

Are you loved? [*Just let the question sit there a few moments*]

All of us desire to be loved.

All of us desire to be loved; but not all of us believe that we are loved.

All of us desire to be loved; not just accepted, not just known, not just tolerated. We desire to be loved; unconditionally, passionately and completely.

In our desire for love many people search out things, people and experiences that will tell them they are loved. But rarely does this search provide the depth of love for which we long.

In our desire for love many people think of themselves as simply unlovable. They believe that something they have done or something that has been done to them makes them unlovable.

Well when you walk away from here today I want you to *know* that you are loved; that you have *experienced* the love of God and as a result of that knowledge and experience of love that you are determined to see your life *changed* by love.

Let's begin by opening the scripture to Romans 8:35-39.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

I don't know about you but there are certainly times in my life when I feel separated from the love of God. When I mess up in my relationship with my wife or kids I feel that I'm separated from the love of God. I feel separated from the love of God when things don't go the way I want. As a matter of fact (and this is really trivial) the other night I lost something. As I stewed because I couldn't find it I said to God, "You must not really love me!"

Now I don't think God had anything to do with me misplacing something at my home; but I made the assumption that when something was not going my way then God must not love me.

I wonder if that is what Paul was addressing when he wrote this passage. Listen to the whole passage: *continue reading Romans 8*

So is there anything that can separate us from the love of God? No!

So let's say this together, I am loved, and nothing can separate me from the love of God!

Now, in case you don't believe that you are loved we're going to look at three stories from scripture that remind us that we are loved. But before we do that I want to remind you of something about the nature of God- God is love!

John says it several times in 1 John 4. Listen to what John writes 1 John 4:7-12

It is the nature of God to love!

Now let's look for that love in these three stories.

The first story is from the Old Testament prophet Hosea. Anyone read the book of Hosea lately? (I didn't think so!)

Hosea was a prophet of God who lived during the later days of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The nation of Israel had been unfaithful to God for generations. The nation had continuously been abandoning God and going after the tribal gods of other nations.

So it is in that setting that Hosea is called by God to prophesy to the nation of Israel. But Hosea isn't just to use words to get the attention of the people; Hosea is called to live out God's word to the nation of Israel.

That may not sound bad unless you know the rest of the story! God called Hosea to go out and marry an adulterous wife. (Think Pretty Woman but without the storybook ending!) Hosea was to love Gomer even though she would not remain faithful to him.

The relationship (marriage) was a living demonstration that even though Israel continues to be unfaithful to the covenant that God had established, God would always remain faithful.

Just listen to some of the words from Hosea 11 that describe how God still loves this nation:

How can I give you up...My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger...(wouldn't that be more like us! then God says), For I am God, and not man- the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath. (11:8-9)

God loves us even when we are unfaithful! God keeps his covenant commitment to us even when we don't keep our covenant. As Lewis Smedes says: *[God] is the sort who sticks with what he is stuck with.*

God is the sort who sticks with what he is stuck with!

God is committed to love us even when we are unfaithful and unlovable. Paul affirms that when he writes to the Romans:

It isn't often that someone will die for a righteous person, though maybe someone might dare to die for a good person. But God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us. (5:7-8 CEB)

God is the sort who sticks with what he is stuck with!

Hosea is a beautiful picture of a God who loves us, who sticks with us, even when we're not so good at sticking with and loving God.

Hosea introduced a new dimension of God that for many in the Old Testament was unknown. But fast forward a few centuries and Jesus is once again introducing a God who sticks with us- and this time not as Yahweh but by a word that speaks volumes about the heart of God, Abba- Father, daddy.

Look at these two stories from Jesus encounters with people who undoubtedly had not experienced love- who could not say after seeking love in all the wrong places- I am loved.

In Luke 19, we have the story of a tax-collector named Zacchaeus. Tax collectors, whether in Jesus time or today, were not looked upon with much love. As a matter of fact, Zacchaeus was not just a tax-collector; he was a chief tax-collector meaning he probably oversaw an army of tax-collectors. So when the Bible says that he was wealthy we can assume that over the years he had accumulated a great deal of taxes over and above what Rome really wanted.

In Israel, Zacchaeus was considered not only unlovable, he was considered unclean. So it was a scandal when Jesus stopped under the tree that Zacchaeus had inhabited; but it was worse yet when Jesus invited himself to Zach's house for dinner.

Jesus was demonstrating that *God is the sort who sticks with what he is stuck with!* Jesus demonstrated grace and acceptance and validated that Zach was loved by God even when no one else loved him.

Zach was changed by the love of God! And as a result of Jesus demonstration of God's love Zach could say, I am loved!

Luke tells us of another 'sinner' that had desired to know and experience love; but couldn't say, 'I am loved.'

The story is found in Luke 7:36-50.

Jesus was invited into the home of Simon the Pharisee for dinner. While dinner was being enjoyed; a 'sinful' woman, read into that prostitute, entered the home and found her way to the feet of Jesus. [Remember that during this time period people reclined to eat so Jesus feet were easily accessible to the woman.]

So Luke tells us that the woman... came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. 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. (37-38)

With Simon and his guests shocked by this behavior and the fact that Jesus left this woman touch him; Jesus asked Simon to think about this: Luke 7:40-43

We can read into this story that somewhere along the way this woman had heard Jesus speak about the love of God that *sticks with what he is stuck with!* Her act demonstrated that she could now say, 'I am loved!'

Nothing can separate you from the love of God! No matter who you are, what you've been through, what you've done; what is happening around you or inside you; **you are loved!** Loved by a God who *sticks with what he is stuck with!*

But I want you to take notice of something that is so evident in these last two stories. Because I am loved, love changes me.

Because I am loved, how I *live* changes. Zach gave back what he had taken and the woman left her sinful lifestyle.

Because I am loved, how I *love* changes. The cheap, selfish love demonstrated by this woman and Zach was replaced with God's love- the extravagant, self-giving love.

Because I am loved something else changes; how I *worship* changes. In particular I want you to think a moment about the actions of the woman at Jesus feet. We could say that as she wept at his feet that she was worshipping.

Think about what transpired in that moment at Jesus feet? She comprehended who she was- a sinner. But she also comprehended who God is- a faithful and gracious God who loves even her. And it all came together in comprehending how incredibly good God is to open the floodgates of love to her.

When we experience God's love that is when we know we are loved! And it changes how we live, how we love and how we worship.

So when you walk away from here today do you *know* that you are loved? Have you begun to *experience* the love of God? And as a result of that knowledge and experience of love that you are determined to see your life *changed* by love?

So let me ask you what I asked at the beginning of today's message: Are you loved?

Yes, you are loved!