

Who Do You Love?

by Alan Redpath

The key to a successful church is love for the Word of God, love for one another, and love for prayer.

Duration: 43:54

Scripture: Acts 2:42-47

Topics: "Love"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker begins by sharing a humorous anecdote about two Irishmen and two Englishmen to emphasize the importance of overcoming social barriers and getting to know one another. He then expresses his appreciation for the warm welcome and discusses the significance of the ministry of the local church. The speaker reads from Acts chapter two, focusing on the closing verses, which describe the early believers' devotion to the apostles' doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers. He emphasizes the fear that came upon every soul and the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. The speaker concludes by highlighting the daily growth of the church as the Lord added to their number those whom he was saving.

Transcript

First of all, let me just say how I appreciate the warm welcome extended to my wife and myself this morning. We are very glad indeed to be here. Having been a pastor of a Baptist church in London for some fourteen years, and then in Chicago in USA for ten, and in Edinburgh for three or four more, I do naturally believe very much in the ministry of the local church.

And I do not believe that anything can substitute the regular ministry and teaching of the Word of God from the pulpit week after week. I think therefore it is very gracious of your pastor to ask me as a visitor here to intrude in the ministry of the Word today. I am thinking of two Englishmen, two Welshmen, and two Scotsmen, and two Irishmen who were cast up on a desert island and lost for six months.

At the end of six months they were discovered. The two Welshmen were singing. The two Scotsmen were discussing home rule for Scotland.

The two Irishmen were fighting. And the two Englishmen, well, they were not speaking to each other because they had not been introduced. I do not tell you just that to be funny, but I really do say that it would be a great help to me in overcoming what we call reserve, that which most people call snootiness.

It would be a great help to me if you would come up and speak to me and to my wife so that we would get to know you sometime during this week. One disadvantage of a ministry of this kind is that we get to know so few people, and therefore your help would be greatly appreciated. Now let us turn to the Word of God, and particularly to the Acts of the Apostles and the second chapter, Acts chapter 2, and I want to read to you just the closing few verses of this chapter.

Reading from verse 42, And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship and in breaking of bread and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together and had all things common, and sold their possessions and goods and parted them to all men as every man had need.

And they continued daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved. Just let us bow our heads before the Lord of the Word and bow our hearts before him, and you will echo, I hope, the prayer which I offer for you and for myself.

Speak, Lord, in the stillness while we wait on thee. Hush our hearts to listen in expectancy. Speak, O blessed Master, in this quiet hour.

Let me see thy face, Lord, and feel thy touch of power. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Would you just glance again at the closing verse of this chapter, and particularly at the second portion of it, the last sentence, and let me read it to you as it appears in the New English Bible version. And day by day, that is day after day after day after day, the Lord added to their number those whom he was saving. Here is something that the Lord did.

It was not simply additions to a church role, nor was it a membership campaign, but something that, in the exercise of the sovereign will of God, he effected in his church. And he did it because the conditions within the church demanded it. Indeed, without being irreverent, I would say that the Lord simply had to do it, for if he didn't do it, he would not be true to his promises.

Conditions within the church were such that they called for a demonstration of his power, and of his glory, and of his presence. What a victory. Eagerly, need I, or dare I say, almost wistfully, I would bend my will and my heart to the ministry of his Holy Spirit today, and cry, O Lord, do it again.

In most of our churches, we add just about enough members every year to make up for loss by promotion to glory, or removal to other districts. And yet, day after day after day, the Lord added to the church those whom he was saving. O God, that he would show us how this may happen, and why it doesn't happen, and give us grace to remedy what is wrong, and see that it does happen.

For the Lord is just the same today. Now, you'll notice that this chapter, or you'll remember, that it has witnessed the birth of the most amazing society which the world has ever seen. It had no directors.

It had no committees, believe it or not. No committees, what a wonderful release. It had no talented leadership.

It was composed in the main of unschooled men and unlettered men who had had no theological training. They had no money. Indeed, a few verses after this chapter closes, they boasted in their bankruptcy, silver

and gold have we none.

But such as we have, we give you. That was said, you remember, to a paralyzed man, in the name of Jesus, get up and walk. They had no money, but they had power to raise men into life and blessing.

And they were confronted by such tremendous material source of opposition, which might be reckoned to crush them in a week. The survival of this little group of people was absolutely inexplicable, apart from miracle. And yet, around this little society, all the hopes of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit were centered.

For through this church, all his purposes in the world were going to be fulfilled. For its formation, the Lord had given himself. And now he had come to live in the heart and in the life of every member of it, in order that he might direct it, control it, and guide it by the power and sovereignty of his Holy Spirit.

If his hopes were to be realized, and his purposes were to be fulfilled through his church, what would you say would be the one quality that they must possess above all others? Today, the answer to that question would be education, theological preparation and training, higher standards to meet the challenge and the culture of our day. I don't find that in the New Testament. If the church was to be really a power which was going to shape human history, and that's what the church was for, what must it have above everything else? Let me answer that question by asking another.

What would you say was the quality lacking in the lives of those through whom God was seeking to fulfill his plan in Old Testament times? Where was the breakdown? Where was the one area in which they failed? Let me give you the answer in the words of our Lord. As a scribe once came to him, and you read it in the Gospels, in Mark, for instance, chapter 12, having heard him and said to him, what's the greatest commandment of all? And Jesus answered him, the first of all the commandments is, hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord, and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. This is the first commandment.

And the second is like it, namely, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these. Here was the thing that was lacking.

Here was the point of breakdown. One little word, love. The Marashal once asked a group of leaders of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship in 1951, when they were talking about disbanding because of having been put out of China, she asked them, how do you spell love? And they looked at her and said, well, what do you mean? L-O-V-E? No, she said, you don't.

How do you spell love? S-A-C-R-I-S-I-C-E. Sacrifice. One thing that was missing in Old Testament times was real love.

But listen to the New Testament answer. In our Lord's prayer, not the family prayer, but John chapter 17, as he prays, he says, Father, that they all may be one, as thou art in me, and I in thee, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The greatest factor for evangelism and for the conviction of every generation is a fellowship which is mustered by love.

John 21 verse 15, Simon, lovest thou me more than these? 1 Corinthians 13, which was read to us this morning, though I speak with the tongues of men, of angels, and have not love, I am just a noisy God. 2 Peter 1.7, add to your faith love. And John in his letter, first letter in the fourth chapter in the seventh verse, beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God.

Yes? Pentecost marked the coming into the world of something that it had never known before. And the church of Jesus Christ is to confront every generation with the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. 3 And the influential church, so often regarded as such because of the kind of people who attend it, or because of the money at its disposal, is in fact the church which is governed not by intellectual ability, but by Holy Spirit love getting through in the heart of every Christian.

4 Oh yes, the gifts of the Spirit may have their place, but this is the dynamic force with which the world is to be confronted right now. This is not a patronizing affection, it's not a mere courtesy or affability, but it's the word that's used in John 3.16, God so loved the world that he gave, the love of God. A love which hurts, a love which costs, a love which knows no limit to its endurance, a love which is patient and kind, a love which gives all.

And if you want to see it in all its power, you only have to take a long look at the cross of Calvary. 5 Oh, t'was love, t'was wondrous love, the love of God to me, the love that brought my Savior from above to die on Calvary. Now, my friends, it was this which was liberated at the cross, at Pentecost, liberated to be the greatest factor in evangelism.

This is the life which has come to indwell every one of us, the love life of God, to control and master every Christian. And here, in the second chapter of the Acts, you see it in operation in the church, and you see the effect of it in the world. If you have your Bible open, you will notice three words on which I want to focus your attention this morning, in this little portion that we read.

First of them is fellowship, Acts chapter 2 and verse 41. They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship. The second word is fear, verse 43, and fear came upon every soul, and wonders and signs were done by the apostles.

And verse 47, favour, praising God and having favour with all the people. Now, here is something of the characteristics of a spirit-filled Christian, a spirit-filled church. If you like, a love-filled church, a love-filled Christian.

Verse 42, a love for the Word of God. They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship and breaking of bread and prayer, a love for the Word of God. Returning to it again and again, a love for one another in a selfless fellowship they shared together, a love for the Lord in the breaking of bread from house to house.

You notice that, don't you? The church went from house to house, breaking bread and sharing in fellowship one with another. One of the greatest victories which the enemy has achieved is his success in concentrating the activities of a Christian church within the four walls of building. The Unley Park Baptist Church, Adelaide, is not the bricks and mortar which composed this building this morning.

This is simply the building in which the Unley Park Baptist Church meet, and it is composed of people in whose lives a miracle has taken place, who have been redeemed, who have been invoked by the Spirit of God, and who share Jesus day by day in their homes with their neighbours and with their friends, a love for the Word of God. And I find everywhere I go that the churches that are getting places and making an impact are confronting people through groups in Bible study and fellowship and prayer in homes, and I find this most exciting. The churches that are dying on their feet are churches which have nothing but Sunday service, morning and evening, and that's a lot, apart from occasionally from midweek service, but all their activities are confined to the walls of a building.

Traditional, dying, dying, dying, saying, well, we must have people come in here and listen to our sermons. No, no, we have no right to expect that, but we have a right to expect that people will come and watch our daily lives, our reactions, our behaviour, as they meet with us in our homes. Now here is the victory of love.

Here is true fellowship. Here is real devotion. Here is real sacrificial Christian living.

They continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship and breaking of bread and in prayer. Fellowship, a love for the Lord and the love of God in control in our lives. I pause to ask, is that true in all of us here this morning? This love that counts not the cost.

This love that's prepared to, not merely to give a subscription to a missionary cause, but to go across the road and speak to our neighbours and our friends about Jesus. In all this great congregation this morning, I wonder how many of you during this past week have talked to one individual about Christ? Have really shared your love for the Lord with someone else, that they see the reality of Christ in you? Do they see anything of that sacrificial love which costs? While I was pastor at Charlotte Chapel, one Sunday morning a young lady came to speak to me after service and she held out her left hand. A girl doesn't need to say anything when she holds out her left hand and I knew where to look and sure enough there was a beautiful diamond ring.

I congratulated her, I knew her fiancé and we arranged for the wedding. Some three months later she came to me again one Sunday morning and again held out her left hand. This time there was no ring.

I said to her, well what's happened? Oh she said nothing, nothing. I said, well that must be about the greatest understatement of the century, nothing. And then she had a little weep and broke down and she said, well see it's like this, for the past three months God, and you are partly to blame, she said to me, God has been saying to me that he wants me in Thailand as a missionary and my fiancé has become more and more convinced that the Lord wants him to serve him here in Scotland and that's the answer.

I rejoiced in the love of God, shed abroad in her heart. A year or two later she went up to Thailand. Later on still I was out there with OMF at a field conference and I met her and she said to me, you know, I'd rather be out here unmarried in the will of God than I would be married out of the will of God at home.

And she was radiant. But I, who have an eye for these kinds of situations, I thought to myself, I'm not quite sure whether this is going to last long. And sure enough, about a year later I heard that she was engaged to be married and she'd met the man of God's choice right in the centre of God's will on the mission field, supposing that girl had chosen God's second best.

Supposing she'd put love, a human love, before the love of God. It's always possible to do that. But the early church and the real Christian is mastered by the love of God in a fellowship which loves the word and loves the Lord and loves his book and loves the place of prayer.

What's the smallest meeting in your church calendar every week? If I'm wrong, I hope, I hope that somebody will just tell me straight at the end of this service. If I am wrong, then all I can say is that Unleaved Park is a glorious exception. For the smallest meeting of the week in a church calendar, in 99 out of 100 cases, is a prayer meeting.

The early church, with a tremendous love for the word and a prayer, met together, house to house, breaking of bread and in prayer. Are you someone upon whom your minister can count to be present

weekly at a prayer meeting? But you see, this fellowship is not merely devotion to the Lord Jesus, but here's where the rub comes in, it's discipline. We are told in, I think it's the first book of Chronicles in the 12th chapter in verse 38, about some men who came to make David king, that they could keep rank.

Now, this has simply got to be true if Jesus is to be our king. As soldiers in an army, we are to learn in the fellowship of the church to keep rank. Now, what does that mean? It just means this, that I can't always do as I like.

Or just what I would want to do if I were on my own as a Christian. It means that my own opinions and my own views and preferences have sometimes to be given up in order that in the church I'm in, I might keep rank. Some Christians never realise this.

And we all want to be individualists. And if our views are not accepted, then we step out of rank. I don't mean that we're all to agree all the time, how uninteresting that would be.

But I do mean this, and I trust that the Holy Spirit drives this home to your heart. The tragedy in our churches today is this, not that we disagree, but that we disagree so disagreeably that we break fellowship. We break rank.

I know a church in Southern California that had a new building put up. They didn't really need one, but they had one put up. Beautiful building.

And half the church wanted wall-to-wall carpeting, and it must be red. And the other half wanted wall-to-wall carpeting, and it must be blue. And they had an argument about this until eventually they split and formed another independent Bible church.

And believe me, we need another independent church as badly as we need a hole in the head. And over and over again, over trivial issues, the Christian divide, and the church divides and splits over issues that are utterly secondary. Ah, if we're living in love, we don't do that.

When love is in control, that doesn't happen. And you see, people who can only be relied on when everything goes according to their liking will soon find that they're not taken very seriously, and other people fill their place. Fellowship in the church corrects the exaggerated ideas of my own importance.

My opinions and preferences, which are often merely prejudice, are removed as they're submitted to the discipline of fellowship. Forgive me, but you may not always be in agreement with some action which is decided in the church. And of course, the whole church could be wrong, and you could be right.

But it shows, if I may be pardoned for saying so, a marked lack of humility to assume that that's so without really prayerful thought. It's much more likely to be God's way of showing you that your own view is not so important, after all, seeing that so many people think differently. And God is calling you to glorify him by submitting to the discipline of fellowship, and keeping rank, and therefore showing that love has conquered you.

The Christian who exerts most influence in the church is the one who knows the difference between vital truth and personal opinion. As a result, he gives in to others in matters of opinion in order to keep rank. And then when some matter of vital truth is concerned, he is heard with respect, because everyone knows that he is a man whose first concern is the glory of God.

Now, this is the victory of the second chapter of Acts. Love for his word, love for one another, love for the Lord, love for prayer. Oh, may the Lord ever give you that here, a church which has that, has got what the New Testament church had, the love of God, shed abroad in our hearts, and through our fellowship by the Holy Spirit.

And then, do you notice, because of this in existence, something happens. Two things happen, actually. Verse 43, fear came upon every soul, a church to be afraid of.

That sense of awe and conviction which grips the heart of an unbeliever in the presence of the Spirit of God released through love. Sometimes people can be almost afraid to come within the doors of this building in case they get converted. For there's such an atmosphere of a church living in love that they're afraid of it.

One of the greatest movements of revival in recent years has taken place, has made it, no doubt you know, in East Africa, especially in the country of Rwanda. Some years ago I was in Tanzania, and I had gone to a church, to a mission home on a Saturday evening to meet some missionaries, and there had come into that home two African pastors, not ignorant people, people who had been thoroughly trained for the ministry, and I couldn't understand a word they were saying. They were just talking to each other in their own language, but their faces were shining and glowing and beaming, and obviously they were talking about Christ.

And the missionary afterwards told me as that was the subject, they were talking about Jesus. They were living in the thrill of their first love. And the next morning I had to preach in the church, and it was an Anglican church.

Excuse me, but sometimes I feel the Anglican church is a bit sticky, not always, of course, by no means, but sometimes. And I wondered just exactly what I'd have to face. And when I went into that church, lo and behold, I knew the minister.

And I hadn't seen him for 10 years. And I said, well, how nice to meet you. He said, yes, it's good to meet you.

But before you go to the pulpit this morning, may I say something to you? I had to come to Africa to get to know Jesus. I said, don't be absurd, men. Don't be absurd.

You were a crusader leader in London. You were leader of your youth fellowship in your church. You were a keen Christian.

Oh, yes, he said. I knew all about him, but I didn't know him. And when I went into that pulpit, I knew what he meant.

I knew what he meant. I can honestly say I have never been nearer heaven than that morning. The singing of that congregation, not it was loud and raucous, but simply, oh, there was a vibrance to it, and life to it, and reality to it.

There was no deadness about it. And the whole place was alive. It was a multiracial church, a multinational church.

There were believers there from almost every country you could think of, because Mwanza is quite an industrial town. And there they were living in their first love. And I tell you, an unbeliever coming into that place was afraid because of the sense of the awe of God being in the midst.

And when God speaks, and when God visits a fellowship, and when God is in the midst, there's a sense of fear and a sense of dread. And like the early church, we say, men and brethren, what must we do to be saved? Fear came upon every soul, released not by hardness, not by coldness, but by the sheer warmth of love and the glow of their first love for Christ. Have you got that in your heart today? Not so long ago, I hesitate to tell you this, but I think I can.

A gentleman came to speak to me who'd had his, just had his silver wedding anniversary. And he said to me, a pastor, he said, I want to tell you a story. He said something wonderful has happened.

He said, we've been married for 25 years. And for the past 10 years, I've been getting so scared because my wife has been so chilly towards me, so cold and indifferent and distant. And it was concerning me.

And I daren't ask her why. And I thought to myself, well, I don't know what on earth can be the matter with her, because I've bought her a new Cadillac car every year. And I bought her new homes from time to time and new fur coats, mink fur coats and all the rest.

And she's had everything that a woman can want. What on earth is the matter with her? And I daren't ask her. So pastor, he said, I took her out on their silver wedding anniversary and I thought I'd give her a good dinner.

So I took her out and to a lovely restaurant here. I gave her a lovely meal and we had a good feed. And then I said, now, my dear, I just want to just ask you one question.

How is it that during the past year, 10 years, I have given you new Cadillac cars, new fur coats and new homes and everything, but you've been so cool. Why? Oh, she said, I'm so glad you asked me that question because I've been wanting to ask, to tell you, but I don't. Should I tell you the answer? You have given me new Cadillac cars and new coats and new homes and new clothing and everything I could want like that.

And I'm most grateful to you. But there's one thing you've never given me and that's the love of your heart. I wonder how that, well, I know how that man felt.

It broke him. And that celebrate wedding anniversary was the beginning of a new day in their home. The dawn of a new day when love got through.

Fellowship, koinonia, the word, real love. And they shared Christ together as they'd never done before. And when that happens, a church, not a building, but a home, a family, oh, becomes a center of witness and testimony because the warmth of Holy Spirit love just glows through.

Beloved, is your home like that? If it isn't, why isn't it? Why don't you stop in your tracks instead of living on a conveyor belt from Monday morning till Saturday night and hardly ever knowing your wife or your husband and all going several different ways in your home and the home being disintegrated and not united by love? Why don't you stop in your tracks and ask yourself, why is it we're so busy, too busy for love? Love of God, fear came upon every soul. And one more thing, my last word, favour. How strange, how strange, what funny words to have together, fear, favour.

People are afraid of them, ah, but they like them. It's no mark of spirituality or spiritual maturity to be disliked as a Christian by everybody else. Strange combination.

The church and the Christian full of Holy Spirit love has always the favour of the people. And once you lose that quality of love, oh, you see it, say, I don't know a thing about Adelaide, but you do, just you go around the churches and because they've lost this, lost the love of God, lost that glow, lost that spirit of attraction and magnetism, you see the level to which they've sunk in order to attract people. All sorts of jazzed up programmes, an frantic attempt to find an answer, to meet people today, the awful generation gap, somehow we've got to meet young people where they are.

Oh yes, I know, I know, but beloved, the trouble is not that we've lost touch with this generation, but we've lost touch with God. Lost touch with Him. Let's say it to each other quietly but seriously and reflect upon it if that isn't true.

And I find while I always have majored on young people's work, wherever I go, I tell you today, young people are awfully sceptical, sceptical of the church, sceptical of anything supernatural, they won't take anything for granted, quite rightly so. Why? Why? Because they've seen so much lack of reality in their parents, in their families, in their homes. God help us.

That's where our problems lie. When love breaks through, then I tell you when folks come inside this church on the Lord's day, the weary are strengthened, the lonely find fellowship, and the defeated find new hope, and the lost find Jesus. That's the influential church, and that's my burden for the church in the world today.

That's what happens when revival comes, beloved, how simple it all is. How complicated we've met, with all our committees and all our age groups and all our splitting up into all sorts of groups to meet everybody's need. How awfully complicated to keep the machinery churning around, how we work at it to keep it all going.

Oh, I'm so tired of it, so tired, so sick of it all, for this is not Christianity, this is just playing church to keep the machine going. But how simple when the Holy Spirit breaks through and revival comes, and the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts. And when that happens, suspicion and coldness and mistrust and lack of confidence and gossiping and lovelessness depart forever to be replaced by a love which finds fear and favour, and immediately, day by day.

Oh, day by day, the Lord added to their number those whom they were saving. He did it, not their eloquence, not their efficiency, he did it, added day by day to his body, he had to do it. And I tell you, he'll do it again right now.

Whenever he can find a love-filled heart. We've lost favour with people because we've lost the quality of love, and we've lost that because we've forgotten what the meaning of real fellowship is. Now I've finished, I've unburdened my heart and my soul to you this morning, perhaps not to your liking, maybe, but that doesn't matter to me very much.

I'm just concerned, I'm concerned that the rest of my life, most of my ministries in retrospect, the rest of it may be faithful and true to the word. Let me say to you, what a tragedy it would be, what a waste of my time, what a waste of your time coming to church, what a waste of my time if this service ended by little comments about the sermon after it's all over. What a waste of time.

That's how most services end. You can always tell if a message has got through by the way a congregation leave the church. Time and time again I've been humbled by that.

The conversation centres around everything except the Lord. The dates, the programs, the plans, all the things that we're going to do and the word from God is forgotten and lost and it hasn't taken root. Oh that's not the congregation's fault, that's the preacher's fault over and over again, my fault.

But I tell you when it takes root, when something gets home to the heart, the first thing that you want to do my friend before you've had your dinner is to go home and talk to the Lord about it. To take positive action, to restore fellowship which has been broken. Fellowship may be in your church, maybe before you go out those two doors for the first time in your life you'll come forward half a dozen pews and you'll shake hands with somebody you haven't spoken to for years.

You've held a grudge against them, you can't bear the sight of them and you've purposed and liberally planned that you sit on one side of the church and they on the other and the two never meet. What a day, what a day for God's kingdom if that is broken down today. Ah yes and on a more personal level maybe this morning husband and wife will go home, maybe with a broken heart and maybe holding hands and keep together and get before God in prayer and confess the fellowship that has been broken, the love that has died out, the marriage that is simply held together for appearance sake even though it's church and Christian and they'll find a new love, a new thrill, a new freshness in all their home relationships and with their children.

So I pray God that a miracle may happen in some life, in some home here today because the love of God has been shed abroad in your hearts by the Holy Spirit. Let us pray. Jesus, thine all-victorious love shed in my soul abroad, then shall my heart no longer rove, rooted and fixed in God.

Oh that in me the sacred fire might now begin to glow, burn up the dross of base desire and make the mountains flow. Come upon us, Lord, with this great and mighty power and force of thy love in our hearts that we may find a new love in God. Our souls and hearts kindled with the flame of heavenly love and as we meet others may they detect that we've been with Jesus.

Oh tenderly we pray for husband and wife and parent and child relationship that our homes and family circles may be deeper and united as the outcome of this day spent together in thy presence and Lord they may come into this fellowship, into this precious fellowship, a new touch of the love of heaven, a new breath of the power of almighty God so that day after day the Lord will add to their number such as are being saved. God grant it for thy namesake. Amen.

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