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Am I a Noisy Gong?

LOVE, JOY, PEACE, PATIENCE, KINDNESS, GOODNESS,
FAITHFULNESS, GENTLENESS, SELF-CONTROL

Ministry would be fine if it weren't for all the people.” That line usually gets a chuckle. As pastors, we know people are the focus of ministry, but they're also the cause of great frustration. People mess up our plans. Good plans. Plans to build a student ministry, organize an evangelistic event, reach an unreached people group, or simply pastor a church. Like an engineer sketching the steps of a project, we set goals, establish timelines, and rally volunteers to accomplish our mission. It's easy to see people as obstacles to our mission. We forget people *are* the mission.

Christian leaders are tempted to treat people like cogs in a machine—pieces we maintain to ensure the engine runs smoothly. The “machine” can be a friendship, a family, a marriage, a ministry, or even a church. If this is our mindset, friends, children, spouses, volunteers, and church members become parts we use to meet our own personal desires. We grow bitter when the parts

don't work properly, wrecking our plan. Instead of loving the people God sovereignly and wisely placed in our lives, we use them, and prove we love ourselves most of all.

A LOT TO LEARN ABOUT LOVE

When I first began to preach, I didn't think deeply about the congregation. Instead, I focused on my craft. *How is my introduction? Am I making good eye contact? Are my points rooted in the text? Is the gospel clear? Did I wrap up with a compelling conclusion?* Such questions are important. But I should have asked other questions about preaching, ones not typically raised in courses on theology or homiletics. *Do I care about my audience? Do I know them? Am I aware of their trials? Do I love them? Do I love the God who made them?* These questions are just as important, and too often overlooked.

Shortly after one of my first Sunday evening sermons, I met up with a godly friend to get some feedback. We sat at his kitchen table over a cup of coffee and a box of Entenmann's pastries. Before he could say a word, I defensively assured him my message didn't measure up to my standards.

He listened as I lamented my performance. Of course, I secretly hoped he would interrupt and counter my assessment. I gave him every opportunity to correct me. "Aaron," he could have said, "your message was actually quite good; be encouraged." I longed for him to explain how my insightful words changed his life. Instead, he thanked me for preaching and changed the topic.

A few days later, he placed a handwritten note in my mailbox. It began with 1 Corinthians 13:1, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." Paul's point is clear: when pursuing spiritual gifts to make us look good, we rob them of their value. My friend

recognized that I focused on myself more than the people I had hoped to serve.

The verse he wrote out for me struck its blow. Somehow, in all my preparation, I'd failed to love the people God called me to teach. Yes, I needed to wisely handle the text. Of course, I needed to carefully expound and apply the gospel. Absolutely, I needed to seek feedback to grow as a preacher. But what does it matter if I lack love? I'd treated God's people like cogs in the machine of my ministry. I'd become a noisy gong.

I had a lot to learn about love. Sanctification without love is meaningless. To see why, we need to think about an earlier event in the Christian life: justification.

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LOVE COMES FIRST IN JUSTIFICATION

Though love is key to sanctification, it's at the heart of justification too. Paul had a quarrel with the churches in Galatia. The gospel of God's grace had become less clear to them, less dear. They turned the volume down on Paul's message of salvation by grace alone and cranked up the sound on the law. False teachers had sneaked a Trojan horse full of good works into the city of their salvation. Sadly, the young Galatian churches opened wide their gates.

Paul did all he could to close them. He begins his letter to them with a roar: "If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:9). Paul allowed no confusion. Salvation is either all of grace, or it's fiction. The works of the law have the power to condemn, but they cannot

make us right in the eyes of a holy God. “By works of the law,” declared Paul, “no one will be justified” (Gal. 2:16).

Christians contribute nothing to their justification. Death, not works, marks the start of the Christian life. Sound crazy? Look at Paul. He knew he couldn’t lead himself into a holy, happy Christian life. Before he could live with Christ, Paul had to die with Him. This explains Paul’s joyful exclamation: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

Notice what Paul says Jesus did. Jesus “loved” him and “gave himself up” for him. Love came first. Love always comes first.

Most Christians eventually ask why God saved them and not their unbelieving mother, brother, friend, or neighbor. They toy with bad answers. *God knew I would choose him. God thought I might be helpful for his work on earth. God thinks I’m special.* But if any of these answers were true, our salvation would depend on us. That can’t be. The only answer to the question of why God saved you is because He loved you. Salvation belongs to God. It depends on God. It always has.

When God freed Israel from slavery in Egypt and gave them a land to possess, He knew they’d one day wonder why. Moses answered this question by pointing them to the love of God.

It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deut. 7:7–8)

God's salvation of His people has always been rooted in love for His people. God committed to them. He set His affection on them. He secured the best for them. This is love. Love comes first in justification, and this sets the stage for our sanctification.

LOVE COMES FIRST IN SANCTIFICATION

It should be no surprise to find Paul puts love first when he lists the pieces of the fruit of the Spirit. This is because love kick-starts everything in the Christian life.

Christ gave Himself up for us because He loved us. This is the heart of justification. If Christ gave Himself up for us, we will love others. This is the heart of sanctification. A loveless life is a Christless life. The apostle John made it quite clear our sanctification flows out of our justification. Put another way, our love for others flows from God's love for us:

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:10–12).

John inserted a statement in these verses which, at first glance, doesn't quite seem to fit. He wrote "no one has ever seen God." Why make this point here? Because the fact that we can't see God makes it tough to know we have a relationship with God. It's much easier to prove you have a relationship with someone you can see.

My wife and I obviously have a relationship. I can see her, and she can see me. We spend a lot of time with one another. We go to the same church. We drive together in the same car. We live in

the same house. When I first got married, I was surprised by just how much I saw her. The fact that I constantly see her is a small but important piece of evidence that I love her.

God can see us, but we can't see Him. So how is our relationship to God made visible? In our love for one another: "If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us" (1 John 4:12). A few verses later, John is even clearer: "he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" (4:20).

As I look back at just this past week, I see so many examples of believers loving one another in my church. One man just asked for a ride to and from the hospital, and someone quickly offered to help. A young couple just had their second child, and brothers and sisters brought meals to make the transition easier. A handful of elders are currently hard at work to help a couple work through some serious marriage issues. All this is done out of love.

This is basic Christianity. Love is the first and best evidence we are Christians. Not splashy websites. Not expanding churches. Not growing budgets. Not a vast social media presence. Not even good sermons. Love is the primary piece of the fruit of the Spirit because it's the best evidence God redeemed us from sin.

KNOWING ABOUT LOVE VERSUS LOVING

Anyone who reads the Bible is going to know something about love. We find it on nearly every page of Scripture. Love is the bedrock of biblical theology. For example, we know God is love (1 John 4:8). What else could explain His relentless pursuit of an unholy people? The God who told His people to love (Deut. 6:5) is the one who first loved them (1 John 4:19). God's election of His church is not rooted in Him looking down the corridor of

time and seeing something lovely in us. No, God chose to save a wicked people due to the vast storehouse of His divine and inexplicable love (Deut. 7:7–8; Eph. 2:4). The youngest Christian knows loving God and neighbor is part of the warp and woof of the Christian life (Mark 12:31). The command to love is a command too obvious to miss.

J. I. Packer famously described the difference between knowing about God and knowing God. He likened it to a person sitting on a balcony and watching people set off on a journey down the road below. It's one thing to see the path from above. It's another thing altogether to get your feet dirty on the earthy terrain. So it is with knowing God. We can't do it from afar. We dare not make it an academic exercise; there's no such thing as an ivory tower Christian.¹

Likewise, there is a world of difference between knowing about love and actually loving. I have a close friend who went on an overseas missions trip when he was a young Christian. He spent his day evangelizing but saw no spiritual fruit—at least not from his own efforts. God used his partners in ministry to lead a few to saving faith. My friend knew he should be happy. Instead, he begrudged their success. He cared more about his reputation than others' salvation. This is not love.

It's difficult to begrudge the success of a ministry neighbor when you love them. Every Christian, and certainly every Christian leader, must place love at the heart of his or her ministry. A

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pastor who knows about love, but doesn't actually love, makes a mockery of his calling as a shepherd of God's flock.

THE ENEMIES OF LOVE

The day I opened my friend's note referencing 1 Corinthians 13, I was like that man sitting in the balcony. I knew about love. I could speak to its importance. I could describe its contours. But I elbowed love aside to make room for two of its most vicious enemies: pride and self-interest.

Pride asks how we look, instead of how others feel. It's fed when the preacher lusts to be heard by a larger crowd or when a friend demands to be loved by a more popular person. Pride demands attention instead of giving encouragement. It swells when a leader covets the last word, or when a father intimidates his family into silence. Pride cares more about the leader's significance than the congregation's sanctification. Pride cares more about the growth of your church than the church belonging to your friend downtown.

Self-interest is pride's cousin. It bends over backwards to make life more comfortable. Self-interest is like a man who doesn't get out of bed in the morning. He sleeps under the covers where it's cozy; he won't put his naked feet on the hard and cold bedroom floor. The day ahead is filled with a thousand opportunities to love and serve others, but self-interest says, "Just keep warm." Self-interest tells us service is too inconvenient, and perhaps even painful. It flourishes when we won't do or say the hard thing. I'm a task-focused worker. I enjoy crossing items off of my to-do list. Left to my own devices, I'll put my head down so I can get as many projects done as possible. Love kicks me off the computer, sits me down in the car, buckles the seatbelt, and sends me off to a homebound member.

How do leaders become nothing? How do pastors fail to love? By ministering from a reservoir of pride and self-interest. The longer I'm a pastor, the more I realize that pride and self-interest won't go down without a struggle. Like a prizefighter, they just keep punching. Those who won't fight back with fierce jabs of love are, quite simply, nothing (1 Cor. 13:2).

A WORD OF WARNING

It's important to explore how we can love better. But first, let's beware of falling into another ditch. More than one well-meaning leader has sacrificed truth at the altar of love. This would be a tragic mistake.

Love must never be pitted against the truth. The two are sweet friends. A "loving" pastor who abandons sound doctrine doesn't really love at all. He's like a doctor who greets his dying patient with a compassionate smile but withholds the very medicine that could save his life. Truth, and specifically the truth of the gospel, is our only hope of eternal life.

The Bible never makes love an enemy of the truth. They're comrades in arms. To feed Christ's sheep is to explain Christian doctrine to Christ's church. This kind of teaching is birthed out of love for Christ—love and truth must not be separated. Shepherds teach the truth of God's Word from hearts captured by God's love (Luke 6:45).

Where do you lean? Before reading on, you would be wise to

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assess your inclinations. Are you tempted to soft-pedal doctrine for the sake of another person's feelings? Or are you more likely to clarify scriptural truth while neglecting the souls of Christ's flock? Neither inclination is good. A heart genuinely moved by God will pursue truth and love.

AN EXEMPLARY MODEL

The last thing our churches or ministries need is leaders positioning themselves toward greater degrees of prominence. Pastors, for example, are called to love a local church. The people I serve need elders who dearly love them. The buzz of seeing how many "likes" you have on social media should pale in comparison to the joy of seeing the people you serve day-in-and-day-out growing in grace and godliness. We find an extraordinary example in the apostle Paul. If 1 Corinthians 13:1 ("noisy gong") convicts me of sin, 1 Thessalonians 2:8 calls me to action.

Paul and Silas faithfully planted the gospel in Thessalonica. Many Jews and Gentiles came to faith (Acts 17:1–4), even as these new Christians struggled. A mob of unbelievers attacked the fledgling church (Acts 17:5–9). Paul fled, the church grew in his absence, and when he wrote back he thanked God for their faith, love, and hope (1 Thess. 1:3). Paul rejoiced because the congregation at Thessalonica became a hub for gospel ministry (1 Thess. 1:8).

In many ways, this local church had everything I hope to see in the church I serve today: holiness, joy, steadfastness, and evangelistic fervor. Clearly, Paul was thankful for the fruit of their ministry. But Paul appeared to be even more thankful for *them*. At the heart of Paul's greeting is a simple reminder of how much he loved this congregation.

We were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.
(1 Thess. 2:7–8)

If Paul could describe himself as a nursing mother, shouldn't we strive to be as nurturing as we are prophetic, as loving as we are sound, as tender as we are true?

We tend to think of Paul as a strong and forceful defender of truth. Why then did he use the metaphor of a nursing mother? Because he wanted the church to grasp his love for them. He used words to implant an image that proved he didn't merely want to teach truth to them, he longed to share life with them.

Paul didn't see the Thessalonians as cogs in the machine of his own self-worth. He didn't value them for their potential to plant churches, reach the nations, enlarge his influence, or affirm his teaching gifts. Paul loved them deeply. He cared enough about the church to share not only the gospel with them, but his very self as well.

Elders rightly follow the example of the apostles in Acts 6:4 and devote themselves "to prayer and to the ministry of the word." As a result of this priority, pastoral ministry can be isolating. The good leader spends time on his knees, interceding for Christ's flock. The good leader prizes hours in study as he prepares to feed the church sound doctrine. These moments of quiet prayer and preparation can certainly be born out of a genuine love for God's people.

Unfortunately, it's also possible for pastors to use times of solitude to avoid God's people. Perhaps, without even being fully aware of what we're doing, we minimize opportunities to share ourselves with the very people God called us to love.

Years ago, a friend arranged for me to take a tour of a mega-church in our city. Presumably to facilitate time for prayer and study, the pastor built an office very close to the sanctuary. It included a “secret” entrance allowing him to enter and exit the stage virtually unseen. I marveled at the fact he could preach to his congregation without having to talk to them.

Are you striving to know and be known by the people you serve? Is your love for the body of Christ demonstrated in an eagerness to enjoy time with them? Sharing your life with the people you serve is a practical demonstration of love.

HOW TO GROW IN LOVE

I don’t want to be a noisy gong. No faithful leader does. So how can we grow in love?

Pray the gospel grips you. Unless you are overtaken by God’s amazing love for sinners, you won’t love others. Willpower doesn’t drive you to love; it can’t. God’s Spirit must work before you marvel at God who “shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). The love you show others will never be as costly as the love He showed you. Pray that the simple gospel would take a firm hold of your life.

Examine your heart for signs of pride and self-interest. This is about as fun as having a tooth pulled, but it’s so important. Are you crestfallen when you aren’t recognized? Are you bitter if a church vote doesn’t go your way? Are you too scared to point out sin in the lives of others? Your answer to such questions will show whether you are bottling up love or, worse, will prove you lack it. When you truly love others, you don’t need them to agree with you or to affirm you. Your love for them will not be conditioned upon the acceptance they throw your way.

Share your life with others. Examples abound: an intentional conversation after a service; a coffee meeting where you talk about your spiritual health; opening up your home for a meal; an encouraging note to a struggling member; participating in a small group you don't lead. There are so many ways we can follow Paul's example and share "not only the gospel of God, but our own selves."

Persevere through conflict. Someone once told me it's easier to take the ship to Tarshish than the road to Nineveh. He's right. Love compels us to embrace the harder course. This means not running away from friends, not withdrawing from your spouse, and not escaping to an easier job or church. If people are just cogs to us, we'll move on when they start to rust. But if we love them, we'll care for them long after the gears crank and the machine slows down.

"HE GAVE UP HIS OWN EASE"

"Leaders lead. Followers follow." It's a common sentiment, and there's certainly some truth to it. For elders and Christian leaders to succeed, they have to chart the course. Furthermore, chaos will ensue if everyone charts their own course. That's why followers follow. Fair enough.

I once heard a pastor give an update on a church he had been leading a few years. For a number of reasons, the ministry had been difficult for him. Like many young pastors, he had a strong sense of where the church needed to be. He knew his Bible inside and out, and he held all the right values: expositional preaching, sound theology, careful church membership—the whole nine yards. Many pastors like him go into ministry with a clear-cut vision for what their church should look like, and they

are often right. They embrace the mantra, “leaders lead.”

As my friend shared his report, tears welled up in his eyes and he said, “I came to change the church, but the church has changed me.” He didn’t lose his theological spine. He kept his blueprint for the church’s future. But in the process of pastoring those saints, as trials erupted in his own life, he realized he needed them as much as they needed him. In those tears, I could see his love for the congregation God called him to serve.

He learned a valuable lesson: leaders don’t just lead, they love. And in loving, we come to look more like Jesus. Pastor Jonathan Edwards put it well:

Such was the love of Christ to us, that he did, as it were, spend himself for our sakes. His love did not rest in mere feeling, nor in light efforts and small sacrifices, but though we were enemies, yet he so loved us, that he had a heart to deny himself, and undertake the greatest efforts, and undergo the greatest sufferings, for our sakes. He gave up his own ease, and comfort, and interest, and honour, and wealth; and became poor, and outcast, and despised, and had not where to lay his head, and all for us!²

“Ministry would be fine if it weren’t for all the people.” That’s not true at all. Shepherding in the fruit of the Spirit starts with loving God *and* the sheep He has generously placed in your care.