

(One Body in Christ) 2. Growing in Love

by Zac Poonen

The sermon emphasizes the importance of Christ-like love in building up the Body of Christ, which involves self-denial, forgiveness, loyalty, patience, unprejudice, respect, courtesy, caring, and generosity.

Scripture: Matthew 18:35, John 13:34, 1 Corinthians 12:24, 2 Corinthians 2:11, Ephesians 4:11, James 2:13, 1 Peter 4:10, 1 John 3:16

Topics: "Christian Fellowship", "Christ Like Love"

Description

Zac Poonen preaches on the importance of building up the Body of Christ through the exercise of spiritual gifts and love. He emphasizes that wherever gifts are mentioned in the New Testament, love is also stressed simultaneously. Christ-like love, characterized by sacrificial, unselfish actions, is the fundamental law of the body of Christ, requiring self-denial and forgiveness. Poonen highlights the need for sacrificial, unselfish love as the basis for true Christian fellowship, warning against selfishness and the hindrances it poses to genuine communion within the Body of Christ.

Transcript

The Body of Christ is built up and grows by the exercise of spiritual gifts and by love (Ephesians 4:11, 12 & 16). Gifts and love are both needed. Hence we find that wherever gifts are spoken of in the New Testament, the exercise of love is also simultaneously stressed (1 Corinthians 12 (on gifts) & 13 (on love); Romans 12:4-8 (on gifts) & verses 9 and 10 (on love); 1 Peter 4:10, 11 (on gifts) & verse 8 (on love)).

Christ-Like Love

Jesus gave His disciples a new commandment just before He went to the Cross. They were to love one another as He had loved them (John 13:34). It is that last phrase which makes Jesus' command impossible to fulfil without God's grace.

What is the distinctive feature of the love of Christ? Surely, it is the Cross on which He died for us. So when He tells me to love my brother as He loved me, it is a call to follow His example and to die to self in my relationship with my brother. Self-denial is to characterize my relationship with other members in Christ's Body. This and nothing less than this is true Christian love. When we are told that "we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16), it is not a reference to physical death, but to something far more difficult. It is easier to die once as a martyr than to lay down our self-life a thousand times a day in our relationship with our fellow-believers. But it is to the latter that Jesus calls us.

Such sacrificial, unselfish love is the fundamental law of the body of Christ. One who does not carry the Cross and choose the way of self-denial cannot fulfil his function in Christ's Body.

Why are we offended by and irritated with other Christians? Surely, because Self is still on the throne of our lives. We consider ourselves so important, that we feel we must be respected and consulted by others. We feel that others must behave and order their affairs as we want them to. We expect others to be kind and considerate to us, to 'make much' of us and praise us. Such feelings and expectations are clear evidence of the fact that we know nothing of the Cross experientially. Our lives are still dominated by selfishness, revolving exclusively around Self and its interests.

True Christian fellowship can never be experienced among believers, if the love of the Cross is not made the fundamental rule in the conduct of their relationships. Apart from such love, whatever goes by the name "fellowship" will only be social friendship and not the true communion of the Body of Christ. Such social friendship exists in worldly clubs too. Sadly, many Christian churches and groups are no better than clubs!

The members of a Christian fellowship should be closely interlocked one with the other. God has not called us to be an assortment of dismembered limbs thrown together as in an anatomy laboratory, but to be united one with the other as parts of a living organism like the human body. But there is a price to be paid if this is to become a reality - the price of each member denying himself for the sake of others. Blessed indeed is that Christian group where all the members are willing to live by this rule.

What are some of the practical implications of living by the law of love?

Forgiving Love

Consider first, the area of mutual forgiveness. No one who denies himself can ever harbour bitterness or a grudge against another or fail to forgive another human being. Resentment exists only in hearts where Self is still on the throne.

Jesus once told a parable of a servant who, though forgiven much by his master, could not forgive his fellow-servant a paltry debt. His master, on hearing this, handed over the unmerciful servant to the torturers to be punished. "So", said Jesus, "shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:35). However one interprets being handed over to the torturers for punishment, that is exactly what Jesus said would happen to those who adopted an unforgiving attitude or even harboured an unforgiving spirit against any of his fellow-believers. Notice that Jesus emphasized that forgiveness must be from the heart. In other words, it must be wholehearted and not an external ritual. Telling someone that you forgive him is meaningless if there is still bitterness in your heart.

When we violate God's law of love, we hinder the working of the Body of Christ. But that is not all. We harm ourselves as well. Dr. S.I. McMillen, in *None of These Diseases*, says, "The moment I start hating a man, I become his slave. I cannot enjoy my work any more, because he even controls my thoughts. My resentment produces too many stress hormones in my body and I become fatigued after a few hours of work. The work I formerly enjoyed is now drudgery. Even vacations cease to give me pleasure. The man I hate hounds me wherever I go. I cannot escape his tyrannical grasp on my mind."

Hidden grudges and bitterness are ruining the effectiveness, and even the physical health of many Christians and Christian workers throughout the world today.

Jesus taught that we were to take the initiative in restoring fellowship, even where a brother feels (rightly or wrongly) that we have hurt him.

If you are standingoffering a sacrifice to God", said Jesus, and suddenly remember that a friend has something against you, leave your sacrifice there beside the altar and go and apologize and be reconciled to him, and then come and offer your sacrifice to God (Matthew 5:23, 24 - TLB).

Likewise He said,

When you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in Heaven will forgive your sins too

(Mark 11:25 - TLB).

Jesus calls us in all situations to deny ourselves, swallow our pride, and "go the second mile" in seeking to restore fellowship wherever it has been broken. At times, despite our best efforts at reconciliation, a brother may adopt a hard, unforgiving attitude; but if we have made the effort we shall have discharged our responsibility before God.

Jesus' words make it clear that God cannot accept our worship or our service or anything else that we offer to Him, if matters are unsettled between us and any other member of His body, and we have made no effort towards reconciliation. I wonder at times, how many Christians take the words of Jesus seriously. Many treat God's commands lightly and thereby bring spiritual death into the Body of Christ.

A further reason for forgiveness", Paul tells us, is to keep from being outsmarted by Satan (2 Corinthians 2:11 - TLB).

What Does He Mean?

If someone's conduct towards us is inspired by Satan, and we retaliate in like manner, we are serving Satan too. How foolish we are, if we are stung into serving Satan by someone else's bad conduct.

When people cursed and reviled Jesus on the Cross, they were serving Satan. But Jesus served His Father and so could pray, "Father, forgive them."

So the question is not one of whether we are right and our bitterness justifiable, but rather this: Whom are we going to serve - Satan or God?

We are often most in danger when we know that we are right and the other party is wrong. For it is in such situations that we can become self-righteous Pharisees. We may be right concerning the issue, but wrong in our attitude - Satanic rather than Christ-like, proud rather than humble.

God delights in being merciful and all His children should have this quality in them. Hell is the only place in the universe where mercy is totally absent. And therefore a merciless attitude and an unforgiving spirit would only indicate that we have a little bit of Hell right down in our hearts.

Besides, we deprive ourselves of God's mercy when we fail to show mercy to others in their failings. The Bible says,

There will be no mercy to those who have shown no mercy (James 2:13).

God treats us in the same way as we treat others.

To one who joyfully accepts the Cross in his life, humbling himself and forgiving others is an easy step. Only those who persist in keeping Self enthroned find forgiveness difficult.

Showing mercy and forgiving others is only a first step. The Bible calls us to go even further and to cover our brother's fault (1 Peter 4:8) "Love forgets mistakes" (Proverbs 17:9 - TLB), and so when we have forgiven a brother from our hearts, we should bury the matter completely. We should not tell others of his having failed and of our having forgiven him - for that would put him in a bad light. Our endeavour should be to place our fellow-believers in the best light possible.

Through such love the Body of Christ is built up.

Loyal Love

If you love someone, you will be loyal to him no matter what the cost" (1 Corinthians 13:7 - TLB).

Loyalty involves not saying anything behind a person's back which one is not prepared to tell to his face. Backbiting is the pastime of cowards.

This does not of course mean that we are not to give an adverse report about a fellow-believer when asked for our opinion by someone like a prospective employer. In such a situation, we must remember that our loyalty to God and to His work supersedes our loyalty to our fellow-believers, and commits us to truthfulness. But where truth permits, we should cover our brother's fault as much as possible.

Patient Love

Love is very patient. It is not irritable or touchy" (1 Corinthians 13:4, 5 - TLB).

It is easy to bear with the faults of others and to be patient with them when we are willing to deny ourselves. If we die to self, we cannot be irritated or offended by the conduct of others. We shall be delivered too from touchiness and impatience. A love that cannot bear patiently with the faults of others is merely sentimental and human. The love of Christ is of an altogether different quality.

The Bible commands us:

BE PATIENT WITH EACH OTHER, MAKING ALLOWANCE FOR EACH OTHER'S FAULTS BECAUSE OF YOUR LOVE" (Ephesians 4:2 - TLB).

Here is a verse that should be written in bold letters before every Church and Christian fellowship. Patience is one of the clearest evidences of the love of the Cross.

We are all fallen human beings. When we see our own faults honestly, it is easier to be tolerant of the faults of others. Our impatience and irritability are usually a measure of our self-righteousness.

Unprejudiced Love

If you love someone, you will....lways expect the best of him" (1 Corinthians 13:7 - TLB).

Because of the self-centredness of our natures, our evaluation of others is usually based on selective perception - that is, we see in others only what we want to see. If we detest a person, we see only his weaknesses and believe everything evil that we hear about him; and likewise, when we adore an individual, we see only what is good in him and believe everything good that we hear of him. We see people through "coloured glasses." Hence the phrase, "Love is blind"!

To give but one illustration of selective perception: Many of us have pre-conceived ideas about how people from certain communities and races behave. And when we hear a rumour or a scandal about one of them (which may be totally false), our prejudices are immediately reinforced, we believe the gossip without question and fellowship is destroyed.

To avoid such pitfalls, we should seek to rid ourselves of all pre-judgments (or prejudices) against communities or races or any other categories of people. It is also a most helpful discipline to remember the good points of those whom we do not naturally like and recognize the limitations of those whom we idolize. We must judge those we dislike with mercy, and those we admire with realism.

We should never judge others on the basis of hearsay, nor even jump to conclusion on the basis of what we see. A person's behaviour may appear 'suspect'. But there may be a good explanation for it. We should seek to put the best possible interpretation on the actions of others, at all times.

It was said of Jesus (in a prophetic reference in the book of Isaiah), that He would not form a judgement by hearsay or even by appearance, but would seek to arrive at a just assessment of people (Isaiah 11:3, 4).

So must it be in the Body of Christ.

Respectful Love

Love places a high value on others.

When Self is on the throne of our lives, we tend to despise or ignore others. But when we bear the Cross and die to self, we begin to respect, value and even delight in our fellow-believers.

What is our attitude to believers who are socially, intellectually, or spiritually inferior to us? Our answer will depend on whether we know the reality of Calvary love in our lives. The love of God was seen in Christ when He died to His position and to His superiority as God and came down and identified completely with fallen man. His love was neither patronizing nor condescending, neither should ours be.

But how often one member of the Body looks down on another because of racial, social, cultural or other differences. Such "Christians" (even if they are fundamentalists in doctrine) can never be instruments for building up the Body of Christ, for they have not understood the first principle of Christian service - the principle of 'incarnation'. The Word became flesh and dwelt among the people as one of them. As it was with the Head, so must it be with the members of His Body, if they are to be effective for God.

Do you value your fellow-believers? Do you recognize your need of them and genuinely seek their fellowship? Or do you form little cliques consisting of congenial people of the same race, community or intellectual or social level, circulate exclusively within such cliques and call that 'fellowship'? If so, the great Deceiver of men has robbed you of riches which might have been yours if you had humbly sought

fellowship on an equal basis, "with all the saints."

Courteous Love

Love is kindnever rude (1 Corinthians 13:4, 5 - TLB).

"Kindness makes a man attractive", the Bible says (Proverbs 19:22 - TLB). We are courteous towards strangers, but often rude towards those with whom we 'rub shoulders' daily. It does not cost us anything to be courteous and say a few words of kindness and thus 'spread a little honey' wherever we go, yet most of us neglect to do this. Kind words and acts could have deepened many a fellowship that remained on a shallow level. Like oil in machinery, courtesy could have eliminated friction in many of our relationships.

But we are slow to learn.

Because we are basically self-centred, we have to discipline ourselves and educate ourselves in the art of being kind. Fellowship does not develop naturally. It has to be cultivated carefully like a garden.

How often, through careless utterances a believer wounds another. How many Christians seek to earn a reputation for humour, by cracking jokes at the expense of others. They may be less eager to tell a joke against themselves!

There is value in humour - certainly - but it should not result in making others feel small or awkward. Remember, "It is harder to win back friendship of an offended brother than to capture a fortified city" (Proverbs 18:19 - TLB).

Caring Love

Love is concerned about the needs of others.

The love of Christ, we have been seeing, is not self-centred. It is unselfish. This applies in the area of our brother's need as well.

Consider the human body. When any part of the human body is injured causing an infection, immediately large number of leucocytes (white blood cells) are produced in the blood to combat the germs that have caused the infection. These leucocytes rush to the injured area to battle with the bacteria causing the problem and die in the process, forming what is known as 'pus'. Millions of white blood cells give up their life to bring health to the injured part.

What a lovely illustration of the way the Body of Christ should function!

The Bible says,

God has put the Body (of Christ) together in such a waythat the parts have the same care for each other that they do for themselves. If one part suffers, all parts suffer with it, and if one part is honoured, all the parts are glad (1 Corinthians 12:24-26 - TLB).

This last verse is not a command telling each 'part' to suffer or be glad when other 'parts' suffer or are glad but rather a description of how one 'part' affects the others. In the same way, in the Body of Christ, each members shares spontaneously in the suffering and joy of his or her fellow-members. If such is not the case, faulty relationships are indicated.

If there is a living relationship between us and the Lord and if our eyes have been opened by the Holy Spirit to see the truth of the Body of Christ, then when another member suffers, we shall suffer with him. His problem will cause us concern too.

Generous Love

The Scripture says,

"What's the use of saying that you have faith and are Christians, if you aren't proving it by helping others? Will that kind of faith save anyone? If you have a friend who is in need of food and clothing, and you say to him, 'Well, good-bye and God bless you; stay warm and eat hearty', and then don't give him clothes or food, what good does that do"? (James 2:14-16 - TLB).

Again it says,

"If someone who is supposed to be a Christian has money enough to live well, and sees a brother in need, and won't help him - how can God's love be within him?Let us stop just saying we love people; let us really love them, and show it by our actions" (1 John 3:17, 18 - TLB).

This does not mean that we should be distributing money indiscriminately to all Christians who profess to be in need. No. Joshua and the leaders of Israel once made a big mistake by showing compassion to the people of Gibeon, who played a trick on them by pretending they were in great need (Joshua 9). Many well-meaning and kindhearted Christians have been fooled likewise by professional deceivers.

There is no virtue in being gullible.

But let us seek to be in touch with the Lord and then we shall have wisdom for every situation. We are not to be governed merely by human compassion. We should be in touch with the Head and governed by Him.

Christ-Directed Love

In the human body, there is co-ordination among the various parts because each part 'obeys' or is controlled by the head (or brain). Likewise in the Church, true fellowship can be a reality between the members only when Christ (the Head) is in control of inter-personal relationships. It is dangerous for two Christians to form a deep relationship without Christ being in between them and being the central figure in their relationship.

I have seen instances where truth has been compromised by Christians for the sake of friendship. God's work suffers in many places today, because human loyalty takes precedence over loyalty to the truth of God. In all such cases, it is obvious that the fellowship that exists between the parties concerned is not through or in Christ but only on a human plane. This is often mistaken for deep Christian fellowship, but is actually a counterfeit of the real thing.

If we live in close and deep communion with the Head, obeying His laws, we shall naturally have the right attitude to other members in the Body. Our fellowship one with another will then be deep and genuine, not sentimental and frothy.

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