

LOVE: Love The Overlooked

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A few weeks ago, I preached on the story of the Good Samaritan. About how real love is inconvenient; about investing in other, taking an interest in them. About loving whoever may come our way. Then, in Pets At Home... (story). So from now on, I'm only going to speak about financial breakthrough!

Not really, but it got me thinking. I knew what I had to do in that moment. I'd just spoken this message all about the cost of real love. Yet still this thought crossed my mind. What if we don't help out? What if we make an excuse and go on our way? Would it matter?

Pastor Tom has always encouraging us about the importance of messages which speak to people's Mondays, not just to their Sunday. That is the acid test for any message – does it survive contact with the real world? Will you still be putting it into practice by the end of the week.

But if you've been here for any length of time, perhaps you've asked the same question I asked myself that Sunday. Does it matter if I put it into practice? That's a provocative question, isn't it? But if even I, the one who preached the message, wonder about whether to apply it, it strikes me that perhaps you've had that thought too. Maybe you haven't voiced it out loud. Maybe you haven't given form to the thought. But maybe the idea has crossed your mind. We've heard all about love in this series – in many forms and circumstances and situations – but perhaps you've found yourself wondering if it'd matter if you didn't love sometimes. We've heard about real love, revolutionary love and gritty love - about love in marriage, love for our enemies, love for those that don't seem so lovely. Even Bishop Michael Curry got in on the act – preaching to a global audience at the Royal Wedding about the power of love. (I did wonder about just playing the video of his message instead!) But what stirring, inspiring words he spoke about the power of love; about its capacity to revolutionise our world. But maybe sometimes you don't feel up to love. Maybe sometimes you don't feel strong enough. Maybe sometimes you feel like you don't care enough. Maybe you feel too tired or worn out or rundown to love. And that thought niggles away – does it matter if I don't put this into practice?

As a church, we often talk about loving our city. Pastor Tom has always inspired us to be externally focused – we exist not for ourselves, but for those outside our church. But what does it actually look like to love our city? Can we love in a way that makes an impact in our society? There is even perhaps a question of who we love. Do we have a responsibility to love everyone? How could we even do that? What difference does it make if we do?

Instead of asking "what difference does it make?", I want to ask "what difference could it make?". To flip it and look for the opportunity that love provides. What we're going to explore today is challenging and convicting, but it is also inspiring – staggering in its scope and longevity. We're going to look at what are some of Jesus' most provocative, challenging words. To ask how they apply to love and what we can do in response.

But before we get to those words, I want to take a minute just to speak to all those here today who wouldn't call themselves a Christian. Maybe you're not someone who normally comes along to church. Maybe you're still exploring things. You wouldn't say you were a Jesus follower. I think what we will explore in a moment is aimed very much at those who profess to follow Jesus. But I hope that everyone will take something away today. It may just be that today gives you a glimpse into how God actually feels about you. Because I think sometimes that message can get lost in translation.

I had a heart-breaking conversation with one of my colleagues not so long ago. He was someone raised in a church background who, because of what he was taught then, had come to believe that he would never be welcome in church - and he wasn't sure he could ever come to church because of that. I could only apologise that that was how he felt - that that was what Christians had taught him about God. So I hope that if you wouldn't say you were a Christian today, you'll see God in a very different light by the time we're finished.

That said, let's get to this provocative, challenging story shall we? And it literally is a story. In Matthew 25, we read of Jesus telling stories about the coming kingdom of God. His final story goes like this...

Matthew 25:31-46 - 31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' 37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' 40 "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' 44 "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' 45 "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' 46 "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

I told you it was challenging, didn't I? Jesus is looking ahead here to end of the world. The Son of Man. That's how Jesus speaks of Himself through-out the accounts of His life. Here

He is, looking forward to the day when He shall return – in all His glory. The band playing, angels following; bright lights, fanfare and fireworks. The whole shebang.

He then speaks of the King. But He doesn't mean Elvis. From His reference to "my Father", it seems pretty clear that Jesus means Himself. He proposes here that He will do something that may seem more shocking to those that are Christians than to those that aren't. Because Jesus suggests that He will separate people based on what they have or have not done. This seems reasonable in a worldly context. You wouldn't be too surprised if your boss made a decision about your ongoing employment based on what you have or have not done, would you?! But isn't Jesus all about acceptance? We often teach that relationship with God isn't based on what we can do, but on what Jesus has done. That by His death and resurrection, every sin that should separate us from God has been dealt with. That we are justified by grace, bought back by His blood, able to boldly and confidently walk into the presence of God not by our own deeds but because of His life given up for us. Is Jesus here turning this whole concept on its head?

Thankfully, no. I don't think Jesus is making it so that we have to earn our way into heaven. I don't think we've been getting it wrong all these years. But I do think Jesus intends to shock His audience. I do think Jesus wants to shake things up. We have this image of Jesus as meek and mild; as cautious and caring. But the Biblical account of Jesus just doesn't back that up. Jesus wasn't crucified by the religious leaders because He was so soft and squishy that they couldn't stand Him. He was put to death because He was dangerous, offensive, and inclined to stir things up. Jesus associated with the most wretched, reviled and scandalous of people. He told people they'd have to give up all they had to follow Him. He berated the religious teachers of the day. He accused them of hypocrisy, of greed and called them out for perpetuating injustice. And every now and then He threw out an idea so shocking it made everyone take a step back. Like in John 6, when He told a crowd that unless they eat His flesh and drink His blood, they will not find eternal life! Jesus was not averse to causing a little controversy. He was inclined to shock His audience, to make them think.

Jesus draws our attention to who we are prepared to help. He speaks of feeding the hungry, showing hospitality to strangers, clothing the needy, helping the sick and visiting those in prison. These are tangible, practical acts. The kind of acts that practically show love for others. It is not much of a stretch to say that Jesus is encouraging us to love like this.

I don't think Jesus is being too prescriptive here though. I don't think He's saying we should do these, but nothing else. These are examples. They cover the breadth of human need — they speak to physical *and* emotional lack – to those who have tangible needs like food or clothing, but also to loneliness and isolation. His summing up statement is the cover all about who we should love – "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

That phrase "the least of these" is an interesting one. To us, that phrase perhaps conjures up ideas of something less valuable or less significant. While there may be some truth in that understanding, Jesus' words here actually go beyond it. The Message translation perhaps better captures the true meaning, translating those words as "someone overlooked

or ignored". That's the essence of what Jesus is getting at here. Those that are looked down on by society, those that are ignored. Those are locked up even, out of the way.

Jesus then speaks of a tangible, practical kind of love. Of a willingness to do something for those that are overlooked and ignored. The kind of response He speaks of is a willingness to meet a need. To practically help. To put into action what has been heard.

I wonder whether Jesus' stark words here are less about how we earn His favour and more about what happens when we're in relationship with Him. I wonder if what He's suggesting is that those who know Him, know how to love like this. That the tangible outworking of a relationship with God is that we reach out to those who are overlooked or ignored, to offer to help them in any way we can.

That is certainly what we see in the life of Jesus. Time and again, He goes out of His way to meet practical needs. Time and again, He reaches out to those who are isolated or ignored. Time and again, He focuses His attention on those that are overlooked. Could it that He is saying that those who truly follow Him will love like He does?

And perhaps that those who don't love like this, don't really know Him – regardless of how they might identify themselves. That's certainly the criticism He levels at the Pharisees a couple of chapters earlier. He basically accuses them of professing to follow God, but doing nothing to truly help people. In that context, the venom of the second part of the passage makes sense. He wants to shake them from their empty words into meaningful action.

For those of us that seek to follow Jesus, the application then is clear. We are to love the overlooked – in practical, tangible ways. We are to do what we can to meet the needs of those around us – to help those who are otherwise considered insignificant or ignored.

Don't miss too the scale of this opportunity. Jesus is talking here of the end of the world. He is looking back across time at all that has gone before. We need that sense of eternal perspective. We need to see the true power of our simple acts. Jesus is suggesting that these things will make an eternal difference – that they will have an eternal impact. We often assume that something big and impressive is required to truly make our mark on eternity – but Jesus instead points to simple acts of practical, tangible love.

If we truly long to make a difference – in our lives, in this city, through our church – what if what truly counts is whether we're prepared to love the overlooked?

The question then is how do we do that? We asked at the start if it mattered – and it is so clear that it does. The difference it could make is huge. But that doesn't break down the barriers to us living it out necessarily. How can we love those that are overlooked?

I have three thoughts for you this morning. Normally, I would alliterate them or rhyme them or otherwise come up with a clever way for you to remember them. But I have got nothing – so you'll simply have to write them down!

1) Change Your Perspective

Right now, I am providing a physical representation of what it looks like to overlook someone. I am literally looking down on you. If I look straight ahead, I will overlook you all. If I want to avoid overlooking you, what do I need to do? That's right, I need to come down.

[Walk down steps and along the front of the stage]

Now this would seem like a simple act to most of you, but to me it is harder than it looks. I won't go into why – I broke my knee. I hardly ever mention it! But the truth is that coming down isn't that easy for many of us either. We actually have all sorts of psychological reasons why we might like to have some people to look down on. Not that we like being better than others, necessarily, but that on some level the idea that we are makes us feel better about ourselves. History is steeped with examples of injustice and inequality. But if we want to avoid looking down on others, the solution is to step into their world. It is easy to overlook others if we feel superior to them; far harder if we see them as our equal.

This image of coming down actually reminds me of Jesus – who gave up the majesty and glory to Heaven, to connect with flawed and failing humanity on Earth. We read of just that transaction outlined in Philippians 2...

Philippians 2:5-11 - ⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

There is a powerful picture here of Christ's humility. Jesus was prepared to step down into our world - to give up the glory of heaven in humble obedience. We are encouraged to have that same mind-set. How did Kendrick Lamar put it: Be humble, step down?! (sic)

The words that go before help us to understand how to do this.

Philippians 2:3-4 - ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

We're encouraged to put aside selfish ambition, to set aside vanity. To value others above ourselves. *"Looking not to your own interests, but each of you to the interests of others"*. We need to take an interest in others. To ask how they feel. To find out what they need. We should not consider it beneath us to talk to others, but should instead look to sit with them. ***[Sit down]*** To engage with them. To ask what we can do to help them.

Which leads us on to the second thought I have about how to love the overlooked...

[Get back on stage]

2) Love Any Way

We've heard a phrase a couple of times in this series. Love anyway. Helena brought out this idea – that we should love regardless of the obstacles, regardless of our concerns or questions. Esther emphasised the same, of how we should love even through pain. I'm wearing a t-shirt that advertises this same idea. ***[Take off jacket to reveal "Love Anyway" t-shirt]***

But I want to add a space that I think will add a new dimension to this. In this story that Jesus tells, it strikes that He covers this wide range of practical things that you could do to help others. As I said earlier, I don't think He is suggesting just doing these things. I think He's putting across the idea of doing whatever we can; of doing anything we can.

So I want to suggest that as well as choosing to **Love Anyway**, We should also choose to **Love Any Way**.

We should love any way we can. We should just take whatever opportunity that presents itself. We can spend too long weighing up whether we could or should help, and end up doing nothing. Like if you pass a homeless person in the street, does anyone else go through this whole moral dilemma in their head? ***[Walking across stage]*** "Should I give them some money? But what will they spend it on? What if they don't spend it on food? What if they spend it on drugs? I heard that you shouldn't give people money, you should buy them food instead. Maybe I should do that. Do I have time? Oh gosh, I'm past them now. Never mind."

It isn't hard to see the odd thinking error there, is it? The odd less than humble thought. But we can be paralysed too by the question of whether we should do something – and before we know it, we've missed the chance to do anything.

It happens in our workplaces. It happens in our schools. It happens everywhere. We don't go over to that person on their own. We don't stop for a moment to speak to a colleague. We don't ask if someone's OK. We had a compliment on the tip of our tongue, but...

What if we decided just to love anyway in any way we can? What if this week we just took every opportunity to do something nice? What if we didn't stop to think for too long and we just impulsively helped people? Would our week would be better or worse? How about this... Can we agree together to help without hesitation this week?

3) Put on love

So that's two practical keys. One more to go. And I pretty much promised in my opening comments that we'd address those times when we just don't feel like loving. Times when we don't feel with have the strength, or the energy. Or maybe just we feel too broken or beaten up ourselves to help others.

On one hand, part of me thinks we just have to get over it. In these verses, Jesus doesn't really make any concession for how we feel. He doesn't say to the second group "depart from me, you who are cursed, except for those who didn't really feel up to it for whatever reason, because I understand that life's tough sometimes". I'm challenged by what Pastor

Tom said last week, that truth is higher than feelings. I think our modern society places too much stock in how we feel. Of how most of the significant achievements in history have been accomplished despite how those involved might have felt. Of how living primarily by how we feel really isn't the best way to live. I was tempted to say that we should just put it on. Put it on. When you don't feel like loving, just pretend you do and get on with it.

Then I realised that putting it on really is the answer – but not quite the way I thought. In the book of Colossians, Paul lists a bunch of virtues that should define God's people: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness – then:

Colossians 3:14 - 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Over everything else, put on love. There is word picture here, like someone putting on a piece of clothing, that draws together all these other positive characteristics. Clothe yourselves, Paul writes, with these virtues – and over it all, put on love. The Message says "...wear love. It is your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it".

[Pick up jacket from rail] I have a jacket that gives me a sense of what this verse is all about. I was given this for my 30th birthday. It was purchased by a number of family and friends who clubbed together to buy it. It is a representation of their love for me. **[Put jacket on]** If ever I'm not sure what to wear, I know I'll feel good wearing this jacket. And just as I wear this and feel that bit better, so we should intentionally and consciously put on love.

In the words that follow in Colossians, we catch a glimpse of the kind of love we should put on...

Colossians 3:15-17 - 15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. 16 Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. 17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Paul here brings it all back to one source. Let peace of Christ rule in your hearts. Let the message of Christ dwell among you. Whatever you do, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus. Jesus Christ is the source. Paul encourages us to let the peace we find in Jesus still our anxieties. To let the message of Jesus guide our path. And to do it all – in word and deed – in Jesus' name.

Instead of putting it on in terms of faking it, we need to put it on by consciously reminding ourselves of the love we find in Jesus. Just as we consciously get dressed in the morning, so we need to consciously remind ourselves that we are loved by God.

What if we made that part of our morning routine this week? That as we get dressed, we remind ourselves that we are loved by God. That we are loved with the kind of love that has no bounds or limits – a love that endures and overcomes. Why don't we follow Paul's guidance and

give thanks for that love? As we're putting on our socks or doing up our shirt, why don't we say "I thank you Jesus that you love me".

I think that if we consciously reminded ourselves of the love of God at the start of each day this week, we would find loving others in a practical, tangible way so much easier to do. If we walked out feeling so fully loved ourselves, we are so much more likely to feel like we can love others too.

I need to finish, but I hope those three keys will help you to love the overlooked.

Change your perspective – by humbling considering the interests of others.

Love any way – don't hesitate to help others however you can.

Put on love – by reminding yourself at the start of every day about just how loved you are.

Loving those who are overlooked and ignored is not an add-on or an extra. It is a core pursuit for those that follow Jesus. We may not always be able to plan it, but we can be prepared for it - by changing our perspective, embracing every opportunity, and walking through our week emboldened by the love God has for us.

On the other side of a decision to love the overlooked is a world of influence and opportunity. We know from Jesus' words that eternity will tell the story of our response. But I think too that we can see change in our day to day lives – as we live out the kind of love that sets us apart from the rest of the world. We can see a spark of hope light up in people; a sense of value and worth flickering back into life. We can see their soul refreshed by our kindness. We can start a revolution of acceptance, appreciation and love.

Let's turn down the volume on the voice that says "does it matter?" and turn up the volume on "what difference could it make if I loved?". Let's look for the interests of others, let's help in any way we can, and let's love others out of the love we find in Christ. Let's take our shot at eternity, let's make our mark on history – let's choose to be known as those who love the overlooked.

Thank you.