

Love

SCOTT HOEZEE

Turn on your car radio, pick a station – any station – and the odds are good that you will hear a song about love within minutes, if not immediately; but open the newspaper, go to CNN.com or your favorite online news site, you will probably have to search a while to find a story about people being loving to each other. So we believe we need love, we want love, we sing about and think about love, but how much of love is really reflected in our culture? Even when we do see it is that the same love the Bible talks about? Let's talk about that virtue of love next on *Groundwork*.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we have been talking in this most recent series of broadcasts about virtue – Christian virtue – and particularly the big three: Faith, hope, and love; and today we are up to the final one: Love. So, we are going to wonder a little bit; can we live without love, or is it true, especially for Christians, that love is kind of like oxygen. Would we die without it?

DAVE BAST

I kind of think so; and certainly the songs that you referenced in the open of the program would seem to indicate that: All you need is love.

SCOTT HOEZEE

What the world needs now is love, sweet love.

DAVE BAST

Love makes the world go round.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In fact, it is interesting... I think that somehow if you could make every song that has something or other to do with love just disappear from the world, I don't think there would be a lot of music left. Most iPods would probably get pretty empty and the iTunes store would empty out because it is apparently what we think about and long for because we sure sing about it a lot. In fact, a friend of mine recently noted that probably the biggest band – the musical group – in the world for the last 25 or 30 years is U2, and if you made all of their songs about love disappear, there would not be anything left.

DAVE BAST

Nothing; no playlist.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Including one of their most famous songs, where they are really talking about God and love: I still have not found what I am looking for; and that, I think, resonates with a lot of people. They are looking for love; and as we will say today, that is ultimately also going to be looking for God.

DAVE BAST

I think people are on the right track with that feeling. There is no question in my mind that it is the most important thing in the world. It is the most important thing to find in life. My older brother Bob was a pastor. He died a number of years ago of cancer, and in the last sermon that he was able to preach he said the thing that he had learned... you know, he knew it before, but that he had really internalized and come to be convinced of through his illness was that nothing in the world mattered except relationships...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and love.

DAVE BAST

Relationships, yes, based on love – your relationship with God and your relationship with the people who you care about in your life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right; and you know, C. S. Lewis in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which many of us perhaps grew up reading and may be familiar with *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, where the lion, Aslan, who is kind of the Christ figure, sacrifices himself and ends up defeating the enemy – the White Witch. Lewis refers to that as the deep magic of the cosmos; that love is what ultimately will undo evil. I was reminded of that more recently with the Harry Potter series, and there, too, love is the key to everything, and you know, one character even says to Harry at one point: Don't pity the dead, Harry. Pity the living; pity those who live without love. So there, too, love is the secret; love is the key to all of life.

DAVE BAST

Yes, but, you know, really, what is it? Because we talk like that: Deep magic and secret and key; but we kind of throw the word around, too. You know, I love pizza; I love my kids; I love God; I love the Detroit Tigers. I mean, I love all those things, but in the same way? Does the word really have meaning?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; we probably do overuse it, that is for sure. We can turn on a dime, right? You go to church and you sing, I love Jesus, and more love to thee, O God; and in the narthex you talk about how you loved last night's basketball game. So, we use the word a little loosey-goosey, but deep, deep down, I think we know that love – faith, hope, and love – and the greatest one is love, as we will say in a minute – I think we know that the Church cannot live without love; and that is something we are going to want to explore.

DAVE BAST

So we will look at the famous passage, 1 Corinthians 13, and we will dig down to find out exactly what is the New Testament understanding of love – the real love – using the word in its fullest and deepest sense; and we will come back to that after a short break.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we are talking about the last virtue in this series, the virtue of love; and as we said earlier, where we are going to go in the New Testament today is mostly going to be 1 Corinthians 13, which tells us that this is the greatest of all Christian virtues because this is the only one that will keep on going even when we are

finished with the need for faith and hope.

DAVE BAST

That is how the chapter ends, building up to that famous climax: Now these three, faith, hope, and love remain – or abide – but the greatest of these is love; and from that we ask, well, why is it the greatest? One reason is because someday faith will turn into sight and hope will become experience. You don't need to hope when you have what you are hoping for.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; you might hope to get a new car when you graduate from college, but once you've got the car, no more need to hope; you've got it. So, that is the remarkable thing about 1 Corinthians 13. Paul says: Everything we do in the Church, everything we know will disappear one day. Some day we won't need preaching. I am not sure what I am going to do, but we won't need sermons and we won't need prophecy and we won't need this, and we won't even need faith and hope, but we are still going to need love, and the question is: Why? Why is that the one that goes on?

DAVE BAST

So let's listen to 1 Corinthians 13, verses 1 through 3: ¹If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not 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 have not love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

So there it is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, a series of remarkable claims, and there is really only one explanation, and that is, at some level love is, indeed, the core of the universe. It is really, finally, not an emotion. It is more than a feeling; it is a reality.

DAVE BAST

It is important, I think, to remember here to whom he is speaking – to whom Paul is writing these words – because sometimes we will read this chapter, and it goes on: Love is kind, love is patient, love is not rude, it does not envy, it is not boastful; love hopes all things, believes all things, endures all things... and then, the greatest is love; but we often read this chapter in the context of a wedding. I know you have probably done a lot of weddings, I have done a lot of weddings. You have probably heard it ad nauseum almost. But this is not written for a wedding; this is written to a really fractious, crazy group of Christians in the city of Corinth.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Unfortunately, we have taken 1 Corinthians 13 and we have put it on counted cross-stitch wall hangings and we have reserved it for weddings; and so, we have sort of carved it out of the longer letter of 1 Corinthians; but you cannot do that, and most of 1 Corinthians is Paul going through the list of conflicts in Corinth. These people were tearing each other's eyes out over who had the greatest gift, and they were being rude to each other by not waiting for each other at the Lord's Supper even. The rich would eat all the food, and so, this place was an unholy mess.

DAVE BAST

Oh, they were sexually immoral. He addresses that at length, some of the problems.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, I mean, name a problem and they had it, and they had sent Paul a long list and he is answering that in this letter. They are almost an embarrassment in the Church of Jesus Christ – they are almost an embarrassment; but at the end of the day, Paul says: Let's cut through all your problems; your problem is you do not have love; and where Paul theologically goes with that and what grounds that really is: Because you don't have love, you don't have enough God among you because God is love.

DAVE BAST

And notice how he starts out by addressing in the more immediate context of Chapters 12 and 14, their over-emphasis almost, their being overly impressed with spectacular spiritual power and spiritual gifts; and so he begins in these opening verses by saying: Look, you can have all the gifts in the world, including the power to work miracles and faith so great you can move mountains... You think of Jesus' words in the Gospel... And if you don't have love, let me tell you what you've got; you've got nothing, you've gained nothing; you are nothing; you have nothing; forget it. Zilch, zero!

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are like a feather floating on the wind. There is nothing to you; there is no substance to you; and again, it is because God is love. So, what the New Testament makes clear, and we will have a couple other verses later as well from 1 John, the New Testament makes it clear that love... Again, it is not a feeling or an emotion; it is as real as gravity; it is as solid as a granite mountain because it is rooted in God and it is rooted particularly in our understanding of the Trinity – of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – that God is and always has been, within God's own being, a community of love; and that is the core of the doctrine of the Trinity.

DAVE BAST

So now we are going all theological here, but sorry, we have to.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right.

DAVE BAST

This is not an abstract sort of esoteric Christian theological theory spun out of the mists and like arguing about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. We have need for knowing and believing these core doctrines about God, including the doctrine of the Trinity. Now, that is not to say we are going to understand it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No.

DAVE BAST

Because it is a deep mystery; but what it means is when we say God is love, it is not gas; it is not a pious platitude; it is not just sort of this vague, Oh God has warm fuzzies toward everyone and everything. What we mean is that God in his very being is relational.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. One of the things that those who don't believe in a triune God – other religions – one of the things they have accused Christians of is that Christians don't know how to count. We keep going: One, two, three, and still end up with one. One plus one plus one equals one. We still have one God that we worship; so, if there are three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, what keeps them from being three different gods? And one of the traditional answers – not the only one – but one of the traditional answers is love. They are so in love with each other – they serve each other – they honor each other – they are constantly moving toward one another in great love, and that keeps the unity of God. That is why it is just one God, and it is love.

DAVE BAST

This is so incredibly practical for us to know and believe this, because what it means first and foremost is that God did not have to create a world or a universe or fill it with people in order to have someone to love. He does not create out of any need. He is complete and absolutely perfect in himself, and he has plenty of love to go around.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, that is why I like... We in the Western world – in Europe and the United States and Canada and so forth – we in the Western world have often pictured the Trinity as a triangle; and it works, right? Three sides, one shape, but our Eastern Orthodox sisters and brothers have, of all things, always depicted the Trinity with a circle; and a lot of us in the West say: Where is three in a circle? But they want to use a circle because what they are saying is: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are constantly running after each other and chasing each other to serve each other and love each other; and within that unity of God, there is this endless circle of love that has existed before creation from all eternity. That is just who God is.

DAVE BAST

So when we talk about love being real and being a force, we mean it is real in the same way that God is real and for the same reason, because it is at the center of his being, and is, therefore, kind of the ground of everything.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and that is why Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 says: It does not matter who you are or what you do; if you don't have love, you don't have substance because you don't have... you are not living into who God made you to be, and that makes you insubstantial – it makes you fluffy, light, you will just blow away; no matter who you are, you have to have God; and I think how that works out and what that means in practice is maybe what we can talk about after we come back from a short break.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Hi. Welcome back to *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

So, Scott, we have just been talking about love as being real. It is the force that binds God together: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is the force that underlies the creation, and it is what we need to strive for as Christians. I mean, ultimately virtue is Christ-likeness – it is being like God – it is becoming like God; and that boils it down to love.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it all comes from faith, which as we said, is the great gift that unleashes all the gifts, and faith leads to hope, as we talked about in the previous program, and it all leads to love because all of it is reconnecting us to the image of God in which we were made and the image that has been renewed in Jesus Christ; and so, the more we look like Jesus, the more we are going to look like love, because God is love.

DAVE BAST

And, let's be clear, that love is not just a feeling; love is a force, it is a power, it is a way of living, it is a way of acting, as Paul makes clear here in the middle of 1 Corinthians 13 when he unpacks all these descriptives of love, which are all ways of behaving – ways of acting; and that makes sense of some of the puzzling things that Jesus said, like love your enemies. It does not mean we have to like them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Correct, yes, yes; but what it does mean is we have a whole new way of looking at each other; and when you look at another person in love – and here is what some of the Christians in Corinth weren't doing because they were distracted by all kinds of things – but when you look at another person in love, you see God and God's image in that person, and that means: I want you to thrive; I want you to flourish; I want you to be well in every possible way; and I want to serve you to help make that happen.

DAVE BAST

St. Augustine once said about the difference between God's love, the word for which, of course, in the New Testament is the famous *agape*...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Agape, yes.

DAVE BAST

Between that and ordinary human love, the kind of love the pop songs sing about is that God's love creates its object, and in human love, the object creates the love. In other words, we tend to love in a human level what is lovely – what attracts us – what makes us happy. God does it the other way around. He takes something that is unattractive maybe in itself and he makes it beautiful by loving it, and we are to do the same.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are to recognize that truth when we meet others. They already bear the fingerprints of God. The fingerprints of God are all over every person we meet; and ultimately, as C. S. – again, we keep coming back to C. S. Lewis – but as C. S. Lewis also pointed out: If we really knew who one another was – if we really could see our neighbor as God made that person in love to be – if we could really see what our neighbor will look like in heaven, if you will, in the kingdom of God, we would be so amazed.

DAVE BAST

Yes, maybe what love will turn them into.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, what the love of Jesus will do... We would be so amazed at what our neighbor looks like that we might be tempted to worship them, but we certainly would be led to serve them in *agape* – in a self-sacrificing love – which Jesus showed us how to do.

DAVE BAST

I have sometimes used an analogy... It is like the difference between a garden and an alpine meadow. They are both pieces of ground filled with flowers, but in the one case, we love the meadow because it is beautiful; in the other case, the garden is beautiful because somebody has loved it and tended it and tilled it and turned it into what this land could be – what it could look like.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, indeed; of course, though, if every human being we met looked like a beautiful flower, it would be a lot easier to love them, and if it were really easy to spy the image of God in every person we meet, it would be easy to love them, but sometimes it is a little hard to see, and that is when love becomes, indeed, our calling – when it is undeserved; sometimes even when it is rejected; sometimes when people are, well, let's admit, some people are just not very lovely.

DAVE BAST

Yes, hard to love. Well, but you know, God said: Love your neighbor. That comes from Leviticus and Jesus repeated it in the Gospel as being the fulfillment of the Law: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. It is interesting because I think it was G. K. Chesterton who said: The reason we are commanded to love our neighbor is because we pick our friends, but God picks our neighbors.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and God picks our sisters and brothers in the congregation, too.

DAVE BAST

Exactly, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that was the thing in Corinth. You do not get to pick who your family members in Christ are. God calls all kinds of people and he puts you into a church. You are not going to like everybody, you are not going to get along with everybody, but you are called to love everybody because they are your sister, they are your brother; they are the chip off the divine block. That is a piece of God in your midst, same as you are. So, love does not make things easy, but it does make life full of God. It helps us to see each other in a new way, which is what Paul wants to do in 1 Corinthians 13 – see each other as worthy targets of all the love you can muster because that is how God sees you, and you are not always that lovable to God either, by the way.

DAVE BAST

Exactly. It strikes me that the opposite of love is not necessarily hate. A lot of times the opposite of love is just apathy. It is just not bothering – it is not caring; and that is what maybe we can overcome with the power that comes through the Holy Spirit to love the way Jesus loved – the way God loves.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, so if it is true that God, within the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – are serving each other because they want to see one another thrive and flourish – and if that is what we are called to do, then right, apathy is the opposite; and it is all over the place today: I am going to look out for good old number one. What is that to me? Live and let live. I mind my own business. I could not care less. Those are apathetic attitudes, which are the opposite of the love that says: I see the image of God in you and so I want you to thrive. Again, that can involve hard work, especially in certain cases, but to have that apathetic shrug of the shoulders: I don't care what happens to you, I am just going to look out for myself. That means I am failing to see God in you, and that is profoundly unloving.

DAVE BAST

And I want to bring this back to the context of the congregation. Most of our listeners, I think, are members of a local body – of a congregation; and that can very often be the hardest place, we have seen in reference to Corinth. You mentioned 1 John earlier in the program, and here is a classic statement from 1 John 3:11: This is the message you have heard from the beginning, we should love one another. He is talking to the Christian congregation here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and he is reminding us... You know, for John, *the beginning* is always code for creation – for Genesis 1: In the beginning; and so John does that in John 1 – his Gospel: In the beginning was the word... And here in his epistle – his letter – he says: This is the message you have heard from the beginning, love one another. Because as you hinted at earlier, Dave, the whole creation came from love. God did not need to make a world, but there was so much love inside God, he said: I am going to share it with the whole universe of beings; because God's love could not be contained. So we were created in love; we have been saved by love: For God so loved the world... And love is going to endure. That is the only one of the virtues that will go on when the new creation comes. Our whole existence is framed by love.

DAVE BAST

And imagine what your church would look like if everybody devoted themselves to this pursuit.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, I think it would look like the kingdom of God.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for listening to *Groundwork* again today; and don't forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what

you have been hearing, and suggest topics or passages you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/love>

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