

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Four things we need to follow: Follow Love

Running away from things and running after things. These must be two of the most common ways to live! Some people spend their entire life running away. There are lots of things to run from. Some run away from responsibility, others from a terrible past. Some try to run away from their mistakes, others run from the police. Some people even run away from themselves, which seems doomed to failure! On the other hand, many people spend their whole lives in hot pursuit. They run after wealth or fame, women or men, power or pleasure. Some even pursue immortality. You might imagine that the apostle Paul would not advise Christians to spend their lives running away, or running in pursuit. In fact, in today's passage, he tells them to do both! Let's read 1 Timothy 6:10-11: *"For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness."*

So there are some things that we must 'flee', or run away from, and others that we 'pursue', that is follow or run after, and the thing that we are thinking about following today is love. Now, there are always people ready to rip a sentence or phrase out of its biblical context and distort it to mean whatever they want to prove. Such a person might use the Apostle's command to 'pursue love' as a way to justify living immorally or abandoning a spouse to follow a 'new love' that has attracted them. But the command to pursue love doesn't stand by itself; it comes after the command to pursue righteousness, godliness and faith, and before the command to pursue patience and gentleness.

The six things in the list are not a menu that we can select our choices from, as though I might select love and gentleness and you are free to choose faith and patience. The six stand together and constrain each other, so that, for example, the faith has to be a godly faith, and the love must be righteous, godly, faithful, patient and gentle! That sounds like quite a high order of love; so we will spend the rest of our time thinking about what such a love might look like and how we might practice and perfect it.

The title today is 'follow love' and that would tend to suggest following along behind. Perhaps we might think about following in somebody's footsteps and that might lead us to think about following in the footsteps of Christ, Who loved so freely and so strongly. That is not a bad way to think, but I don't believe it is quite the idea in this verse. I read the New King James Version which translates it as 'pursue love', which gives us much more of the idea of chasing after something in a determined way. Dogs pursue cats. Police pursue burglars. There is a sense of urgency and vigour implied that chimes well with the mental image Paul seems to be presenting to us. Flee from some things: don't just turn away, but run off in the other direction. Pursue other things: don't just drift along behind them, give chase purposefully.

So how exactly do we pursue love? Who are we to love, how are we to love them and is it possible to increase that love and, if so, how?

Who are we to love?

I'm going to start with who it is that we are meant to love. The possibilities seem to be God, other believers, non-believers, or some combination of those three. The simple fact is that neither the verse, nor the immediate context, spell out clearly who the love is to be directed towards, so it is probably best to make the application as wide as possible, and suggest all three. However, to avoid spreading our time too thinly this morning, I am going to speak very briefly about love for God and then focus on the other two. Love for God is very natural for a new believer. Such a person has just understood for the first time that God loves them as an individual. They have believed that Jesus, God's Son, has died for them to take the punishment for their sins and make them suitable for heaven. They have learned that God Himself is Love, and that He has fixed the wonderful love that He has had for His Son for all eternity on them, in spite of all their sinfulness. Who would not love a God like that? We can certainly grow cold in our love for God, and even bitter and angry if we feel He has not given us what we think we deserved, but we only need to remind ourselves of what He has done for us to awaken again a deep love for the God who is the very definition of love.

Loving other people can be a whole lot trickier, which is why we will spend more time on that topic!

Is love for others natural?

The answer to that question is yes - and no! John, in his first epistle, is very clear that loving is a basic proof of new life in Christ. *"He who does not love does not know God, for God is love"*, 1 John 4:8. If we think that we can love God but not others, John continues, in 1 John 4:20, *"If someone says, 'I love God', and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?"* So, at some level, love for others is a basic evidence of new birth, and it is not possible for the life of Christ to be in somebody and for that person not to love others.

But that is not the whole story. When we became a believer our existing sinful nature did not immediately vanish, and that nature is not loving, gracious and self-sacrificing. Rather, it tends to indifference, malice and selfishness. Pursuing love goes firmly against the grain of my old nature, so, in that sense, it is not natural at all, which is why we sometimes find it very hard.

Is it possible to increase love?

The following two prayers of Paul, for two different New Testament churches, make it very plain that Paul believed it to be both possible and desirable for the love of Christians to increase. Philippians 1:9: *"And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more."* 1 Thessalonians 3:12: *"And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all."* So it is clearly both possible and desirable for our love for others to grow.

How do I do it?

The next question that arises is 'How do I do it?' On the face of it, requesting that we love others more is a bit like asking us to fly: it seems like a good idea, but we have no idea how to set about it and we don't seem to have the right apparatus! After all, other people are often not always very lovable! With somebody special, we might find that the more we get to know them, the more we learn to love them. We have already thought how that is bound to be the case with God. But with some people, the more you get to know them, the more unpleasant, or downright difficult, they turn out to be! We are naturally attracted to some people and naturally repelled by others, and then God expects us to love the repellent ones as well! Exactly how is that supposed to work?

Let me suggest some things that I find helpful. First of all, I should make plain that I am **not** claiming to excel in this area. I freely confess to finding this as hard as the next person, which is perhaps why all of my suggestions focus on understanding yourself more than understanding other people. Let me present six things you need to learn about yourself in order to love other people better.

1. Learn yourself - what you were, and what you still are

When we think about other people we often focus on their faults. When we think about ourselves we usually concentrate on our perceived good points, and find excuses for our failings. As believers we need to remind ourselves periodically of what we were before Christ saved us. Perhaps we lived respectably, but we were rebels against the God who had shown us nothing but love. At best we neglected God and His claims on our lives. At worst we were active rebels and enemies, refusing to obey or even acknowledge Him, and determined to go our own way.

Even since we have been saved, we are not what we ought to be. We might be able to recite a list of sins we have not committed, and then feel superior to those who have, but what about the much bigger list of the things we have done wrong? Which of us is free from the socially acceptable sins of pride, egotism and covetousness? To say nothing of the thoughts and feelings we would never want anybody to know about, or the frighteningly long periods of time when we have no thoughts of God whatever and are quietly happy to keep Him at a distance.

Once you have a better understanding of what you were, and are, you might be a little less inclined to condemn, and turn away from other people.

2. Learn what you deserve

It is a fundamental part of the gospel, that we deserved nothing but condemnation from a holy God. We preach that nobody, ourselves included, could ever hope to make themselves acceptable to God, even if they had all eternity to attempt it. We explain to others that it doesn't matter how they compare to other people, **everybody** is a million miles short of God's standard. I recently heard a preacher describe us as, being like students who all sit around discussing who got the best 'F', when we all needed an 'A'! We therefore accept, as a point of doctrine, that we deserve hell and judgement, but somehow we still keep secretly thinking of ourselves as rather more deserving than other people.

Once you face up to what you truly deserve you will be a little less put out when somebody fails to give you the respect, thanks or credit you think you are owed.

3. Learn what Christ did for you

There is no place like the cross for learning what love looks like! Whenever I begin to doubt that God really cares about me and my situation, I go back and consider again Christ's death for me. When I begin to think that I am somebody important, and rather a special case, I recall Jesus dying on a shameful cross and condemned by God for my sins.

When my wife's little nephew died recently, the pastor, describing what a loving little boy Sam was, said that Sam could love others because he knew what it was to be loved unconditionally by his parents. He could give love freely because he knew what it was to receive love freely. There never was, or will be, any freely given love greater than that seen at the cross. A deepening sense of that love for you will start to enable you to love others in a similar way.

4. Learn how little you deserved that!

We often struggle to love other people because they are not very lovable. In essence, we think they don't really deserve our love. That may even be true, but imagine what a world of trouble we would be in if God had refused to love us because we didn't deserve it! I've been a Christian since I was a young child and I am now in my fifties. I would like to think I have engaged in some useful work for the Lord during that time, and have always wished to live in a way that would honour and please Him, but I don't imagine for one second that I have begun to deserve God's gift of His Son.

When you begin to grasp how little you will ever deserve God's love, you can start to consider loving people who don't appear to deserve yours.

5. Learn how much Christ loves them, i.e. just the same as He loves you

Do you have a best friend? Somebody who may have many other friends, but you are special to them, and there is some kind of extra bond between you that means they will put you first if you ever need them to. Perhaps because Jesus is such a wonderful friend to us, we fall into the trap of thinking that He loves us in a way that is unique to us. It sometimes comes as a shock to be reminded that Jesus loves other people in **exactly** the same way He loves me! I don't want to spend time this morning distinguishing the different ways in which God loves believers and unbelievers; my simple point is that He loves all believers exactly the same amount.

When I was still an unbeliever, He loved me in exactly the same way He loves the unbeliever that I am struggling to love today. He currently loves me in exactly the same way He loves that difficult to live with, sharp-tongued person in my church.

When you wonder again at the incredible way Jesus loves you, and then consider that He loves the other people in your church just the same; maybe you will start loving them a bit more too.

6. Learn how much patience Christ has with you every single day

I don't like to think of myself as an impatient person, but my patience is definitely finite! Family and work colleagues can testify to the fact that, sooner or later, I will become irritated or angry and some behaviours are especially likely to induce that state quite quickly! I am perpetually amazed at the patience Christ shows to me. Given that He sees, not just all my outward faults and failings, but all the stuff hidden inside my heart and mind, and given that the same sins have existed for years, decades even, I find His loving patience nothing less than staggering.

We noted earlier, that the love we are meant to pursue is to be a patient love. I am reminded of the story Jesus told of two men with debts (Matthew 18:21-25). One was forgiven an unimaginably large debt by his master (Matthew 18:27), but subsequently refused to forgive a relatively trivial debt owed to him by another man (Matthew 18:30). I have the uncomfortable feeling that, all too often, I act like the man who was forgiven a vast amount and refused to act graciously to another.

When I have grasped more clearly the depth and length of Christ's patience with me, I may finally begin to increase in patient love towards others.

I want to make a few remarks about more difficult circumstances before I move on. Nothing that I have said so far means that love always overrides everything, including the demands of justice. Victims of abuse will have to deal at some point with their feelings of anger and revulsion, but I do **not** suggest that showing love means they must not

reveal and report the abuse or allow it to continue. Victims of violent crime, or relatives of such victims, are perfectly right to report that crime and expect to see the courts take action. I'm not really qualified to talk about dealing with the hurt and damage that such crimes inflict, but I am sure that closing up your heart and refusing to ever forgive at any level will lead to further emotional and spiritual harm. Pursuing love in those kinds of situations may need the help of wise professional counselling and will, no doubt, be a painful and costly course, but the alternative, of turning away from love, is likely to be even more costly in the long term.

What does love look like?

The simplest answer might be that love looks like God's character and is best demonstrated by the cross. But such a definition is likely to frighten us away from pursuing love, by making the standard seem so high that we just give up the effort. So let's look at some smaller descriptions of what love is and what it does.

Giving love

Love gives. One of the most famous verses in the Bible begins *"For God so loved the world that He gave..."* John 3:16. Even our everyday experience of love tells us that people in love give each other gifts. There are lots of things we can give to others. Money, time, attention, a listening ear, sympathy, practical help and support - the list of things we can give is almost endless. Loving others is very closely connected to giving. If I claim to love and never give anything at all, my claims are proved empty.

What can I give to somebody else today as I seek to pursue love?

Sacrificial love

Of course, it is possible to give superficially - remember that David was determined not to offer to God that which had cost him nothing (2 Samuel 24:24). Paul commends the giving of the Macedonians in 2 Corinthians 8 because they had given out of deep poverty, that is, their giving had been sacrificial. God's giving of His Son is the ultimate example of sacrificial giving, and we are the beneficiaries of it. Listening to ministry on the passage, *"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her"* Ephesians 5:25, I heard a speaker say that he periodically asked himself what he had given sacrificially for his wife recently. I find that question challenging enough (especially since my wife is sat opposite me at the moment!), but what if we ask it about other people whom we find much more challenging to love?

What am I prepared to sacrifice to show that my claimed love is real?

Selfless love

Love is demonstrated by putting other people first. One outcome of the fall is a deep seated selfishness that makes us expect other people, including God, to provide what we need. What we need might be anything from food, to a desire to feel cared for, but we expect others to give it to us, and insist that we get what we deserve before we even think about what others might need. One of the characteristics of love is that it puts self on one side and gives priority to someone else.

How can I practise putting other people ahead of myself?

Longsuffering love

"Love suffers long and is kind" 1 Corinthians 13:4. I don't think it is coincidental that these two expressions are paired together in that great chapter about love. Sometimes at the end of our longsuffering we have kept our tempers and avoided storming off, but we are far from feeling and acting in a kindly way! To suffer long and still be kind, shows a deep and mature kind of love that is perhaps produced by some of those self-learning exercises we considered earlier.

Who do I know that I can show longsuffering and kindness to for Jesus' sake?

Lord, we really appreciate the marvellous love that You have shown to us, and want to thank You for it today. Please show us how we can pass that love on to others, and help us to see how that is one way of showing our love to You. Amen.

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