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Restoring Christmas
“Loving All”
(Part 4)

Intro:

- How do we work at loving all people? If we're honest, some people are just harder to love than others. If we are going to be committed to loving people, we must have a love that grows / develops / matures. HOW? 3 decisions that will grow love in us.

I. Our Love Grows As We Forgive Others

- Why should I forgive people who have hurt me? They don't deserve it! How could God ask me to do something that just seems so unfair?
 - A. Unforgiveness hinders our ability to love

Eph. 4:31-32 “Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words and slander, as well as all types of malicious behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.” (NLT)

 1. Unforgiveness traps these negative qualities inside our heart. (bitterness / rage / anger / harshness / malicious spirit)
 2. Unforgiveness is like putting a lid on your heart. It keeps the negative emotions / qualities trapped inside us and God's love on the outside. Refusing to forgive keeps these emotions bottled up inside you. There's no place for them to go.
 3. **Illustrate:** Jar and tennis balls – Each tennis ball represents your refusal to forgive – what you're hanging on to. Now there is a lid AND no room for God's love in your heart.
 - Some of you have trouble loving people simply because your heart is filled with other emotions. There's no room!
 4. Unforgiveness creates emotional atrophy. (Love atrophy – explain atrophy) Hanging on to bitterness lessens your ability to genuinely love people. The more you hang on to bitterness, the less and less you love. Your ability to love gets weaker and weaker, and your bitterness intensifies with time.

5. Unforgiveness does not protect your heart, it emotionally starves your heart!
We think that by refusing to forgive we're in some way protecting ourselves from more hurt. The reality is we are emotionally killing ourselves!
- This is why the Scripture says..."INSTEAD"...Don't allow your heart to be filled with these negative / destructive emotions, but rather instead...FORGIVE!
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B. Forgiveness releases our hearts to love

- One day Peter asked the Lord how many times he should forgive someone. Feeling very spiritual, he said, "Seven times?" Jesus' answer was 70 X 7!
Luke 17:4 "Even if that person wrongs you seven times a day and each time turns again and asks forgiveness, you must forgive." (NLT)
 1. Jesus understood the bondage of unforgiveness. Jesus knew that unforgiveness makes you an emotional prisoner. Forgiveness is the only way to protect your heart and live an emotionally free experience.
 2. The more we refuse to forgive, the harder our hearts become.
Heb. 3:15 "Today when you hear his voice, don't harden your hearts as Israel did when they rebelled." (NLT) Any time we tell God "NO", we are making a choice that will harden our hearts. Refusing to forgive is one of those choices.
 - Let me share some Forgiveness Facts:
 3. We must understand that forgiveness is a choice NOT an emotion. I have yet to feel like forgiving someone. Quit waiting for this day. It may never come!
 4. Forgiveness is a conscious choice to release the person who hurt you from whatever emotional debt they owe you. When someone wounds you, a debt is created. We want restitution / justice / payment.
 5. Forgiveness is a process NOT an event. Sometimes, forgiveness is a daily choice / sometimes those feelings raise their ugly head / we have to remind ourselves of our decision to forgive and choose it again. (especially in the early stages)
 6. Forgiveness is the only way to NOT be an emotional prisoner to other people. Until we forgive those who hurt us, we give them emotional power over our lives. Forgiveness is the only way to be free from this emotional tyranny. (Until you forgive, the offender owns you!)
 7. Forgiveness is the only choice that unlocks your heart to love people more. Once the negative emotions are being removed from your heart, there is now room for God to pour His love into your life.
 - Before you can love people more, are there those in your life God is wanting you to forgive? Some of you have been prisoners to your anger / hurt and unforgiveness for years. God desires you to be free. Who do you need to release / who do you need to forgive?

II. Our Love Grows As We Accept Others

- How do we grow in our acceptance of others?

A. Acceptance is the result of increased understanding

Prov. 16:22 Understanding is a fountain of life to the one who has it,...(NASB) This is how it plays out in my marriage. The more understanding I have about my wife and her with me, the more understanding / acceptance / and life we experience. It's tough to accept and love what we don't understand.

- What am I supposed to understand? (3 key areas)

1. Increase your understanding that people think differently than you do and it's acceptable.

Rom. 14:1 "Accept other believers who are weak in faith, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong." (NLT) They think differently / have different convictions / different practices / and It's OK!

- I don't have to agree with your opinion in order to accept you as a person. What happens though is we reject another person's opinion along with the person. We make it a package deal!
- I can't begin to tell you how many times I have experienced this in ministry over the years. Just because I have a different opinion on something, I am rejected as a person. The conversation goes from attacking the opinion to attacking the person. (story)
- Instead of arguing your point, why not ask more questions and seek to understand why people think and act the way they do? Love seeks to understand first before seeking to be understood. Some of you struggle with accepting those who think differently than you.
- How many families fought over Christmas because they some family members who think differently about it than others. (Not wrong, just different!) Love can't grow as long as we refuse to accept each other.

2. Increase your understanding that people are flawed and they will let me down, therefore, I don't expect perfection relationally. Faults are acceptable. Some of you have very unrealistic expectations in relationships.

Col. 3:13 "Make allowances for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others."

(NLT) Expect faults! Plan on them in your relationships.

- Relationships in our culture are disposable. As soon as we see something we don't like / see a flaw / been let down / we dispose of the relationship.
- Some of you expect perfection in your relationships and this is why you're so lonely! You believe that faults in others let you off the

“relational hook”. This allows you to feel self-righteous / judgmental / yet you end up being guilty of the greater sin! (Jesus condemned this)

- Love grows as we understand that faults / flaws in our relationships are normal and acceptable. By saying acceptable, I’m not excusing bad behavior, by merely accepting that flaws are a relational fact.
- By “making allowances” I am having a realistic expectation in my relationships. I’m not going to be surprised by faults and I will be ready with forgiveness when I see them. (just like Jesus with me.)

3. Increase your understanding that accepting others gives God glory. Being right doesn’t bring God glory...accepting people does! (Read together.)

Rom. 15:7 “Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory.” (NLT)

- If believers in Jesus would focus more on accepting people instead of being right, I believe we’d see a lot more progress of God’s Kingdom being a reality.
- Why was Jesus so attractive to people? He didn’t come to condemn people. He was accepting of them as people. (the prostitutes / tax-gatherers / drunkards / the outcasts / He just loved people!
- When we accept others, we are demonstrating the heart of God to people. We are accurately representing Him in our world. This brings Him glory! (Are we attracting or repelling people from God?)
- Believers really blow it in this area. We think it is more important to be right than accepting. We incorrectly believe that if we are accepting of people we are accepting of their behavior. Jesus didn’t think so. (Jesus wasn’t endorsing drunkenness by being at a drunkard's house.)

Are there some things about your understanding that needs to change so you can accept theirs

B. Acceptance is the result of resisting judgment

Luke 6:37 Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn others, or it will all come back against you. Forgive others, and you will be forgiven. (NLT)

1. Acceptance is not declaring that people’s behavior doesn’t matter. We are given the right to judge behavior as being right or wrong, yet we are NOT given the right to judge people as right or wrong.
2. The issue is behavior Vs character. One we have the right to determine and one we do not. Our tendency is to condemn the behavior and the person together. This, we are not given the right to do.
 - WHY? Behavior is external – character is internal – only God can see.
3. There are negative consequences to ourselves and others if we cross the line and begin to condemn people’s character. Notice Luke 6 warns us not to

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condemn others or “*it will come back against you...*”

- This is God’s job. If we assume God’s job, it comes back on us. What? The same standard of judgment that we use on others God will use on us! Think about this! (If we err, let’s err on mercy!)

4. If we condemn others, we also create an environment where they cannot change. No one is transformed in an environment of condemnation. This is why Paul encouraged an entire church to reach back out to a brother who had fallen away. (Explain context.) They condemned some behavior.

II Cor. 2:7 “Now, however, it is time to forgive and comfort him. Otherwise he may be overcome by discouragement.” (NLT)

5. Unfortunately, the church has a reputation for being quick to condemn and throw people away, but lousy at restoring them! I want to be known for restoration!
6. If we are going to be people known for loving all, then we have to grow in our acceptance of all. Do you have trouble accepting a different race / religion? / certain sins or behaviors? Those who look different? Tattoos / piercings / hair color? (I’m guilty of passing judgment because of looks)

Our love will grow as we make a choice to accept all.

III. Our Love Grows As We Choose To Love Others

A. God’s love is a choice

1. In God’s Kingdom, we don’t make people earn love. Love is a choice. Love is freely given. Love is unconditional. This is one of THE key distinguishing characteristics of believers. (The world will know you are my disciples IF YOU LOVE...)
2. In our culture, love is all about feelings rather than choices. This is why you can fall in it or fall out of it! In God’s Kingdom, love is a choice. An act of the will! It is an issue of obedience.
I Cor. 13:4-8. These are NOT feelings. These are choices! (Slide) These are the behaviors / actions of unconditional love! (Put your name in there!)
3. This is why it is so observable! The world doesn’t live this way! Some of you are thinking; “This is impossible! I can’t love this way!” In your own power, it’s true...you can’t. BUT, God doesn’t expect you to this by yourself.

B. God empowers godly choices

II Tim. 1:7 “For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love and self-discipline.” (NLT) Why has God given us His Spirit to live inside us? So we can be empowered to live His way. (this happens at conversion.)

1. Our love simply cannot grow until we make the choice to love others God’s way. So often we stay paralyzed by what God wants us to do because we see

the impossibility of it. We know ourselves all too well.

2. We fail to understand that God empowers us to obey Him after we make the right choices NOT before it. God knows that you and I don't have the power to love people like this.
3. But, living by faith is making the right decision and trusting that God will enable you to do it. God doesn't ask us to do things that He doesn't empower us for. BUT, He does wait for you to choose obedience first!
4. There really is a Spirit inside you of power / love / discipline that is waiting to be unleashed upon your life and relationships. The more you choose to love like this, the more you give the Holy Spirit opportunity in your life.
5. We have to stop waiting to feel like loving people and make the choice.

If Christmas is ever to be restored, it will happen because God's people decided to love all like Jesus did. As we finish this series and finish yet another year, will you allow God to grow your love? Are there people to forgive? Are there people you need to accept? Are there some loving choices you need to make? Then, let's ask God to change us!