



This is the text of a sermon preached on 29th August 2010 by David Last. The title of the sermon was “You can know real love” and it was the seventh sermon from a series entitled “9 special offers”

Introduction

Mentors

Have you ever had a mentor – somebody with experience, who could offer you advice on what you were doing? Mentors are found in many situations. In the past, on the great sailing ships, a new, young sailor might find himself working alongside an old hand who could “show him the ropes” – which is to say the new sailor learned from the older man all the names of the different ropes used on the ship. But working with that sailor, the new lad might also come to rely upon him for all sorts of other advice because of the experience the sailor had of serving at sea, dealing with the rest of the crew, travelling the world and just more generally in life. So the older man could become a mentor to the younger one: his experience and knowledge would be trusted as a guide for life.

Well that's one example but, as I say, mentors appear in many different places. Some companies and educational establishments officially appoint mentors to help others develop. Mentors are sometimes used with youngsters who have got themselves into all sorts of trouble and the authorities want to help them escape from their cycle of problems and

crimes. The mentor uses his or her experience to direct and encourage the youngster into a better way of life.

But what about you? Has there been anyone in your life who has guided you – whether formally or informally – so that you live in better ways? And did this mentor have your trust particularly because he or she had already done the things that you were now facing? After all, that's the point about the old sailor on the ship isn't it? He's not talking as somebody who has read a lot about living on board a ship: he's talking as somebody who has done it. Such people are often the ones we trust most. Whereas we find it hard to take seriously people who are teaching us about life when they've had no experience. Sure they may have lots of book knowledge about their subject and sometimes that's very important. But we'd still prefer to meet the person who has lived it out. They're the ones we want to be our mentors.

Jesus as a mentor

Ok, so what has all this got to do with this sermon? Well this afternoon our sermon is part of a series named “9 special offers” and the idea of each sermon is that it's about something offered to us by Jesus Christ. And

our topic today is concerned with how Jesus Christ can bring us to know real love. But Jesus doesn't teach about love from a theoretical point of view. His teaching flows out from his life: he lived a life of love towards others and, indeed, his life is the ultimate example of truly loving others. And that's why I started the sermon by getting you to think about mentors because, if I can put it this way, Jesus Christ is the supreme mentor when it comes to love. He's definitely the one you want to guide you. As I hope to show you: you can completely trust him on this subject.

So let's tackle our subject and I'm going to start by talking a little about the word "love" otherwise we'll end up completely confused since people use the word love in multiple different ways. Then when I've done that, I want to describe something of how Jesus has made real love known and visible, before finishing by explaining what it all means personally for each one of us.

So, let's begin with the word "love".

Defining love

Light-weight love

We speak of loving all sorts of people and things. I might love my wife in one way, love my children in another way, and love baked beans in a third way. So let's try to clarify the word a little.

Often "love" is little more than a summary of our current feelings. A lad who tells a girl that he "loves her" may simply be saying that he's

got some strong sensations coursing through his body which are affecting his mind, stomach and elsewhere; his feelings are on a high and that means he wants to be with the girl as often as possible. And so long as those feelings continue, he stills "loves" the girl. But then a day comes when she no longer excites him in that way and he starts looking around at other girls. Maybe their relationship begins to involve a level of tension, disagreement, argument, even fighting. Until finally he utters the words "I don't love you any more". What does he mean? He means the feelings have gone and he's no longer drawn to the girl such that he wants to be with her.

This type of love is similar to our love of baked beans. It's all about our pleasure and enjoyment. I may love baked beans but then, going through a time of life when I'm poor, may eat them so often that I get put off. I no longer love baked beans the way I used to. Indeed if I suffer some food poisoning from a bad tin then it may be that I never eat them ever again and then I'll say that I used to love baked beans but now I don't.

However, this light-weight, self-concerned, version of love isn't really what the Bible means by the word or what Jesus can teach us about. That's not to say that these feelings and desires are unimportant. God made us to feel deeply for some things in life and particularly for some people. These very powerful emotions that we experience are good gifts from God and are designed to join us closely to others: to help us love them. However, by themselves they don't define all that love is –

love is actually much richer.

Giving love

So where can we see deeper forms of love? Well, it's often encountered in the way people will care for others even when their feelings might tell them to run away.

For example, you can see such love in a mother who continues to stay in contact with her daughter and tries to help her, even when the daughter is a totally nasty piece of work who is verbally, and maybe physically, abusive; a daughter who constantly speaks of how her mother has ruined her life (whilst continuing to take everything her mother has to give). Now if you spoke to the mother you might ask, "why do you keep in contact?". And her reply would probably be, "Well I may not like her very much but I do love my daughter." What does she mean? She means that because this was the child who came from her own body and whom she's cared for over many years, she still wants what is best for her. So although it hurts to have contact, still she maintains the link.

Now that sort of love is deeper and stronger isn't it? It's a love which isn't dependant upon how I feel but rather is built upon the foundation of belonging together – having a sense of commitment to somebody. Because the mother first brought the daughter into the world, she continues to feel a responsibility to seek her well-being. That type of loving bond can be found not only between parents and children, but in the wider family, in some friendships, between some comrades and in

some marriages.

Of course I'm simplifying all this and the reality is more complicated, but hopefully you're familiar with the general ideas about the word "love" that I'm working with.

Enemy love

However, even that type of self-giving love which doesn't rely upon liking the other person isn't the full version of love which the Bible speaks about. So we need to expand our view even further and think about a love for others which is so generous that it will seek the good of others not only in friendly or family situations but even when you would actually expect the total opposite.

This type of love is what you might see, for example, when a victim shows great kindness and mercy to the criminal who viciously attacked him: it's the sort of love which is willing to love even enemies. Love which runs this far is very rare and sometimes is seen as weakness or as a psychological abnormality. But Jesus teaches that this is real love: so let's now spend a few minutes learning from Jesus himself about it.

Impossible love

Jesus' words

Jesus taught his followers to love God and love other people, even including their enemies. Here he is speaking about this on one occasion:

Luke 6:27-35 I tell you who hear me: Love

your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners', expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.

What is Jesus saying here to those who become Christians? He's saying that he expects an impossibly high standard from them, in terms of how they treat other people. All of us have enemies. Some are individuals we already have in our lives and who cause us trouble. Others we don't know personally but what we know about them causes us to want to stay away from them because they might harm us – gang members, vicious neighbours and so forth. Some of us have extremely antagonistic enemies who regularly make our lives a misery, like a bully at work; others have occasional enemies who irritate, frustrate, trouble us now and then. The experience of

enemies varies from person to person, and changes with different times in life. But for all of us there will be people whom we'd rather keep away from because to have contact with them is to meet trouble: they are our enemies. But Jesus commands Christians to love such people by showing them kindness, speaking well to them and praying for them.

Impossible actions

Of course Jesus knows that this sort of close engagement with enemies can produce some nasty effects. So an enemy may be somebody who despises and insults you - “slaps you across the face”, so to speak. But Jesus says to his people: “when you are treated that way maintain friendly contact even though it may mean more insults – slaps on the other cheek”. Or an enemy may be somebody who exploits and steals from you. But Jesus says to his people: “when you are treated this way still show generosity even though it may mean losing more – your tunic as well as your cloak.” Or an enemy may be somebody who lies to and cheats you, borrowing what they'll never return. But Jesus says to this people: “why you are treated this way still be willing to give even though you know it will never come back.” Our natural inclination is to cut all contact with those who harm us; Jesus tells his people to do good to those who mistreat them.

Now if we're honest, we find Jesus' policy here impossible: he's asking too much and is being ridiculous. How can anybody live their life this way? Yet these are the commands Jesus

gave to his people. Sure, he said many others things too about wrongdoing, justice and God's punishment: so these commands are to be understood in a wider context which gives a more rounded picture of Jesus' meaning. But even allowing for all that, Jesus' words remain shocking. He asked his followers for conduct which we would think unworkable. So why did he teach this? Well, there are two things to say.

Showing a kingdom of love

Firstly, Jesus wanted his followers to “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (vs 31). What does that mean? It means that through their behaviour Christians challenge their enemies, saying to them “No matter how you behave, I will treat you in the way you ought to treat me and thus show you how good life could be.” In other words, Christians become mentors to their enemies: showing them a better way to live.

If everyone in the world lived their lives with a loving concern for the good of all others – as Jesus describes – then the world would be a happy place: no more wars, fights and arguments; joy would prevail. Jesus told his followers to put that on display to everyone – including their enemies. Christians are commanded by Jesus to show what a kingdom of love looks like.

However, in saying that, let's be clear about something. Jesus did not naively think that this would change the enemies. He assumed that most people would continue to behave in nasty and wicked ways even after seeing real

love. He assumed that his followers would get slapped on both cheeks and their tunics would be stolen. But he still taught Christians to do this: to display to their enemies how they ought to live, confronting them with the alternative to their nastiness.

But why? What's the possible good of doing this, if in general it doesn't change anyone? Wasn't Jesus just encouraging meaningless and potentially harmful conduct?

God's generosity

No, and the reason for that is the second thing I want to say about Jesus' teaching. Jesus taught his followers to love this way because this is precisely how God behaves. Listen again to the final phrase of those words I read a moment ago: if you love like this, said Jesus, then “*you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.*” Jesus taught his people to love their enemies because that is what God does and people need to know this, if they are to have any hope.

Now who is Jesus talking about in those words? Who are “the ungrateful and the wicked” whom God is kind towards? Answer: us. All human beings – without exception – are the natural enemies of God. We've gone our own way, living as we choose. We're ungrateful to God, taking for granted all that we have and being resentful when life does not go the way we want. And we're wicked. God made us to live our lives in generous, selfless, loving ways but instead we have lived on the earth in sinful and wicked ways: ways which

dishonour God, displease him, and spoil his world. We've treated the world God gave to us, like vandals; we've treated one another in the same way. This world is a mess and it is so because of our hatred, meanness, greed, perversion and self-centredness. We've fouled up.

Yet God continues to allow us to live here, albeit suffering some of the consequences of our misbehaviour. There continues to be many things to enjoy and delight in on the earth.

And that's a huge kindness from God, towards people who have abused his generosity so many times. The human race should long since have been wiped from the face of the planet, but in actual fact we continue to thrive, grow and know many blessings in this world.

God so loved

However, Jesus' words aren't just about God treating us mercifully in those ways. There is a much greater kindness that God has shown to us and that can be expressed by quoting some other of Jesus' words.

John 3:16-17 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

God hasn't just restrained his punishment of us, he's also intervened to save this world from the mess it is in. God sent his son – Jesus – into the world to achieve this and it required huge mercy and generosity from God because

Jesus was appallingly treated: ignored, mocked, despised, rejected, hated and killed. But God accepted this path of suffering so that the very people who did this to Jesus – who behaved as God's enemies – could be saved. You see Jesus ended up tortured to death on a wooden plank not only due to the hatred of others but also as a sacrifice. He died this way to save others who deserved it.

Just punishment

How does that work? Well, in this world: actions bring consequences; choices have outcomes. Justice demands that where somebody has misbehaved – harming and doing wrong to others – then there must be a price to pay. That's only fair, that's only right, wrongdoing should not be left unpunished.

God operates according to this principle. He demands and desires justice for all crimes, all sins, all wickedness, all evil. No matter how small, God judges the deeds of people, bringing due and fair punishment. What punishment? Death. With complete fairness and justice God has pronounced the death penalty upon all of us. He's done so because he gave life to us in the first place and we've used it wickedly. So God takes it back, and we die. The wages of sin is death, says the Bible.

But death is not an end of us; death is an eternal state. Those who die under God's judgement experience the consequences of that judgement for ever. A person who lives cut off from God, with a heart set on their own ways, will lose all that's good and experience everlasting destruction: what the Bible names

Hell.

Changing the world

So we're wicked. Wickedness deserves hell. Therefore that is the destiny for everyone of us ... unless God does something about it. And he has: God gave Jesus, his Son, to die for others. Jesus took the punishment for sin onto himself. He didn't deserve to be punished for he'd done nothing wrong. But he willingly laid down his life so that others could be rescued from the eternal death they deserved. Jesus died to let others live. That is the greatest kindness of all which God has done. God and His Son together agreed on a plan which would cost them much, but which they willingly went through in order to show mercy to wicked people who were behaving as God's enemies and ruining God's world and themselves in the process. That's the degree of God's love. Sacrificial love for his enemies: paying huge costs to show kindness to those who deserved nothing except banishment far away. God came near to us when you would expect him to throw us as far as possible. We see that love in Jesus' life and death.

And the outcome of this love will be a world made new one day. By giving of his Son to suffer and die for others, God set going a process which he promises will end with the remaking of this world into one where no more evil is to be found – even of the smallest sort. And he's promised to populate that world with a new human race of people who love one another totally, without a shadow of anything else interfering, so that the earth becomes full

of joy and peace. God's love will ultimately produce a world of love.

That love – God's love – is the great reason why Jesus commands his people to love others, even enemies. Jesus wants his people to speak about, and live out, the best of lives: a life of love. God himself lives this way. Jesus showed that by living a life of love here on earth. Jesus told his followers to do the same to show this to anyone and everyone, including their enemies. Jesus wanted the world to see in himself, and in his people, what God has done and is doing.

Why does God want it seen? Because he calls us all to turn from our wickedness and join his people.

You can know real love

Finding real love

You see this real love from God, seen in Christ, can become something you personally know. If you learn about Jesus and if you learn from Jesus, then you will understand real love. But it will not just be knowledge in your head: this real love can burst into your life. That's the good news of Christianity, which you cannot find anywhere else. Through faith in Jesus Christ you can know God's love in your life.

And surely we all do want to experience real love don't we? Probably all of us here have experienced the type of love that I spoke about earlier from people who have treated us well because of their feelings for us, until those

feelings faded away. We were their friends or even lovers for a while; but it fell apart.

Maybe we've also experienced that deeper form of love where somebody has treated us well even during the times when we've been utterly unloveable. They'd stayed with us because of the relationship we've got with them; because they feel a sense of commitment and responsibility to hang on in there. We're grateful for such people who will love to that extent.

But how many of us have known love from another which goes as far as God's love has gone? A love which treats enemies with kindness and longs for those enemies to become friends. Who of us has ever really come across love like that? But if you did wouldn't you move your heart and soul? Wouldn't you want to know that somebody cared as deeply and as willingly and totally like that for you? Wouldn't you want to have that real love in your life? You can. Through faith in Jesus Christ.

Faith in Christ

To gain this all you must do is turn to Jesus. Having died upon the cross Jesus was raised back to life by God his father. Today Jesus is alive and well, back in heaven with his father. So you can speak to him in prayer and ask him to bring God's love into your life. You can ask him to teach you about the love of God as seen in the life and death of Christ. You can ask him to help you understand it and take it in. You can ask him to allow you to experience God's love in your life through the forgiveness

of your sins. You can ask him to change you so that you become a person who loves the way God loves. Turn to Jesus Christ and speak to him about this.

But don't just pray – start listening to Jesus as well. It's not enough to speak to Jesus; you need to hear about him and from him and to do that you need to engage with the Bible. Come to church and hear more about him from the Bible. Read for yourself and discover all about him. Jesus has promised that those who truly seek him, will find him. They will receive the help of God's own Holy Spirit to discover the Lord for themselves and will come to personal faith in him, knowing God's love in their life.

Without this you are lost. Your life is displeasing to God and will bring down upon your head the punishment you deserve. There is no escaping that no matter how good you think yourself to be. But your life need not end in that way. There is time for you to regret and apologise for all that is wrong within you, and ask the Lord Jesus Christ to forgive you and make your life new. If you've never done that before, do that this evening.

Do you want to know real love? It can be found. Jesus Christ has put it on display. Become one of his people and you'll discover that more and more in this life and eternally.



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