

## A DISCIPLE HAS . . . EXTRAORDINARY LOVE FOR PEOPLE

One of the things that breaks my heart—and I’m sure breaks God’s heart, too—is that so many people are turned off by Christians. I often hear people say, “I like Jesus, but I don’t like the people who claim to follow Him.” They see us as angry, demanding, and judgmental, and they want to stay as far away as possible. What’s the problem? What’s creating this deep divide between God’s people and the rest of society?

I believe this is the reason: We don’t know how to love the way Jesus loves.

When Jesus interacted with people, He demonstrated the richness and abundance of God’s love, which was a blend of both grace and truth. This kind of love wants the best for people, and it includes knowing when to give comfort and when to confront. Jesus was exquisitely tender with the poor, the sick, lepers, foreigners, misfits, and outcasts. The religious elite rejected these people, but Jesus welcomed them. Yet Jesus never said sin was acceptable. Sin crushes hearts and poisons minds, so Jesus spoke truth everywhere He went. It’s fascinating that the arguments we see in the Gospels aren’t between Jesus and the prostitutes, pimps, and thieves, but between Jesus and the self-righteous religious leaders. They were proud of following all the rules, but they missed God’s heart.

What does it mean to love like Jesus?

- Those of us who have experienced the extraordinary love of God don't look the other way when people are hurting. We move toward them to provide comfort and care.
- Those of us who have experienced the extraordinary love of God don't stand back and condemn those who are radical sinners. We get to know them and earn the right to be heard.
- Those of us who have experienced the extraordinary love of God don't just tolerate those who have different views and assume all religions and philosophies are equal. We speak the truth, explaining God's truth with kindness and without condemnation.
- Those of us who have experienced the extraordinary love of God don't love only those who are easy to love. We dig deep to love those who are hard to love . . . people like you and me.

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True disciples are known by the depth of their love for people, especially for those who are different or difficult. Love is a clearer indication of devotion to Jesus than church attendance, proclamations of faith, Bible study, spiritual gifts, or service. Love is the most important trait of a disciple.

What kind of love? Genuine love, deep love, consistent love, sacrificial love. When people see this kind of love, they sit up and take notice. After the disciples had watched Jesus for three years, He announced, "Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you

are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other” (John 13:34–35, MSG).

Those men surely thought, *I can't do that! I don't have the ability . . . or even the desire . . . to love people like you do!*

Great point, but God doesn't ask us to love others in our own strength and from our own resources. He gives us the limitless resources of His love to draw from. In John's first letter, he explained, “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 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” (1 John 4:7–9, NIV).

But John didn't stop there. We can only express God's love to others to the extent we've experienced it ourselves. John tells 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. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (verses 10–11). Are you having a hard time loving someone? Then dive deeper into God's love for you.

One day as I was studying the subject of love, I read a passage written by the Apostle Paul to the Christians in Ephesus: “For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:14, 17–19).

As I was meditating on this passage, I sensed God saying that there are many different ways people express love, but there are four distinct ways Jesus expressed love. In fact, He took love to entirely different dimensions. I like to call it “the four dimensions of the love of God.” When

we make it a goal to live in these four dimensions, we start looking more like Jesus, and we grow from a believer into a disciple.

## FOUR DIMENSIONS OF LOVE

It's easy to love some people, but the real measure of a disciple is our love for the least, the lost, those from a different culture, and enemies. Let's look at what it means to love these people.

### Loving the least

Caring for the poor is a theme that runs throughout Scripture. In fact, it's one of the dominant threads in the Bible. In one of His last messages, Jesus gave us a picture of the day of judgment. The unrighteous are those who don't care about the sick and needy, but the righteous notice and reach out to help. In the scene Jesus describes, the king commends the righteous for caring for those in need, but they're surprised by His praise.

“Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’” (Matthew 25:37–40)

Soon after I began serving at the church in Richmond, I was introduced to a ministry that served homeless people in the city. One Saturday night I met with a few of the men on the street, but I quickly realized they were trying to rob me. I immediately knew I needed to get out of there!

I went back to my apartment and began to pray for the men. The next night Colleen came over to my apartment after church, and we sat on our porch to enjoy the evening. Soon two intoxicated men came stumbling down the street. As they got closer, I realized they were two of the men I'd met the previous night. I walked into the street to talk to them. One of the men got angry and ran off, but the other stayed to talk. When it started raining, I invited him to sit on the porch with me. He told me his name was Cecil. As I explained the gospel to him, he understood and believed. When he trusted in Jesus, he instantly and supernaturally sobered up!

I was thrilled at the moment, but then I wondered what I was going to do with Cecil. I brought him into our apartment, fed him, let him take a shower, gave him some of my clothes, and provided a place for him to sleep until we could find a better home for him. Cecil had been an alcoholic for thirty-three years, so even though he was sober, he started experiencing severe withdrawal symptoms. The next day we found a rehab clinic where he could get the medical help he needed. When I left him there, I told him, "I'll come visit you every day until you complete this program, and then I'll help you find a better life."

I went to the clinic to see Cecil every day, either in the morning or the evening. In about two weeks, he had detoxed and had stabilized, so the clinic discharged him. He began going to church with Colleen and me, and some of his friends, the drunks and thieves, wanted to come, too. I loaded ten or twelve of them in a cargo van on Sunday morning and brought them to church. At the time, we only had about sixty people in the church, so our vanload of men significantly increased our attendance . . . even though the men frightened some of our regular attenders.

For the next year, I walked with Cecil through a process of discipleship. I helped him get a job, buy a car, and find a place to live, and he started serving as an usher in the church. His life had completely turned around.

Colleen and I planned to get married, but we had a problem. Colleen came from a Catholic background, and her family had withdrawn from her. They didn't plan to attend our wedding, so she had no one to walk her down the aisle. We asked Cecil, the formerly homeless alcoholic, to do the honors. That day he put on a tuxedo, put Colleen's arm in his, and walked her to the front of the church where I was waiting.

Our experience with Cecil opened doors for our church to care for other homeless people, immigrants, and others in need. I realized it's very

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easy to give a few dollars or even a few hours to people in need, but it's a very different thing to give them our hearts. Caring for them is almost always time consuming and messy. Quite often, they've gotten where they are by making many bad choices, or they're victims of others' horrible choices—and usually both. Either way, their lives need a

lot of unraveling and reweaving. Ever since Colleen and I got married, we've made it a practice to be open to people in need. We often have people live in our home until they can get on their feet.

Those who live in the suburbs can easily lose connections with needy people. That's the reason they moved to the suburbs! But that's dangerous for a disciple of Jesus Christ. We need to do whatever it takes to stay connected to people who are less fortunate, who have lost hope, who have made terrible choices, or who are victims of abuse.

Some might ask, "Isn't it a risk for you and your family to have people living with you?" Yes, certainly. I can tell stories of some harrowing experiences with a few of the people we've brought to live with us. But I can also relate stories of how simple acts of kindness healed hearts, gave comfort,