is ready to follow Jesus into endeavors that stretch us and challenge us.

But, let's be clear – it will cost to love as Jesus loves. Sacrifice suggests pain. I remember when I was a top 40 deejay on an AM radio platform, playing a green record by a group called *Nazareth*. Remember Nazareth? I have no idea if there was anything Biblical about the group, but they had a hit song, the title of which was "Love Hurts." The first line says: *Love hurts, love scars, love wounds and marks*. There is more truth to that than those singers likely knew. Love does hurt. Ask any parent of an adult child. It does scar. At least, loving sinners does. It certainly hurt our Lord. His body was scarred and wounded and marked by love for sinners. That death at Calvary was nothing if it wasn't painful. Laying down your life will cost you. It costs you a lot of tears and a lot of forfeited pleasures. There is clearly a price for this imitation love, because it is the real thing. It is the Jesus thing. Elizabeth Elliot has written a lovely book about Amy Carmichael entitled, *A Chance To Die*. In it she prints one of Amy Carmichael's poems. It says:

*Hast thou no scar?
No hidden scar on foot, or side, or hand?
I hear thee sung as mighty in the land,
I hear them hail thy bright, ascendant star,
Hast thou no scar?*

*Hast thou no wound?
Yet I was wounded by the archers, spent,
Leaned Me against a tree to die; and rent
By ravening beasts that compassed Me, I swooned:
Hast thou no wound?*

*No wound? No scar?
Yet, as the Master shall the servant be,
And pierced are the feet that follow Me;
But thine are whole: can he have followed far
Who has no wound nor scar?*

You catch that? Can one have followed Jesus very far and have no scar to show for it? No pains, no wounds. Remember, we are the people with the wounded God. Never in human history had a people worshipped a wounded God, but Christians do exactly that. Here we confront how radical and peculiar our faith is. The world we live in calls us to self-expression, self-fulfillment. Our Master calls us to self-sacrifice. Big difference. And, when you combine the call to follow Jesus, with the great commission to make disciples, we are moved toward a lifestyle of loving sacrifice for the mission of the church. Laying down our lives - what does it mean practically? It means that when you do your budget the word GIVE is to be prominent. The example of Jesus speaks volumes about what it means to use our monies lovingly. Love can be and is expressed in kind words, and gentle hugs, but if it doesn't impact the way you handle your material possessions it isn't real imitation love. If you are a follower of Jesus and God has given you money - what's it for? I was grieved to read a word from a famous pastor who has been criticized for his extravagant lifestyle and do you know how he justified it? He said, "God gave me money so I can show the world that Christians don't have to be poor." Is that why God gives us money? Right, Christians don't have to be poor, but they are to be generous, to be loving. Is your budget shaped by love? And what about your schedule? Is your time spent self-indulgently? I look out at some of you and I know, you are living your life sacrificially and I commend you. I admire you. Busy moms and dads, pouring out your life for your kids. Busy elders and deacons and Sunday-school teachers, laying down your lives for the sake of others. I Corinthians 13 reminds us that we can serve others without loving. Lots of people do that and it shows in their attitude. You can serve without loving but you can't love without serving and without giving your time, your talents, your dollars, your life.

Now, all of this relates to loving sacrificially as Jesus did and does. But, we have two more things to contemplate today about the way Jesus loves. Consider that he loves with specific intentionality. That is, with a clear purpose or goal in mind. His love for sinners has our ultimate best interest in view and that means it is a hardy, strong love that can be tough when tough is needed. What is the goal of his love? Titus 2 says that our Lord **14** *Gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.* Well, that is important to know. This sacrificial love has the goal of making me like Jesus himself, a man committed to pure living and good deeds. Ephesians 5 says the same kind of thing. **5:25a-26a, 27** *Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, ²⁶so that He might sanctify her. ²⁷that He might present*

to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. This is why our love for neighbors can't stop at just kindness. Acts of service, words of affirmation and the like are part of what loving means, but the final hope is that men and women and children discover Christ who can transform their hearts and pardon their sins. For us, this means that we sometimes take the uncomfortable step of talking with them about weighty, eternal matters. Sometimes, we risk rejection through an invitation to a church event, like an Easter service, or an Alpha class, where someone will hear of Christ. How many of you know you can't change a person's heart? You can't give them faith, you can't induce repentance? Of course we know that. But we also know of the power of God's word. Lost people get around the Lord's people and the Lord's word and world-changing stuff happens because Jesus is seeking people to be His worshipers and when He comes seeking for new sheep, He does find.

Our final observation about how Jesus loves is that He loves with patience. He loves with perseverance. Pick your P word. Where do we see the manifest patience of the love of Christ? Well, we see it in His dealings with the disciples. The love of Jesus for these twelve men is such a great lesson for us. He was very intentional. He took the initiative. They didn't send in applications for the Jesus squad, He went after them, each one. And He had an obvious plan for them, a purpose. He was growing their souls into a world-changing army of gospel warriors. And then, what do we read of in the gospel stories? Time after time they disappointed. Their faith failed. When they should have been bold, they were chickens. When they should have been humble, they were arrogant. When they should have prayed, they snoozed. And then, in the moment of our Lord's great crisis they ran away or denied him. And Jesus? He loved them still. He kept teaching, exhorting, and forgiving all the way. You want to love like Jesus? Prepare to be longsuffering. Prepare to forgive, to forbear and to give more opportunities to those who disappoint you.

How does our Savior love? With sacrifice, with purpose, with patience. Are you ready to follow Him? No – but are you ready to ask for the grace of His Spirit to make you ready to follow Him? That much we can hope for and that much we will do.

In 1941 Maximillian Kolbe was a Polish Christian who was swept into the horrors of the prison camp in Auschwitz, that enormous Nazi killing center where thousands of Jews were gassed and cremated every 24 hours. In this horrible place, Kolbe ministered to his fellow prisoners, praying with them, comforting them. Then

one July night at Auschwitz the air was filled with the baying of dogs and the roar of motorcycles. A prisoner from barracks 14 had escaped. The policy of the Germans was simple. For every escapee ten of those left would be sentenced to die, not quickly in the gas chambers, but by starvation, with no food or water until slowly sanity and life slipped away. The commandant lined the men of Barracks 14 before him and inspected them, choosing out the miserable ten. One man cried, "My poor wife, my poor children, what will they do?!" As the commandant lined up the ten men there was a commotion in the ranks. A prisoner had broken out of line, calling for the commandant. It was unheard of to leave formation, let alone address a Nazi officer. The commandant stopped and said, "What does this Polish pig want of me?" It was Max Kolbe, who had ministered to so many, who stood now before the Nazi killer and said, "I would like to die in place of one of the condemned men." When asked for whom he would like to die he chose the man who was weeping over his wife and kids. His wish granted, Kolbe was taken with the others to the death hole where, for the next several days something extraordinary happened. Instead of hearing the usual fighting and howling and frenzy coming from that cell, those outside heard the faint sounds of singing. Why? Why did Max Kolbe do it? Because he was committed to walk in love like Jesus, who gave Himself for us. He did it because he was a Christian. Are you? Are you a follower of this Jesus? You likely won't get a chance to be a hero like Max Kolbe but the Lord calls you to a heroism of a different kind. He calls you to heroic living for your wife, and your kids and your community. He calls you to love in the place and manner of His appointment. The glory of Max Kolbe's story is not that God called him to die, but that He called him to be like Jesus in the place God had him. What does that mean for you? The details will vary depending on who we are and where we are, but what God asks from each of us is this Imitation love, because it only is the real thing. Let's pray