

“Putting on the Armor of Love”

Matthew 22:36-40, Romans 13:8-14, 1 John 4:16 & 19

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If you were to sum up the Bible and God’s relationship with us in one word, which word would you choose?

I would choose love. Grace would be a close second. Grace is undeserved, unearned, forgiving love. Joy would also be on my short list. Joy flows from God’s love for us and our love for God, others, and ourselves. Love is the most popular topic of scripture and of Jesus.

Jesus said. **Matthew 22:36-40 NLT** “‘Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?’ Jesus replied, “‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.”

When it comes to making any decision, we are to choose the option that reveals the most love. The Apostle Paul proclaims in 1 Corinthians that love is the most excellent way.

Occasionally love is an emotion that flows freely. Most of the time love is a choice. Love needs to be nurtured. We need to choose to put love in our heart and mind.

The Apostle Paul wrote. **Romans 13:8-14** “Owe nothing to anyone—except for your obligation to love one another. If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill the requirements of God’s law. For the commandments say, “You must not commit adultery. You must not murder. You must not steal. You must not covet.” These—and other such commandments—are summed up in this one commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to others, so love fulfills the requirements of God’s law. This is all the more urgent, for you know how late it is; time is running out. Wake up, for our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is almost gone; the day of salvation will soon be here. So remove your dark deeds like dirty clothes, and put on the shining armor of right living. Because we belong to the day, we must live decent lives for all to see. Don’t participate in the darkness of wild parties and drunkenness, or in sexual promiscuity and immoral living, or in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, clothe yourself with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. And don’t let yourself think about ways to indulge your evil desires.”

We are to put on the armor of love. One wears armor for protection. When one chooses to wear the armor of love, they are seeking protection from fear, anxiety, grumpiness, anger, jealousy, guilt, revenge, and hate. All of us at times let these dark deeds into our thoughts and hearts. Again and again we are to take them off like dirty clothes and keep putting on the armor of light.

The Apostle Paul at first tried to live a life of love by focusing on removing all the dirty clothes, removing all his unloving ways, striving to live every thou shalt not in the law. This exasperated him, because he ended up doing what he did not want to do instead of his desire to love. If you want to get rid of a bad habit, the most effective way is to replace it with a good habit. Lasting change flows from thinking of all the good you will do yourself and others by loving rather than beating yourself up over your failure to love. Thankfully, when we try to love even just a little, God helps us grow our love. Over the summer we explored how a little faith, a little love, is magnified by God. It grows into the magnificent and multiplies beyond our grandest dreams.

Another Sunday we learned how God will transform us from a flawed person to the likeness of Jesus through our thoughts and through the renewing of our minds.

We are to put on the armor of love. Whether you are a morning person or despise the wake up alarm, we are to intentionally choose love as our first thought. Often we cannot muster up love as our first waking thought, so we need to seek love from God. C. S. Lewis said, “It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. And so on, all day. Standing back from all your natural fussings and frettings; coming in out of the wind.”

Put on the armor of love with good habits. I will confess that I tend to be a grumpy, control freak, perfectionist who would enjoy living as a hermit in Alaska; so, I must choose to love.

I have discovered that prayer is a primary way that God enables me to love. I regularly do a breathing centering prayer where I imagine I am breathing in the love of God and breathing out all the unloving junk. Upon waking I try to think of two things. First a song by Audio Adrenaline that goes. “It's six A.M. I'm so tired. The alarm sounds. And the new day begins. Before I go. And disturb this peaceful moment I look to You. I want to say a prayer. Before my feet can hit the ground. Lord I give this day to You. I'm amazed how You forgive me. Yesterday seems so far behind. It's a brand new day. And every day's a new beginning. I look to You. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. And watch the day begin.” I strive to start my day with this melody which resonates with my centering prayer where I breathe in God's love. Together hopefully they enable my first thought to come from God, a thought of love. The second thing I do upon waking is worship God by being grateful for something or someone.

Find a morning routine that causes you to smile. Mother Teresa said, “Let us always meet each other with smile, for the smile is the beginning of love.”

Another way I put on the armor of love is with a visualization prayer. I imagine that I am backpacking up to this beautiful, pristine, mountain top lake. Jesus is with me. Sometimes Jesus is carrying my pack. At camp Jesus makes a fire and together we watch the sunset. I take a mental picture. Throughout the day when I sense my shining armor of love failing by the bombardment of darkness, I strive to reset my love by recalling the mental picture of Jesus and me.

My spiritual director, John Ackerman, encouraged me to put on the armor of love with the stop, look, and listen prayer: to pay attention to what God is doing in my life; to ask where is God in that; to discover what God is inviting me to do or be; to relax; and to connect with God in the unforced rhythms of grace.

I put on the armor of love by trying to avoid temptation. I am tempted to invest too much time into reading about and watching Badger and Packer football. I am tempted to get grumpy if they lose or irritated by what I perceive to be a bad call. I strive to limit myself to reading one football article a week. I DVR the games and watch them in an hour, so I do not get wound up. I think of the times when I was a referee, how hard it is to get a call right, how rarely does one call affect the outcome of a game. Some weeks I avoid watching football all together for it rarely makes me a more loving person.

I put on the armor of love by bicycling, walking the church labyrinth, and protecting my alone time. I am extremely introverted – meaning I am rejuvenated by alone time. I communicate best when I have had alone time to think about the matter. My bike rides begin by letting go of all the stupid things I say when I have been surprised by a comment. Letting go of my frustrations for not doing more, not communicating clearly, and not remaining non-anxious. My shortest bike ride is usually 22 miles, 90 minutes, because I have a lot of mistakes to let go. After I have sweated them out, then I let in ways in which I can be more loving.

I put on the armor of love by avoiding activities or groups that hinder my love. I am extremely competitive; so if an activity regularly leaves me frustrated rather than being fun, then I need to give it a break

for a while. I am a perfectionist; so if an activity leads to my obsessing over getting it just right, then I need to take a break. Sometimes I have been invited to groups who spend most of their time complaining, talking about how others should live, and focusing on the negative. I try to be a part of groups who are exploring how we can be more loving and are building others up in love.

Love is a choice. Love is a gift of God. Scripture proclaims. **1 John 4:19 NRSV “We love because God first loved us.”** First and foremost we enable our self to love through worship, through loving God. Worship as a community on Sundays. Worship the moment you awake. Worship throughout the day through prayer. Worship is abiding in God. Scripture proclaims. **1 John 4:16 “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”** I believe that the words love and God are interchangeable. Love is God and those who abide in God, abide in love and love abides in them.

Love is a choice. Love is being intentional about your thoughts replacing bad thoughts with loving thoughts, replacing bad habits with good habits, replacing tempting activities with activities that nurture your love.

Love is a choice. Love is taking care of yourself, eating healthy food, exercising, getting enough sleep, making time for rest, family, and friends. Love is letting go of your mistakes and celebrating your goodness.

Love is a choice. Love requires action. Love is serving. Loving is sharing. Love is generously giving. Right now our family of faith is looking for people to put love into action by serving as a Sunday school teacher, landscape care, choir, ringer, praise band, Wednesday children’s leader, buildings and grounds committee, giving to the food shelf, being involved in a mission.

Truly living in love is all encompassing. Some believe that the highest goal in life is to expand one’s love. A person can strive to love and be loved all their life; yet, even the most loving and loved person is able to just experience a snippet of God’s love. Some believe loving and being loved is heaven that hell is whenever we fail to love or feel unloved.

Love is a choice. Love is knowing Christ and showing Christ. Love is striving to live like Christ. **Romans 13:8-14 (MSG) “Don’t run up debts, except for the huge debt of love you owe each other. When you love others, you complete what the law has been after all along. The law code—don’t sleep with another person’s spouse, don’t take someone’s life, don’t take what isn’t yours, don’t always be wanting what you don’t have, and any other “don’t” you can think of—finally adds up to this: Love other people as well as you do yourself. You can’t go wrong when you love others. When you add up everything in the law code, the sum total is love. But make sure that you don’t get so absorbed and exhausted in taking care of all your day-by-day obligations that you lose track of the time and doze off, oblivious to God. The night is about over, dawn is about to break. Be up and awake to what God is doing! God is putting the finishing touches on the salvation work God began when we first believed. We can’t afford to waste a minute, must not squander these precious daylight hours in frivolity and indulgence, in sleeping around and dissipation, in bickering and grabbing everything in sight. Get out of bed and get dressed! Don’t loiter and linger, waiting until the very last minute. Dress yourselves in Christ, and be up and about!”**

Amen