

Handling Love

"It's scandalous!"

"It's immoral!"

"It's disgusting!"

Whispers, intentionally loud enough to be overheard, passed around the circle of clerics who hung together in a clique as though they feared contact with those outside their spiritual club.

"This proves it. I don't care what tricks he does," spoke up one well known apologist, "he's defiled, and he has obviously done this with a willful disregard for the scriptures."

"He clearly has no love for God. He wouldn't stumble us...er...all these people like this if he did."

"Yes, you're right. These poor souls around us don't understand this display is... is... not from a holy God."

Murmuring ebbed and flowed in the group, but here and there the more curious members slipped away. Their attention being drawn to the man that was causing all this fuss. With torn filthy rags still hanging on him, he was surrounded by common people now whose eyes beheld with amazement what had happened.

Moments earlier, he had broken the traditional laws by approaching the teacher as he left the synagogue. It was a rare moment when relatively few people were around him. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as he neared – his heartbeat visible under his tattered clothing.

Leprosy had made him an outcast so long ago, he'd forgotten... no, not really forgotten...it was just that the memories of his family and friends, who now never came close to him, were too painful to recall.

His skin was covered with oozing wounds, his nose and ears were gone. Several of his fingers and toes were gone too. His face was covered and barely human. He shuffled from

imbalance not pain – physically, he felt nothing.

His soul, however, was searing with brokenness – he'd pondered taking his life countless times; his rejection by everyone had cast him into a vast abyss of loneliness. He was an abhorrence even to his own children.

If anyone could see inside his heart, they'd view a sight far more wretched than his outward rottenness. He believed in God, but for a time, he'd hated Him – convinced that Jehovah must also disdain him or not care.

Everyone who understood such things said that he was a sinner, rejected by God, reaping the consequence of an immoral life. And he figured that this must be true for there was nothing to refute it.

Meanwhile, he begged for scraps of food. Money was nearly useless – he couldn't enter a marketplace and no one would handle the coins he'd touched. Most of what he ate, the dogs had left behind. 'Could hell be worse than this?' he wondered.

But just today, while scrounging for morsels, he'd overheard rumors about this teacher, this rabbi that could heal people.

Could it be true!? But no one could cure leprosy! Never, had that happened to a Jew. But wait...he thought for a moment and vaguely remembered the tale of a Syrian whom the prophet of God told to wash in the Jordan river and sure enough – he had been healed! He thought of how far the Jordan was from where he sat.

Could he walk that far? Maybe. But would this rabbi help him? Maybe...but like the Syrian, maybe he needed to be or to know someone special or maybe he needed some coins to give... alas, he was helpless in either case. The rabbi would surely recoil at the sight of him.

After hours of mental turmoil, he decided that if the teacher truly had this power from God, then he had nothing

to lose by seeking his help – it would only be a matter of his willingness to give the command. And somehow, after that, he'd shuffle his way to the river.

Now, as he approached, he stumbled, got back up, and nervously he neared the man, Jesus. Odd, he thought, he didn't dress like a famous rabbi. But something about him was so approachable – there was an 'air' about the man – a kindness that seemed to radiate from him.

'Well, here goes...' He closed in on the small group – his eyes riveted upon the man in the middle. As he neared, an angry voice seem to shout in his mind that he wasn't supposed to get this close to people, but his fear was overpowered by his hope.

Now, just a few yards away, he watched the teacher turn to behold him. At any moment, he expected a look of revulsion and disgust. But to his utter surprise, the tender eyes he beheld pierced his soul like a sword and then filled him with an unearthly, supernaturally-natural warmth.

Suddenly, he realized this was not simply a gifted rabbi. He fell to his knees and bowed on his face. He was oblivious to the remarks of those around him.

His heart poured out, "If You are willing, You can make me clean!"

In the silent moment that followed, an eternity passed. Would Jesus speak the Word? Would He give the command to be cleansed? And then the incredible happened.....

Jesus, moved with compassion, put out His hand and **touched** him...

"He **touched** me!" the stunned leper exclaimed in his heart. He hadn't been touched by anyone in years! That for which he had anguished and wept and hoped for such a long time had actually happened!

You see, touching him was forbidden. To the religious, Jesus had defiled Himself – in contacting the man's

uncleanness, He Himself was now supposedly unclean. In reality, He remained spotless (See Titus 1:15,16)

And with this gentle touch upon his decaying flesh, the man sensed an eruption, a mighty cascading flood of love! Inexplicable, indefinable, uncontainable, unconditional love!

As he gazed into those heaven-filled eyes, his leprosy became almost irrelevant. He'd approached Jesus for the healing of his body, but now, the healing of his heart, by love, was his consuming joy.

And then came the words, "I am willing, be cleansed."

Immediately, his body was totally restored -- his skin, as soft as a child's; his senses, restored. And the best part of all – he knew, he truly knew that God loved him!

Now, sad to say, I've personally struggled at times with something many of you have, no doubt, found easy to accept. You see, I had no problem in perceiving the awesome truth of John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not die but have everlasting life."

How could God be any more clear about His global love?! But, where I desire even more awareness is in the love of God for me individually. Now, I know, along with many of you, that indeed, Christ's incomprehensible suffering reflects His glorious love for each one of us, but when I'm hurting, I also find great comfort in the personification of love I see in Jesus as He dealt with bums like me.

Although I have narrated the story above with some hypothetical circumstances, I hope that the essential truth of the passage is pristinely clear – Christ loves us personally, and He's not afraid or shocked by our condition. He wants to touch us and to be touchable. Right

now, He uses you and I to do this for one another. In fact, it's the proof to the world that we are following Him. However, very soon, He will return to snatch us out of here and then He'll hold us in His arms personally.

Now, we cannot define God's love – even 1Cor 13 is really a description. You see, the love of God is one of His infinite attributes. As such, it is by definition, undefinable.

We can, however, appreciate the demonstration of His love by observing Christ. Consider His interaction with Peter on the shores of Galilee's lake. In John 21, after His resurrection, Jesus confronts Peter with such loving openness – three times, He presses the issue, "Peter do you love Me?" fully aware of the bitter sense of failure in Peter's heart for his three denials the night of the Lord's arrest. He even probes by shifting the question from Peter's "agape" (or divine) love to his "phileo" (or brotherly) love which in itself is quite revealing.

But in it all, we see the tender love of Jesus for this bumbling, hurting guy. He's not just instructing or testing, but He's healing Peter's heart. The story reverberates with Christ's individual, unbounded love for the man. Certainly, His inquiry was never one of doubt or discipline, but of revelation and restoration.

Consider His loving compassion when He wept with Mary and Martha at the tomb of Lazarus. (John 11)

Consider His loving patience with doubtful Thomas in the upper room. (John 20)

Consider the loving truth revealed in His interaction with a single Samaritan woman by the well. (John 4)

Consider virtually every facet of His earthly life and you'll see love – approachable, personal affection.

Then consider the cross.

Countless volumes have still understated the marvelous measureless

love of God as demonstrated on Calvary that was "just three days ago" for the believer. Armies of gifted preachers and expositors have proclaimed it in every corner of the world. How then, could anyone ever have the slightest doubt of God's earnest desire for intimacy with us?

For many reasons – none of them good – but nevertheless, real.

- We may be hurt or sorrowful
- We may suffer from worthy-worries
- We may have put one foot back in the world or never left it
- We may see the cross as being done just for the world and not for us individually
- We may misperceive Abba (Father, Papa) – Who He is.

Let me explain...

- First, many if not most of us have experienced at some time a crushing tragedy. The loss of a child, a spouse, a break-up, an endless series of foster homes, terrible abuse, a lifetime of loneliness... Without the hope of heaven and a present trust in Abba, these experiences will turn to bitterness and worldly sorrow which the Bible declares bring death – separation from God (See 2 Cor 7:10). Now, God doesn't command us to pretend such things don't hurt, to play a spiritual masquerade, but rather to run to Him for help and to know that the day is soon coming when sorrow will be no more. Read Isaiah 51:4 and Jeremiah 31:13.

I'll share a private moment with you that I hope will not offend anyone nor draw attention to me except as an illustration. You see, crushing hurt can overwhelm our ability to sense or even believe in God's love temporarily. This is not a failure on God's part nor necessarily a permanent condition of our own hearts. But a crushed, truly crushed human heart simply lacks the ability to discern anything but grief, sorrow and pain.

Though admittedly a weak example, if you took a hot branding iron and seared my back and then offered to give my neck a massage, I surely wouldn't enjoy it because the pain of the burns would be so great.

I sat beside my boy. He had just left his failing body to join his brother in the awesome presence of our Lord. I cannot and do not want to try to describe the flood of grief experienced at that moment. I was alone with him, his tent, and I held his hand and brushed the hair I had cut so many times – even though I knew he was at peace, I was in the most devastating, crushing war of my existence.

I prayed and tried to hold on to what shreds of trust I had left. Those of you who have lost a child know what I mean. I couldn't believe it; I was surely in a nightmare that would end but then, I knew the nightmare was real.

At that moment, my dear friend entered the little unlit hospital room. My first reaction was the purest indicator of my heart – I turned away from him and wept bitterly. I wailed uncontrollably. It wasn't him that caused my desire to run and scream – it was what he represented – my God. The One who was supposed to love me and yet had taken my child.

He grabbed me gently and I turned around and buried my agonizing face in his chest (he's a tall guy!). All I could sense was my heart and his powerful hug.

He'd traveled more than two I to see us and at that critical moment he was God's love to me even though I had no more ability to discern it than to swim across the ocean. And God knew it.

Later, however, as the Spirit of God began the mending process, I considered how loving it was of my Lord to send him and He also showed me numerous other things that He had done which were just incredibly loving. Now, as I look to heaven, I have come to love

the Lord and His children so much more dearly as a result.

When your heart fails, God hasn't failed. He never fails. (See Psalm 73:26)

- Next, we may think, 'Oh, I'm such a worthless 'loser'. How could You love me?' or 'I'm confident of God's love because I've been good or I've led someone to Him or...' How often have we entertained such ideas? The pitiful estranged condition of our 'old man' always wants to swing us from 'castigation to congratulation' and back. All because we have a tendency towards trying to earn love. All our lives, it has seemed like people have either loved, liked, ignored or hated us based upon what we did or didn't do – this has conditioned or reinforced the notion of our needing to merit love.

However, God's love (like it or not) is unconditional – totally lop-sided if you would. He never measures out His affection for you based on your worthiness or unworthiness. In fact, He never measures out His love period – it is infinite and relentless! (See Jeremiah 31:3)

- Next, Jesus prayed that Abba would not take us out of the world literally (until the rapture!) - John 17:15, but the Bible says we are to leave the world's attachments and entanglements. (See Luke 14:33, 2 Tim 2:4 and 1 John 2:15). That's because although our Father will always love us, we will not perceive, receive or respond to it if 'the world gets in our eyes'. We only have the capacity to love one ideal – one master (Mat 6:24).

- Next, we can misperceive of Abba in our minds as playing the role of a global-God but not as a personal God. It's humanly easier for us to accept a deity who deals with the 'big picture', the fate of all, the grand design – as if God's some CEO in the sky.

We can even look to John 3:16 where it says, "For God so loved the world..." and accept that more easily since "world" is a big word and God's a 'big Guy' – right? (I'm mean that reverently.) And when that is the case, our relationship with Him remains mostly theological, theoretical, philosophical, religious – dutiful but loveless.

The fact is, Abba's love for you is absolutely personal. You are NOT some speck of dust in the huge cosmos of His plan. You, individually, are worth everything to Him – yes... you – no, not the guy over there – YOU!

Jesus explained it in several stories like in Matt 13:46 where He gives everything to obtain a single pearl – you; or in Luke 15:4, where He leaves everything to find one lost sheep – you; or in Luke 15:8 where He drops everything to find one lost coin – you.

And Paul said it too. He recognized the cross as intimate and personal when he wrote in Gal 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved **me** and gave Himself for **me**."

- Finally, we are naturally so spiritually near-sighted that the only God we can perceive, looks like us, thinks like us and behaves like us. No wonder we distrust such a Being. The first thing sinful man did in the Garden of Eden when he heard the Lord coming was to hide. You see, sin twists and contorts our perception of God a full 180 degrees. But Jesus displayed Abba's character to the world – healing, blessing, loving, compassionate, giving, patient, forgiving and on and on. This why it is so critical that we endeavor to see God as He is – not as the religionists teach or as the world portrays or as the devil fumes. The truth is utterly good. God is good and oh, how He loves you. He doesn't see

you like you see you. When you're saved, covered so to speak by the atoning sacrifice of Christ's blood and broken body, Abba sees you as beautifully clean -- worth everything it cost Him to redeem you.

Let me wrap this up with a meditation – the first mention we have in the Bible of love is in Genesis 22:2 where God told Abraham to offer up his son. He said, "...your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love..." This is clearly a picture of the measureless love Abba has for Jesus and yet He gave Him – His only Son, for you. Put it this way, the same strong, gentle hand that lovingly touched that pitiful leper also lovingly took the spike of his sins and sickness to make him truly whole.

Let Him touch you too.