

LOVE: Fake Love/Real Love

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As those who know me well will be aware, I like clothes. So much so that my wife and I have had to introduce a system to stop us buying too many! I wasn't always a wannabe fashionista – back at school I either wore all black or all beige. But from coming to university onwards, I've tried to make a little more effort with my appearance. I've tried to go with the times, to follow the trends. Does anyone want to see how I did? I thought it might be fun to take a look at some of the outfits I've worn over the years...

[PHOTOS: Phil 1 to Phil 7]

Some great looks, I'm sure you'll agree! I thought it'd be fun to start off showing you some of my past fashion faux-pas because my message today was inspired by my favourite item of clothing at the moment. These shoes. [PHOTO: Trainers 1]. I actually got these for Christmas, but have only been able to walk in them for a couple of weeks. I love these trainers. They're my new favourite. I think they look cool. They definitely make me taller. And I've had lots of positive comments about them. But here's the thing about these trainers... they're fake. I'm not saying they're imaginary or photoshopped on. What I mean is that they're a copy – a blatant rip-off of a pair of trainers by a much more prestigious brand. Mine are ASOS. The real ones are Fear Of God. Here's the real thing... [PHOTO: Trainers 2]

So why am I wearing these ASOS trainers instead of the real thing? The answer is about £1000. That's right – the Fear Of God pair cost about a £1000 more. I'm wearing the fake ones because I don't want to pay full price. I have no doubt mine are inferior. They lack the detail of the real deal. They lack the quality of the original. I doubt they're as comfy or well-made or hard-wearing as the proper pair. But I gladly wear them, because I don't want to pay full price.

This made me wonder though – how often do we do the same in life? How often do we settle for something inferior – something less than the best – because we don't want to pay full price?

In our career, for example, do we have the job we want? Or do we have a job that'll do because we don't want to do the extra training or put in the extra effort that's required for the job we really want? That's probably where I'm at, to be completely honest. I like my job, but it isn't the dream job. To get to the dream job I have to pass a load of exams. I tried, but I failed one. I'd have to start again. So I stopped. Like with my trainers, I've settled, because I don't want to pay the full price. Maybe you've done the same.

Maybe not with your job – maybe in other areas. Maybe we want to be physically fitter, but do we want to exercise to get there? Maybe not. We settle for less than the best when it comes to our fitness because we don't want to pay the full price in exercise.

How about our finances? We have a goal. A dream. A plan. But do we really have the discipline it takes to get there? We're too good at spending; too bad at saving; not good

enough at putting off that purchase. We want something big and special; but can we pay the price of the discipline to get there?

Students. It's exam seasons. What results do you want? Are you prepared to pay the price? Or will you settle for less instead?

There are probably hundreds of areas I could talk about, but really, I should focus on love. After all, that's what this series is all about. We've talked a few times about real love in this series. Those words keep cropping up – real love. But what about the opposite? What about fake love? What is fake love? How do we know if what we're got isn't real, but counterfeit – less than the best; not quite as good; not quite right?

I guess, as with those other things, that fake love is love where we haven't been willing to pay full price. But what does that actually mean? What does that look like? What does it look like to pay full price for love? This matters to us, doesn't it? Because we want real love. We want to know it; and we want to show it. We want to give and receive genuine, authentic, legitimate love. But what does it look like to pay the price for that?

Today, we're going to explore exactly that. Thankfully, Jesus had plenty to say on the topic of love; and one of His most well-known parables was designed to help us understand the difference between real love and fake love – to show us the price we pay for the real deal. If you haven't heard that word "parable" before, it simply means a story with a message. Jesus told lots of these, to help illustrate or illuminate spiritual truth. Even if you're not someone that normally comes to church, you may well have heard of this parable, or one of the characters in it. Wherever we're coming from, we can learn something from this.

In Luke 10, we read Jesus being quizzed on the topic of eternal life. I think the whole exchange is interesting ...

Luke 10:25-26 - 25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

I like Jesus' response here. Answers a question with a question. I think he's interested in more than an intellectual debate. He wants to get to know this guy.

Luke 10:27-28 - 27 He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'" 28 "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

What's the answer? Love. Obviously. It would be Jesus, right, but He's asking the question. So the answer is love. Love God, with everything you have; and love your neighbour. Simple. Except it goes on...

Luke 10:29 - 29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"

This seems like a legitimate question, doesn't it? Yet there's the first few words Luke records before the question. "He wanted to justify himself". This man wants to know if he's got it right. Maybe, probably, because he wants to feel the smug sense of satisfaction, of knowing he's getting it right. Or maybe, like us, he wants to know what's real and what's fake. The answer Jesus is about to give will answer his question and ours. Not just who is his neighbour, but what's fake love and what's real.

Luke 10:30-37 30 In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. 32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' 36 "Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" 37 The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Jesus paints this powerful picture with His words. Maybe one you've heard before; maybe one you're aware of. His final question strikes me as the obvious one. Which guy is a neighbour to this man? It's obvious, isn't it? The one who helped him out.

There is power in taking a closer look at these few verses. Because there is a contrast, between the genuine, authentic love shown by the Samaritan; and something else shown by the two who go before. It's worth taking time to look at the key characters in this Jesus story – to understand them is to understand what's real and what's fake when it comes to love.

First, we find a man. Robbed, stripped and beaten. Left half dead in the road. Caught off-guard by life. Done down by the actions of others. Fallen on hard times. There's plenty of people in our world who feel this way. He needs help. He needs love – real, tangible, authentic love. Maybe you feel like this man today. A bit beaten up by life. This is good news from the start – God is interested. He cares about the beaten up and broken-hearted.

This man's in luck. Because here comes a priest. In Jesus' time, the priest was the mediator between man and God – he stood in the gap, representing God to man and man to God. The Bible tells us that God is love. Love's representative has arrived! But no, the priest passes by on the other side - avoids the man, goes out of his way to get past him, leaves him for dead.

Next then comes the Levite. Surely this is the answer the man needs. The Levites were worshippers. Here's someone who worships God. Someone who recognises the awe and majesty of God. Surely they know that worship is not just about singing a few songs – worship is a lifestyle. It is intertwined with justice. Here is the moment, for the compassion of heaven to meet the hurt of earth. But what's this? The Levite too goes by on the other side. He too avoids the man; leaves him for dead.

Two men – both God’s representatives – same response. No help. Just avoidance. They carry God’s reputation on their shoulders, but offer no help to their hurting world.

We want to know what fake love looks like – this is fake love. These two men are representatives of the God who is love, yet they fail to love. They have the robes and the rituals; the rules and the relics; but they offer nothing in practical help to this man. What does fake love look like? I think fake love looks a lot like empty religion.

I worry about the priest and the Levite in this account. Actually, no. I don’t worry about them. I worry I am them. Here they are, God’s representatives – the one who relates to God, the one who worships God – yet both see the hurt and avoid it. They see the pain, but they pass by. This is a challenge to me. It feels like the hero of the story should be a man of God, right? But both miss the moment. Both avoid the opportunity. Neither stops to help.

What if I do the same sometimes? What if I see the hurt, but offer no help? What if I see the pain, but pass by? I bear the name of God, as they do. I call myself a Christian – put myself out there as a representative of Christ. But do I offer the world something tangible, real, practical, genuine and authentic? Or is the love I have fake, because I won’t pay the price to stop and help?

Brennan Manning put it this way – “The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians: who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, walk out the door, and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.”

Some scholars suggest these men would’ve had reason not to stop. This man’s sorry state posed a particular problem for these two religious men. In his beaten, stripped state, he would’ve been unclean. I don’t mean just dirty. I mean ritually unclean. As Sam shared last week, this was a problem. If either the priest or the Levite had stopped to help, they would’ve become unclean too. As well as the effort required to help the man, they would’ve had to go through a whole ritual process to make themselves clean again. To be able to do their work, they would’ve had to be ritually cleansed. So they avoid the man most likely not just because of the effort of helping, but because of the ritual of cleaning up afterwards.

I wonder if we’re the same sometimes. If we’re afraid of getting our hands dirty when it comes to helping others. If we’re afraid a little of their trouble might rub off on us. If we’re afraid of what others will say. What it’ll do to our sensibilities, to our reputation, to our plans and ideas.

I worry that my religious observance gets in the way of me showing real love. Like on a Sunday. I’ve got stuff to do. We’ve got a service to put on. Do I get so keyed up in that that I don’t have time to talk to people? Or am I so busy with church stuff in the week that I don’t have time for friends outside church? Do I let my busy church schedule stop me spending time with people who really need it?

But enough of the negatives, what about the positive? What do we see in the Good Samaritan that we can learn from? It is worth noting that Samaritans were not well liked by the Jews. Jesus is winding up His audience a little here. He’s taking a dig at the so-called

expert in the law. Jews hated Samaritans. They were half-breeds, in Jewish eyes. Outcasts. But Jesus turns their role around. This is encouraging, actually. Because it means that no matter where we come from, what our situation, whatever our background, we can show genuine, authentic, legitimate love. Let's remind ourselves what that looks like...

Luke 10:33-35 - 33 But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

I think there are three principles we can pick out here. Three aspects of this which illustrate what real love looks like – what it looks like to pay full price...

1) Inconvenience

The Samaritan is heading somewhere. He's got business to attend to. He's travelling with oil and wine. He's probably got a few quid. He's got places to be, things to do. You don't head down the road to Jericho just for funsies. But he's prepared to stop, at the sake of his own convenience, to help this man.

Are we? Are we prepared to inconvenience ourselves for the sake of someone else? Are we prepared to go out of our way to help someone? Are we prepared to make our lives harder to make their life better?

I don't know what situation you want to consider here. It may be those who are hurting in our city. It may be someone at work or uni or school. It may be as close to home as a housemate or spouse. Genuine, authentic love looks like inconvenience. Are you prepared to put someone else's needs before your own?

I heard a guy called Bob Goff recently. Those of you that went to Colour will be aware of this amazing man. Something he said recently really struck me – maybe he said it at Colour too. This man is a lawyer by trade, who has built schools in countries across the developing world. He said this: "Jesus isn't wowed when we go across the ocean. He's dazzled when we go across the street". What a great thought. What counts isn't how far we go; it's whether we're prepared to go out of our way.

2) Investment

Have you noticed how much the Samaritan invests in this man? He uses his donkey; puts in the effort to take the man to the inn. He stays there with him until the next day, investing his time. He pays for the stay; and for what's to come; and says he'll come back to cover any outstanding costs.

Are we willing to make that kind of investment for love? Are we prepared to invest time? Are we prepared to invest energy? Are we prepared to invest financially?

Again, this works whatever love it is you're looking to show. You want a good romantic relationship – time, energy and a little financial investment will go a long way. You want to help someone who's struggling – be prepared to put in all three. In church life too – are we prepared to invest into this thing we say we love?

When we speak to someone in the atrium after the service, are we just being friendly or are we looking to make a friend? Are we willing to invest time and energy in developing meaningful relationships? Likewise, if we invite someone to church, is our work done if they show up? Or are we prepared to help them with the journey from that point onwards? More than that, are we just looking to give an invitation – or are we looking to invest real care and attention in the lives of those around us? The Samaritan is prepared to stay, to take care, to cover the cost in the longer term.

3) Interest

I think inconvenience and investment are actually steps two and three. The first step is that the Samaritan is prepared to take an interest in this man. He stops, where the others avoided.

If we want to show genuine, authentic, legitimate love, maybe we need to do the same. We need to show a little interest. Indeed, again, you may already know how this works for you. But if not, this is your starting point. Show a little interest. Ask yourself today, this week, who needs to see genuine, authentic, legitimate love?

Martin Luther King, speaking on this passage, said: "I imagine that the first question the priest and Levite asked was: 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' But by the very nature of his concern, the good Samaritan reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'" Maybe it's time for us to ask what's happening for the people in our world.

Inconvenience, investment, interest – three elements of genuine, authentic love. They're not the whole story, but they're a great starting point. They provide a lens, a filter; a way of asking yourself whether you're paying lip-service to love or living out the real deal. Actually, I have another question you can use to help bring these three together. This might help some of you to put this into practice.

Does the way you live line up with what you say you love?

Now that we understand it. Now that we know what real love looks like. Now that we at least have three starting points for real love, does your life line up with it? Are you prepared to inconvenience yourself for it? Will you invest in it? Do you show interest in it? Does your life line up with what you say you love?

If you say you love your spouse, are you prepared to inconvenience yourself for them? Are you prepared to invest in them? Do you take an interest in them?

Likewise, if you say you love your friends, will you go out of your way for them? Will you give your time and energy on their behalf? Do you care about what they have to say? About what's going on in their lives?

If you say you love your church, does this show through in how you live? Are you prepared to do more than what is manageable and comfortable? Do you give time, talent, finances? Are you on the front foot when it comes to finding out what's happening and how you can play your part?

Does your life line up with what you say you love? That's what Jesus is challenging the man who questions Him with. Jesus wants him to reflect on how he loves, in light of this example. It is worth us doing the same. To ask whether we're prepared to pay the price.

Because the startling reality is that we may be paying the price of real love to something else. We may find that we say we love our family, but when it comes to inconvenience, investment and interest, in reality we're much more focused on our job. We say we love our friends, but something else takes priority. We say we love God, but how we live suggests we love something else. In that situation, we need to ask ourselves whether it is time to make a change – whether we can reset our focus – shift from paying lip-service to love to actually living what we say we love.

Finally, this is true when it comes to the people in our world. As a church, we have always been externally focused. Pastor Tom has instilled this in us over the years. Our desire is not to be a Christian club, but to reach out to people who do not know God in a real, relevant, tangible way. We love our city. We love people. But does the way we live as individuals line up with what we say we love?

Do you remember the question that framed this discussion? Do you remember what the teacher of the law actually asked? He said "*who is my neighbour?*". It tells us too that he was "*seeking to justify himself*". He wanted to know that what he was doing was OK. That he could get away with loving who he wanted to love.

As I touched on earlier, the way Jesus responds would have been shocking to the Jewish mind-set – because he makes the hero a Samaritan. He's setting them up in the way He tells the story. First, they're let down by the priest. Then, they're let down by the Levite. And who is it that comes around the corner? They expected perhaps an expert in the law. Or a good, God-fearing Jew. But what they get is a Samaritan. Someone they hated with a ferocity like no other. Surely no good could come from a Samaritan, yet this man is the hero of the story?

Think about who you'd hate most to be the hero. Who, deep down, could you not imagine coming to the rescue? In our 21st century context this could be a neo-Nazi or a radical Muslim. Or, to a Christian audience, a militant atheist. This is like Richard Dawkins coming around the corner to the man's aid. It designed to be shocking – to shake them to the very core.

Because Jesus wants them to think again about who their neighbour is. Because it isn't OK for them to only love the people that are like them or the people that they like. The primary application was not actually about how we love, but about who we love.

Are we prepared to love those that others consider unlovable? Are we prepared to love those who seem less than lovely? Are we prepared to love those who are challenging, awkward or difficult to reach? Are we prepared to love those outside our social circle? Are we prepared to love those we don't fully understand? Are we prepared to love those we don't agree with? Are we prepared to love those we dislike, or even hate?

That is the standard that Jesus outlines here. Yes, real love – genuine, authentic, tangible love – requires inconvenience, investment, and interest – but it also requires us to discard every barrier, set aside every preconception and to love everyone, everywhere, regardless of how we feel.

This then is the kind of love our world needs to see. It is the kind of love that God has for people; and the kind of love that must be displayed through His church. Paying the full price for love requires inconvenience, investment and interest – but it also requires a commitment to love one and all – no matter how messy, how challenging and how tough.

Imagine what would happen if our world saw a love like that in us. Imagine the difference it would make in your workplace, your school, your university. Imagine how many lives could be transformed if we loved indiscriminately. If we were prepared to love the marginalised and the broken and the unlovable. People who had not known love could find love again. People who had looked for love in the wrong places, could find their way back to a love that embraced them safely and securely. People who had felt lonely and alone could find inclusion, acceptance and hope.

What if we were known for that kind of love? What if people said of Proclaimers – those people love with a genuine, authentic, tangible love? What if people came here because they knew that within this community, they would find love? I think we could revolutionise a city. And with every life touched, we would point people not only to a new kind of love; but to the God who initiated it all. Every time we show love like this, we show people God. God who loved and loves; who rescues and restores; God who breathes hope and purpose and meaning back into life.

Let's love whosoever needs it through inconvenience, though it requires investment. Let's take an interest. Let's ensure our lives lines up with what we say we love. Let's shout to our city through our words and our actions – this is real love – and this is the God who prompts this genuine, authentic, tangible love in us.

Let's pray.