

I heard a question this week that I wanted to begin with today.

“When you think about your spiritual life; is it propelled more by a fear of God’s disfavor or is it propelled more by awe at God’s love?”

What I’m asking you to think about is: What is shaping you spiritually or motivating you spiritually? Is the motivation driven by the potential threat of God’s disfavor over what you will do or will not do or an overwhelming sense of God’s love?

Let me illustrate it this way. Many people view God as an accountant. God has a giant ledger book in which he keeps track of all the things we do; reading our Bible, going to church, praying before meals, etc. And our job is to make certain that the balance sheet is always balanced a little more to the positive so that we can avoid the disfavor of God (or stay out of debt to God). If that is the motivation behind your actions then you’d have to be honest and admit that you fear the threat of God’s disfavor.

But if you have an overwhelming sense of God’s great love for you and that you desire to return God’s love to him and through your love of others; then your motivation to go to church, and read your Bible, etc. is not from fear of God’s disfavor.

Do you see why the answer to that question is so important? Do you understand why knowing your motivation is so critical to shaping not only who you are but also why you do the things you do?

I was a captive to that wrong way of thinking for a long time. I would always put myself down if I didn’t read the right number of chapters from the Bible or spend the right number of hours in prayer. I even see where that negative spirit spilled over into my relationships at home and even in my preaching. Sometimes we just get so caught up in trying to do all the right things that we lose the proper motivation for spending time with God, going to worship, serving others and whatever else helps to shape us spiritually.

As a matter of fact I bet some of you are here this morning because you think that if you go to church each Sunday it will help to balance out what you did or didn’t do last week.

Now, imagine that instead of being motivated by the potential threat of God’s disfavor that we live daily and come together as the body of Christ each week motivated by the overwhelming sense of God’s love. We come because we want to draw close to God and express our love through our worship. That could be so transforming that I can’t imagine the impact you and Linglestown Life would have on our community, our relationships and our world.

So let's look this morning at what motivates us or shapes us spiritually; and specifically, what motivates us to serve others.

Let's start in 1 John 4:7-12.

⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

Did you hear it? Did you hear what John said about God? God is love!

We all say that we believe that God is love; but if we truly believe that God is love then it will radically change the way we relate to God; and it will completely transform the way we relate to other people.

Let's look at this passage for a moment that tells us, God is love.

We use the word 'love' for a lot of different things and the word really has many different meanings. Think about what you love? I love my wife, but I also love my kids, I love potato chips, I love the color blue, I love to read, I love to run. We throw the word love around so much that it is hard to really know what love is.

But John chooses a word in the Greek language that defines love very specifically and that word is *agape*. If you've been around any church you've probably heard about *agape* love. But the word *agape* would have probably caught the first century readers by surprise.

Agape was an uncommon word in the ancient world. It's rarely found outside the New Testament. It seems that the biblical writers seized this unfamiliar word in order to infuse it with new meaning.

In Scripture *agape* describes a love that is unconditional. It is not contingent on the other person's performance or desirability. It is not a love that is necessarily earned, but is given freely. No strings attached! This love is also willful. It's not a matter of feeling or inclination, but rather a decision to act in another person's interest. It means loving the unlovable and the unlovely (us!), not because they deserve to be loved, but because it is our nature to do so. Finally, it's sacrificial. It costs you something to love in this way; it's not just giving, but *giving up* for the sake of someone else (More about this idea of sacrifice next week as we focus on the idea that serving others requires us to sacrifice).

We could say that *agape* love is acting in someone else's interest unconditionally (no matter who they are), willfully (no matter how you feel), and sacrificially (no matter what it costs).

Now that definition of love tells us something about God and what motivates God to love us. God loves us unconditionally (no matter who we are), willfully (God doesn't keep score and love us more or less depending on the balance sheet), and sacrificially (What does John 3:16 tell us? "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son..."). And that definition of God's love also tells us that we don't need to live in fear of God's disfavor if we do or do not do something.

What motivates God to love us should overwhelm us to the point that our lives are shaped by God's agape love. And that overwhelming love should transform the way we love one another and ultimately serve one another.

This passage from 1 John 4 includes our Bible memory verse: *No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*

So what John is telling us is that we are the agape love of God to this world because God lives in each of us. And that means that our love for others is to be unconditional, willful, and sacrificial.

Turn back one chapter to 1 John 3:16-18.

¹⁶ This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? ¹⁸ Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

John tells us that Jesus is the ultimate example of agape love in that Jesus laid down his life for us. But then John gets real practical. If we have benefited from God's agape love, then it is up to us to practically serve the needs of others because we are motivated by the love of God for us.

Loving God comes through our loving others and one way we love others is by serving the practical needs of those around us.

Here is a good opportunity to reiterate what I said last week about "doing for one what you wish you could do for all." Have you thought about or more importantly acted on Going Deep, Going Long and Going Time?

John makes it crystal clear; if it is in our power to affect the life of another person around us we have no choice because the love of God compels us to love and serve one another.

John is rather adamant about what love should motivate the disciple of Jesus to be about. And why not, John was with Jesus when Jesus spoke these words which John writes in John 15:12-17

¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵ I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. ¹⁷ This is my command: Love each other.

John saw in Jesus the powerful effect that agape love can have. Jesus laid down his life for us and that type of love is a powerful motivator. But I want to lock in on something Jesus said in verse 16: “go and bear fruit.”

Earlier in the chapter Jesus is relating to the disciples that he is the vine and they are the branches. There he says that any branch that is growing out of the vine should bear fruit. The fruit of our relationship with Jesus, the fact of our being his disciples means that the love flowing through our lives should motivate us to love one another. Jesus' love is not a one way street, it is a pass through love that we are commanded to pass on to others.

Jesus command is very simple: Love one another. Not out of fear. Not out of obligation. Not out of a self-serving attitude. Simply Love one another.

So what is motivating your service to others?

Agape love is acting in the interest of others, no matter who they are, how we feel, or what it costs. It is putting another person's well-being ahead of our own—not because they are loveable or likeable or because we feel like it at the moment or because it's convenient or comfortable or even reasonable, but because that's what love does.

Imagine what our church would be like if all of us became people who instinctively acted in the interests of others, naturally putting other's well-being ahead of our own. Imagine the transformative impact that kind of love would have on this congregation and our witness to the world.

So let's go back to the question I asked at the beginning of the sermon:

“When you think about your spiritual life; is it propelled more by a fear of God's disfavor or is it propelled more by awe at God's love?”

My prayer today is that we begin to understand the love of God and allow God's love to propel us out into service to others as we seek to love God and love others.

Sermon Outline

In His Steps Pastor George S. Reynolds
March 27, 2011 Linglestown Life

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1 John 4:7-12

God is _____

Agape

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

agape love is acting in someone else's interest unconditionally (no matter who they are), willfully (no matter how you feel), and sacrificially (no matter what it costs)

Bible memory verse: *No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*

1 John 4:12

1 John 3:16-18

If we have benefited from God’s agape love, then it is up to us to practically serve the needs of others because we are motivated by the love of God for us.

“Do for one what you wish you could do for everyone.” Andy Stanley

Go Deep, Go Long, Go Time

John 15:12-17

‘go and bear fruit’

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