



“What Should We Do?”

Acts 2:36-3:10; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (NRSV)

Jesus has called us to action. Make disciples, feed the hungry, witness to the Good News, and clothe the naked. We are to act, in the name of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is love.

On the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came with great power upon the disciples gathered in Jerusalem. They each rose to proclaim the Good News and each person heard it in their own language. Peter then rose to address the gathered crowd and told them that, indeed, God’s Messiah had come, the Day of the Lord had arrived, and, yes, Jesus was their crucified Lord.

When Peter finished speaking, many in the crowd asked him what they should do. Peter’s reply was direct: repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. Then, they too would receive the Holy Spirit. Nearly three thousand people accepted Peter’s testimony and were baptized into the body of Christ. But how much could they have really understood about forgiveness and baptism?

We too often fail to grasp the full sense of our sins being forgiven. Perhaps we think of a slate being wiped clean or a ledger erased. But the Greek word for forgiveness is *aphesis*, literally meaning “release.” The word captures the liberating essence of being forgiven. We are freed from our bondage to sin and death. We are freed from the weight of past sins and mistakes. We are made ready to participate fully in the work of Christ’s body. The Holy Spirit is the empowering presence of God, who frees us so that we can build for the kingdom of God.

Why can’t we love as we should? For the apostle Paul, one explanation¹ is that we are enslaved to powers that hold us captive (see Galatians 4:8); slavery to these powers is fundamental to the human condition. It is this slavery that explains why we and our world are so messed up. We are slaves to Sin, which Paul speaks of as a cosmic power. We are unable to do the simple acts of loving God and loving neighbor each day and in every way.

So by forgiving our sins, Jesus Christ has released us, freed us to new life. But what sort of life? How does God hope we will use our God-given liberty? To put a slight twist on it, we are free to do whatever we want, but only so long as our wants are God’s wants. And what does God want? Simple: love God and love neighbor. That’s what God wanted from the ancient Israelites. That’s what Jesus came to preach and to live out in his willingness to lay down his life for us. That’s what God does and that’s what God wants. As Paul puts it, in Peterson’s rendering, “Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that’s how freedom grows. For everything we know about God’s Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself.”

The Bible and love

In our culture, “love” has become a word that is used so freely, to express so many different ideas and feelings, that it has become almost useless. I “love” God, I “love” my family, I “love” my dog, I “love” peanut butter (ok, I do!). Because we use the word in so many ways, we need to begin with a brief look at the biblical use of the word “love.”

In the Old Testament, our love for God is focused on the delight and joy we find in God. Our love for God is our seeking after God himself. Our love for God is bound up with our obedience. Those who love God are those who keep his commandments (Deut 5:10), serve him, and walk in his ways (Deut 10:12). At the same time, our love for God is to be an internal matter, an affair of the heart (Jeremiah 31:33). Much more than simply affection for God or others, love encompasses the whole person – our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

God’s love is focused on his people, as a community, more than on any specific individual. God’s love for his people is manifested in his relentless pursuit of Israel despite their endless abandonment of him and the covenant. The story of Hosea gives concrete expression to God’s unfathomable, incomprehensible love for the people he has chosen. God instructs Hosea that he is to love and marry a prostitute, Gomer, and continue loving her, no matter what she does to shame and dishonor him. God loves Israel and Hosea is to love Gomer – regardless.

In the New Testament, Jesus builds on the Old Testament understanding of love but makes it completely unconditional. Our love for God represents total commitment and trust. Our love for neighbor is extended to all humanity and cannot be separated from our caring for the marginalized in our society. Jesus even makes clear that our love for neighbor is extended to our enemies – all are included!

Yes, love really is a verb

This sermon series is a call to action – to live out our love of others in substantial and concrete ways. In the writing of this study, I came across a passage from Dr. Sarah Ruden that I decided to share with you. Ruden is not a New Testament scholar, but a classicist, having made her academic career in the translation of major Greek and Latin works from the ancient world, such as the *Aeneid*. She set out to read Paul in the context of his first-century Greco-Roman language and culture. Her observations are both original and fascinating. This excerpt from her book is a bit long, but very worthwhile.²

¹ This is not the only explanation we find in Paul, but it is key to understanding what he means by slavery and freedom.

² 2 Ruden, Sarah (2010-02-10). *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time* (Kindle Locations 2821-2836). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

What is agape [love], then? Paul begins to answer this, with several sharp shifts in focus.

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

Paul has been speaking in the first person, but now moves to the third. Love is something outside himself, but really more like a someone, since it does so many things and has so many human characteristics. Before, we were reading of religion, but most of the way through this present list, we find nothing that can apply directly to a relationship with God, only to relationships with other human beings— unless we can somehow imagine that God needs kindness or patience. Only at the end do more religious words come back: rejoicing in the truth, believing, hoping. But the repeated “all things” (or “everything”) in verse 7 suggests that the goal is still to deal with the everyday world in an exemplary way. These humble virtues are what absolutely never come to an end. They outlast any worship, wisdom, or inspiration.

The break in style in the Greek at the beginning of this section is startling. I made a long search for parallels to this new style, and I ended up feeling like a pedantic moron for missing the whole point: these words are not supposed to be like anything else.

It’s more or less a necessity of our language that the standard translations here contain a lot of adjectives. But the Greek is extreme in not containing a single one. Instead we have a mass of verbs, things love does and doesn’t do. This is the ultimate authority for the saying “Love is a verb.”

Since the wording is so simple, I can translate this piece fairly literally without creating nonsense. I am also going to take out spaces between the words, punctuation, and the distinction between capital and small letters— none of these would have appeared in the original ancient manuscript. Below is an English version of what Paul’s readers saw on the page. To get a sense of what it sounded like when read aloud (a very common practice everywhere, but doubtless more common in the Christian churches, where many members were illiterate), read three times as fast as you would normally, in the typical manner of a Mediterranean language. This will produce something closer to the original machine gun of verbs:

THELOVEENDURES LONGACTSKINDLYTHELOVENOTACTSJEALOUSLYNOTACTSBR
UTALLYNOTBOASTSNOTGETSFULLOFITSELFNOTDISGRACESITSELFNOTSEEKSW
HATISITSONNOTGETSIRRITATEDNOTRECKONSUPTHEEVILNOTREJOICESINTH
EINJUSTICEBUTREJOICESTOGETHERINTHETRUTHENDURESEVERYTHINGBELIEV
ESEVERYTHINGHOPESEVERYTHINGENDURESEVERYTHINGTHELOVENEVERFALLS

So manically verb-centered is the passage that Paul takes two adjectives and creates a one-word verb from each (neither verb being attested previously in Greek); and he creates yet another verb, in Greek a one-word metaphor:

1. “[is] kind” (verb: “kinds”)
2. “[is] boastful” (verb: “boastfuls”)
3. “[is] arrogant” (verb: “inflates-like-a-bellows”)

If we take the meaning from the form, we could say that he is preaching, “You know the right ways to feel? Turn those feelings into acts and perform those acts, ceaselessly. You know the wrong ways to feel? Don’t, ever, perform the acts that spring from them.”

The Spirit and the believers go to work

In keeping with such love, after the day of Pentecost the community of disciples went to work. They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles. They shared with one all that they had; no one went without. They broke bread together, meaning they shared not only the Lord’s meal but also regular meals. They lived life together. They let everyone see God’s goodness in their joy and fellowship. The community grew as more and more people joined them. And they prayed . . . and they prayed.

All this is a brief portrait into the life of this first Christian community. But it can all seem a bit too cozy, like a club that more and more people want to join. They are inspired, their needs are met, and they have friends and fellowship. It is all good, but it is all very inwardly focused. Our churches can be the same. Once you are in, it is awesome. But it is very easy to be satisfied with this life lived together. Perhaps that is why Luke goes from the portrait of communal life to an act of mercy.

Peter and John are headed to the temple to join the others for 3:00 prayers when a crippled man spots them and asks for a handout. Such alms were the only thing that stood between such a handicapped man and devastation. Peter has no money with him, so he gives the man far more than money could buy. In the name of Jesus, Peter commands the man to rise . . . and he did. Jesus had liberated him from his disability; the lame had been made to walk. Such is the kingdom of God.

Action – inwardly and outwardly. That is the life of the church. As we begin the work we’ve dubbed “Spark Tank,” the truth is that we are doing no more than God expects us to do. We have been forgiven, liberated, for a reason. It can never be simply “freedom from.” Rather, our liberation from sin and death is a “freedom for.” For those who need our love, who need our help.