

GOD'S EXTRAVAGANT LOVE

Sterling UMC
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1 John 4:7-21

The U.S. Treasury Department has a special group of men whose job it is to track down counterfeiters. Naturally, these men need to know a counterfeit bill when they see it. How do they learn to identify the fake bills? Oddly enough, they are not trained by spending hours examining counterfeit money. Rather they study the real thing. They become so familiar with authentic bills that they can spot a counterfeit by looking at it or, often, simply by feeling it.

Words, like dollar bills, can be in circulation for such a long time that they start wearing out. Unfortunately the word love is one of those words. That word has become one of the most widely misused words in our language. We say we “love” to travel, we “love” to eat chocolate cake, we “love” our new car. We use the word love to describe the basest as well as the most exalted of human relationships. We live in a world that would often have us believe there is no more to love than warm fuzzy feelings and sentimental emotions. We live in a society that regards love as something to package and to market. But much of what is called love in modern society is simply counterfeit. It bears no resemblance or relationship to the holy, spiritual love of God.

This morning we begin our focus on stewardship. Our theme this year is Extravagant Generosity: The Heart of Giving. Hopefully you have received the letters that have been sent introducing the campaign, you have heard the testimonies offered, and many of you have responded by completing the Heart Cards each week.

Well this morning as we look toward Commitment Sunday next week I want to share with you what is really part 1 of a two-part sermon. You see when you really think about Christian stewardship there are essentially 2 parts, God's part and our part. This morning I want to share with you God's part in this. That can be summarized in three words: God's extravagant love!

The Bible is the story of God's love for his people, for you and me. Story after story, account after account, tells us of God's love, and how he has expressed that love through his care, and protection of his people. God is love. And where do we find the truest expression of God's love? The truest expression of God's love comes to us in the life of his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus came to this earth to reveal to us the fullness of the Father's love. “This is love,” John says, “Not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

You see the reason for this good news, the reason why on the last day of his life our Savior Jesus Christ climbed the hill of Calvary, he endured a brutal beating, was mocked and spit upon. A crown of thorns was placed on his head so hard that the blood ran down into his eyes. Nails were driven through his hands and feet and he was hung upon a cross where over the course of three hours Jesus suffered unspeakable pain and agony, the reason why is because of God's extravagant love for you. God's incomparable, unbounded, unimaginable, unconditional, extravagant love for you and for me.

You need to acknowledge today God's passion for you. What do I mean by that? You need to realize how much God loves you. Everything starts with you understanding how amazingly extravagantly God loves you. A lot of people think God is mad at them. God is not mad at you. He's mad *about* you.

The Bible says that He created everything to be objects of His love, including you. The whole reason you are alive, the reason your heart is beating right now, there's only one reason for it. God made you to love you. He brought you into existence to love you. And His love is extravagant. It is lavish. It is beyond comprehension. In fact, you will never, ever be able to understand fully how much God loves you because you don't have the brain capacity. It'd be like an ant trying to understand the Internet. You just don't have the brain capacity to understand how much God really loves you.

Let me share with you another verse: 1 John 4 says "*God showed how much He loved us by sending His only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through Him. This is real love. He sent His Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.*" Friends, God didn't just say He loved you. He *showed* He loved you. He *proved* He loved you in the most expensive way – by sacrificing His own Son for you. When Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross with His arms outstretched He was saying to you, "I love you this much! I love you *this much!* So much it hurts." Even if you were the only person who had ever lived on earth and you had sinned, you'd blown it, you'd made mistakes, you needed a savior, Jesus Christ still would have come to earth and died for you. That's how much He loves you.

This morning I want you to fully understand the scope of God's love, God's extravagant love for you. Once again the apostle Paul explains it to us so well. He writes in Ephesians, "*May you be able to feel and understand how long, how wide, how deep and how high God's love really is and experience this love for yourself.*" God says, "I don't want you to just know I love you. I want you to feel that I love you." Many people have never felt loved by God. They've never experienced God's love. They say, "Oh, yes. I believe God loves me." But they've never *felt* it. God says, "My love is long and wide and deep and high." What does that mean?

How long is God's love? Long enough to last forever. That's what makes it different from human love. Have you noticed HUMAN love is fickle? It is sporadic, temporary, and conditional. BUT, God IS love, and His love is unconditional, constant, and perfect. Human love wears out. God's love will never stop loving you. It is long enough to last forever.

God's love is long and God's love is wide. It is wide enough to be everywhere. There is no place that you could go in life that God's love is not with you. You will not always feel it. In fact, sometimes you're going to *feel alone*. But you will never *be alone*. Because God's love is everywhere. It's wide enough to be everywhere. There's no place that you can be where God isn't.

And God's love is deep. It's deep enough to handle everything. No problem, no pressure, no stress, no difficulty. You say, "I'm in the pits right now!" God's love is there. There is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still. So:

- When you sit at the bedside of a loved one who is racked with pain or disease ... God still loves you.
- When you sit at the graveside after losing one who has touched your heart and life ... God still loves you.
- When you weep because your financial burdens seem too heavy to bear ... God still loves you.

- When you see your family torn apart, or your marriage heading for disaster ... God still loves you.
- When your heart aches because of a great sin you've committed, and you feel that God could never forgive you ... God still loves you.

God's love is long, it's wide, it's deep, and finally God's extravagant love is high. God's love is high enough to overlook your mistakes. You say, "How could God love ME, when I'm so unworthy of His love? He sees my life ... knows how I live ... knows me inside and out ... knows when I fail Him, and fail to live up to His love. There's too much sin in my life for God to love someone like me. So, how could God love ME?" Well God's love is high enough to forgive. You have never lived a day, a minute, a second, when God didn't love you.

- You may have hidden in shame from God, like Adam & Eve in the Garden of Eden ... but God still loves you.
- You may have deserted Him like the disciples, when they fled when Jesus was arrested ... but God still loves you.
- You may have denied Him like Peter, when they asked him about his relationship with Jesus ... but God still loves you.
- You may have doubted Him like Thomas ... but God still loves you.

Circumstances have nothing to do with God's love. When everything seems to be going wrong, God still loves you. When everything seems to be going right, God still loves you. If you want a gauge of God's love ... a yardstick to measure His love ... don't look at circumstances, look at the cross! In it all, through thick and thin, good times and bad times ... God still loves you! You never leave His mind, His thoughts, or His sight. He sees the worst in you, and loves you anyhow.

And there is one last point about God's extravagant love, about God's passion for you. Paul makes it in the concluding verses of Romans 8, "Nothing separates us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord." No trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord....In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

I believe that God brought you here this morning to say this to you, "I love you." That's the starting point when it comes to stewardship; to understand and recognize and acknowledge God's extravagant love for you.

Here's the problem. A lot of people know *about* Jesus, but they don't *know* Him. Many people are going to miss heaven by eighteen inches because they got it in their head but they don't have it in their heart. They know about Him. They believe He's the Son of God. They understand His passion for them but they have no passion for Him. They don't trust Him with their lives. Jesus died for you so you could have a relationship with Him. God made you for a purpose and the number one part of that purpose is to get to know and love and trust God. Right now He offers you the proposal of a lifetime.

Have you ever personally accepted what Jesus Christ did for you on the cross and told Him so. If you haven't you ought to. In fact, you ought to do it now.