

“Does Love Win?”

A Sermon preached for
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If you were to ask me the singular most important thing that Jesus taught his followers, I would say it was his response to the question “what is the greatest commandment?” His response was: To love the Lord your God, with all your heart, soul, and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself. It is the message of love that comes to us in so many of Jesus teachings: God IS love; Love never fails; Love your neighbor; Love your enemy. Love endures forever. And the greatest of these is Love. In this message, Jesus makes a claim that the Old Law has gone away, and he brings a new law: the law of Love

This morning’s scripture speaks of this love, and it is one of the most beloved, memorized, and spoken verses of the entire Bible. It’s been lifted up at every wedding I’ve ever attended. It is THE Love scripture. It is 1 Corinthians 13, where Paul flushes out Jesus’ concept of love for the people of Corinth. It’s great that we get to study this scripture today, because it allows us some time to unpack it, an opportunity we don’t get when we hear it at weddings. I believe it there are actually three important parts or themes to this verse.

The first part is what Love **is not**. Here Paul emphasizes the idea that this is the new Commandment and it trumps the old idea of living by the Law:

(1 Corinthians 1:1-3)

¹If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

The second part gets into what Love **is**. It defines the new commandment that we are to live by. It touches on the new standard that we should emulate, and it tells of the ultimate nature of Divine Love.

(1 Corinthians 1: 4-8)

⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸Love never ends.

Part three, then, illustrates what this Love does to us. It **completes us**. It takes us from only knowing a part to knowing the whole. And in this part, we are told how we should respond:

(1 Corinthians 13: 8-13)

But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

This is perhaps the hard part of the gospel. That living by the law was only part of the story. Living by the law was like knowing God from looking through the mirror. It was a naïve form of faith. But when Jesus brings the message of Love, it completes the story. Love comes down, and It causes us to live a different way. When living by the law comes to an end, faith, hope, and love still remain. That is the full picture, the mature life. The book of Romans describes it this way: “the law of the spirit of Christ sets you free from the law of sin and death”.

This was a radical message in Jesus time, when people lived by a strict adherence to the law as defined by the Jewish temple. And so people rejected him for it. They didn't necessarily want to hear this new message.

(Luke 4:21-30)

²¹Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" ²³He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" ²⁴And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. ²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

We hear this scripture, and we wonder how could anyone reject Jesus and his message of Love? Especially in his own town, how could they reject him? Yet throughout history there is a continuation of this rejection over and over. And, if we are honest, we can still see Christians today rejecting this radical message of Love. If we are really, really honest, we can claim that there are parts that even we reject, aren't there? We love the sentiment, but we are scared of the radical implications. We like to quote it when we are telling our spouse how to treat us, or reminding our kids what a tough job parenting is. We love the use the verse to talk about what good Christians we are by loving our neighbors. But when it comes to thinking about an eternal, unconditional love for all of humanity by an ever present God, well, we are not so sure are we?

This Christmas season the movie theatres sang the message of God's love, when the long awaited movie version of Les Miserables finally hit the theatre circuit. We love Les Mis, don't we? The movie, the Broadway show, and the book. It is everything we want to hear about God's grace, mercy, and love. We root for Jean Valljean and for all on the side of forgiveness. We hold it up as a perfect example of God's love in the world. But did you know? In 1850, Tsar Nicolas banned the book. He wasn't the only one. Private schools in Philadelphia banned it for its political message of social change and subversion of institutions of power. In 1864, the Vatican placed it on the list of books forbidden to believers and it stayed on that list until 1959. Hugo was rejected as a prophet of God's love. For Hugo and the Vatican, the radical message of love was a threat to social and legal systems of oppression. Again, we love the sentiment, but the implications of what that means for society scares us.

In 2011, Rob Bell, an associate pastor of the emergent Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids Michigan wrote a book, called Love Wins. The main themes of the book revolve around these same ideas of radical love that Jesus teaches. His basic premise is that if Love indeed endures forever, and sin and death are redeemable in time, then ultimately "Love Wins". It is a sentiment that we love to hear. But then his message gets radical. He starts to think about what eternity looks like when Love never fails, but sin and death are forgivable and forgiven in time. He mused that perhaps Hell wasn't a place in eternity, but perhaps hell was something found in our own hearts. Here is one of the more controversial quotes from the book, where he is speaking about Jesus radical message of love:

"As obvious as it is, then, Jesus is bigger than any one religion.

He didn't come to start a new religion, and he continually disrupted whatever conventions or systems or establishments that existed in his day. He will always transcend whatever cages and labels are created to contain him, especially the one called 'Christianity'."

— Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*

Some people love Rob Bell. They think his inclusive message resonates with the many people who have been marginalized or wounded by more conservative churches and

they applaud him for reaching out to these seekers. They say he is putting the primary message of Jesus above the constructs of the Church doctrine. Others, many more conservative Christians, are scared by the implications of his radical message. Some have started calling him a heretic; a false prophet. They used Bible verses to condemn him. I don't agree with every word of Rob Bell, but I also don't think he is a heretic. I am intrigued at his message of radical love, and I am intrigued at those who think they can judge him as a false prophet (or that they can judge anyone else for that matter).

Rob Bell is at the very least polarizing – everyone seems to either love him or hate him, but his interpretations of scripture certainly do divide people around ideologies. Ultimately, he resigned as the pastor of the church. Some say it is because of the scandal of the book; others say it was just time for him to leave. During the time when the book's controversy was at its greatest, Mars Hill lost somewhere in the range of 2,000 to 3,000 members though. So even in 2011, the prophet bringing a message of Jesus' love is rejected in his own community. They loved the sentiment, but they got scared when he started thinking through what it looks like when eternity has this unending love available to all of humanity.

Today we love Les Mis – because that is the warm fuzzy sentiment God's grace and the power of love. We have a much harder time with Rob Bell – he starts talking about the radical implications for eternity, and suddenly we are questioning his interpretations. But we can't love Les Mis and hate Rob Bell, can we? They are interpretations of the same message of radical love that Jesus himself was rejected for trying to teach.

Jesus was rejected by his own town because of his radical message of love. Paul was imprisoned by the Romans for sharing that radically inclusive message. Victor Hugo was rejected by the Vatican for his version of the message of Jesus' love and redemption. Even today, there is an entire segment of Christianity who is rejecting Rob Bell's interpretation of the radical implications of the message of Love that Jesus brings. All these prophets were rejected in their own town, which begs the question, whose messages are we rejecting?

I believe we reject the message in part because we still want to cling to this idea that we somehow earned this love. And I believe we reject those prophets because they remind us that there is nothing we can do to deserve what God is giving. We do this because we want to be good, we want to be right. We want to win. We want to have it both ways, we want to be able to claim God's unconditional love for ourselves, but we also want to be able to prove that we deserved it. We want to show how selfless and Christ-like we are by giving love unconditionally, but we also want to reserve the right to judge who gets to receive God's love.

So the question for you today is this: if love hopes for all things, believes all things, endures all things, and if Love endures forever, then do we still need to fall back on the Old Law that tells us this Love is only for a chosen group, and that we need to work to earn this Love? Are you still trying to prove that you deserve it? Are you still working to earn it? Or can you start to lean into the radical implications of what this love means?

In your life? In the world? What about for eternity? I want to release you from thinking that this is a “yes” or a “no” answer. It is not. As you live into this question, think of it as being somewhere on a continuum spectrum. How far along this spectrum will Love take you? Is Rob Bell a heretic for pushing us to think about an eternity filled with unending love for ALL humanity? Will you reject Paul as the prophet who claims that this love is for all people, Jew or Gentile? Is Jesus message of radical love the way? Is it the only way? If that is true then why did his own people reject him? These are tough questions and there are no easy answers, but I can assure you this. Wherever you land on this continuum, God will meet you there, with an unconditional love that is yours for the taking. And then you will know fully, even as you have been fully known. When all else falls away, faith, hope, and love will remain. And the greatest of these is love. Do you believe that? Does Love win?