

The Love Chapter Experiment: Introduction

February 2009 is exactly the kind of month I would have designed if they had left the making of the calendar to me.

It is exactly four weeks long and begins at the top left side of the calendar on Sunday the first, finishing down at the bottom right side on Saturday the twenty-eighth. Perfect calendar symmetry. Every month should be so orderly!

February also includes St. Valentine's Day, of course—that homage to romance that invites us to consider its place in the whole study of love.

The apostle John knew Jesus Christ better than anyone on Earth and he was sure that the message of the gospel was focused on love, that our common heavenly father himself was the essence of love. Likewise, Jesus is its embodiment, but his disciples often struggle to imitate this most vital aspect of the heavenly character. It is our hope that renewed attention on the chapter of love, First Corinthians thirteen, and the remainder of the New Testament, will reinvigorate our interest in following the pattern.

The thirteenth chapter of Paul's first Corinthian letter is sometimes called "The Love Chapter" by Bible commentators.

In it, the inspired writer attempts to convey his understanding of love as God would want it—especially as it concerns man's love for the people around him. Love for God is considered elsewhere and love for self is generally a problem because of surplus rather than shortage, but here we learn that love must be translated into affectionate action toward others if religion itself is to be worth anything at all.

Jesus taught as much in the parable of the Good Samaritan when asked, "Who is my neighbor" in response to his command to love such a person as oneself. In making love practical and broad, Jesus commanded, "You go, and do likewise" (Luke 10:37).

Love must be impartial and selfless, able to endure when others are behaving in an unlovable fashion so that love can be stronger than hate.

The apostle John wrote that we must "not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth" exposing the fact that many never get past good intentions or mere bluster when it comes to love (First John 3:18).

James is the writer who made the connection between practical love and effective religion, though: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (1:27, cf. 2:14-26).

So many are confused about the subject of love, reducing it to nothing more than an uncontrollable emotion. They fall in and fall out and when relationships are mature, get bored because they insist upon being consumers rather than producers. They complain about getting nothing more out of a relationship that once was defined by love, when in reality, they are at least as guilty of putting too little into it.

In crafting an illustration for Christ's affection for the church, Paul pointed to successful marriages and the love that preserves them. That love is more than a feeling, more than the consumption of someone else's kindness. The key there in Ephesians chapter five is identical to the expounded text in the love chapter. Give yourself. More than money or gifts or even time.

Give yourself.

Sacrifice.

Sacrifice some of your own wishes and preferences to put another ahead of yourself (Philippians 2:1-4).

Give yourself in submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21).

Beginning on February 1st, we want to put our focus on the uniting concept of our faith—love—and learn to love in a more godly way. Bulletin articles and sermons throughout the month will follow that theme, but the real key to the experiment begins at home.

Read First Corinthians chapter thirteen. Every day. For a month.

Meditate upon it and assess yourself—not anyone else! How much does love for myself get in the way of loving God and giving myself for the happiness and progress of others?

How many disagreements, fights, arguments and conflicts are instigated because I am too proud to admit I am wrong or to let someone else choose or go first?

Participation is entirely optional and the only test at the end will come in your relationships and on Judgment Day. The chapter, however, is only 13 verses long, and even the slowest reader can probably handle it in just a few minutes. A few minutes in exchange for a better attitude and a happier life? Isn't it

worth a try?

Try reading it in the morning or by lunch at the latest. If you wait until bed time, you're just as likely to sleep away some of the impact of the text.

The chapter has three sections. Read it analytically:

- Verses 1-3: Selflessness of real love
- Verses 4-7: What love is and isn't
- Verses 8-13: Love is forever

Read it in different translations from day to day if you find yourself losing focus. Think about the words; don't just read them carelessly the way you read the nutritional information at McDonalds. Let's learn what love really is and get on with the business of showing it more consistently.

*The Love Chapter Experiment (I):
God Is Love, But What About Me?*

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

The apostle John knew Jesus Christ better than anyone on Earth and he was sure that the message of the gospel was focused on love, that our common heavenly father himself was the essence of love. Likewise, Jesus is its embodiment, but his disciples often struggle to imitate this most vital aspect of the heavenly character.

Discussion

I. God Is Love

A. Love Personified

1. the apostle John was in a unique position to know the love of God, the character of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit as well as anyone ever has

a. he walked with Jesus, came to know the Father better, and enjoyed the revelation and empowerment of the Spirit

b. he wrote an account of his friend's life, a first century prophecy and three inspired letters

2. in the first of those letters, John spent a great deal of time teaching that God is the personification of love (First John 4:7-10)

a. John begins with the premise that God is love

b. his evidence is that he sent his son to become the propitiation for our sins—the atonement for our guilt

c. he then reasons that the believer's response should be grateful faithfulness—love in practice toward the very people that Jesus died to redeem and that we call our brethren

3. indeed, our entire profession of faith and confession of discipleship to Christ Jesus is dependent upon more than words or mantras or rituals, but upon becoming love as well (First John 4:11-16)

a. many people talk about knowing God, but just as many are ignorant as to whether God knows them

b. when we submissively put away self and magnify God and others, we go a long way toward confirming our discipleship and hope

4. a final day of judgment is coming and as much as our fate might rest in doctrines and issues, it surely also rests in the matter of love (First John 4:17-21)

a. "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him" (James 1:12).

B. Love Exemplified

1. John has indicated that God is love personified and that he exemplified his affection for mankind through more than mere words and well wishes (John 3:13-17)

a. Jesus understood that the essence of love is not in emotion or obtaining pleasant feelings, but that it is about giving and sacrifice

b. he taught that, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35) and then went out and gave himself entirely for the sake of people who were yet his enemies (Romans 5:6-11; see also Ephesians 2:4)

2. the truest test of discipleship became what people were willing to do, not just for their friends and supporters, but for their neighbors and even their enemies (see Matthew 5:43-48)

3. "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are" (First John 3:1).

C. Longsuffering and Kind

1. in the rush to portray God by extremes—either as senile and lenient or capricious and harsh—people forget that God is love and that love of people must include hatred of the devil's tools to harm them

2. Moses said of him: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and

abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty” (Exodus 34:6-7)

3. Solomon said, “O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and showing steadfast love to your servants who walk before you with all their heart” (First Kings 8:23).

4. our God does not desire that any soul should be lost to sin and so he arranges for redemption through his own son’s blood and waits thousands of years as the majority of people follow the devil, just so that the few who choose faith can enjoy salvation (Psalm 36:1, 5-7)

a. selfishness and impatience are the enemies of real love
b. not just the kind that causes people to get married or feed their children or pat their dogs on the head, but the kind of love that gets down in the heart and turns our outlook away from self and onto others

II. Love God

A. Love Required

1. when our love for Christ grows stronger, we learn to return God’s love in a constructive manner, comprehending the whole duty of man in a more complete way—to “Fear God and keep his commandments” (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

2. and yet John has told us that perfect love casts out fear—how to harmonize man’s duty with John’s promise?

a. perfect love casts out the kind of fear that involves torment and terror, not the kind that is respectful and submissive, for Christ is only the author of eternal salvation to those who obey him (see Hebrews 5:8-9)

b. perfect love is obedient to God not just to avoid penalty, but more in order to enjoy abiding fellowship and reward

3. we love God because he first loved us (Mark 12:28-31)

a. rejecting his authority, altering his church, trampling upon his doctrines—these are not signs of love anymore than being disrespectful to one’s parents is evidence of affection

b. perfect love for God yields to his will (First John 2:3-6)

B. Love Repeated

1. the lesson is that we take the love of God for us and translate it into love for the people around us—our families, neighbors and brethren, then also strangers and even enemies—in the proper way

2. we might express our love with acts of obvious affection or those of necessary correction, but we will learn to leave off the animosity of pride and selfishness and greed

3. patience and selflessness will rule in our hearts and a peace we never thought possible without great riches or absolute power will be our reward

4. we will learn to forgive others with a consciousness of just how much Christ must forgive us every day (Ephesians 4:29-32)

C. Love Neglected

1. our discipleship is incomplete and our redemption is insecure when we mute the lesson and power of love, forgetting to crucify self and live for Jesus

2. that was the spiritual condition of the most religious people in Christ’s day, the Pharisees (Luke 11:39-44 and John 5:39-42)

3. if your discipleship is ever going to get past rituals and superficialities, you will have to let the patient, giving, selfless, submissive love of Christ sink down deeper into who you are and who you can be (First Corinthians 13:1-8a)

Conclusion

Love has to be more than mere words and feelings. Love has to be about genuine selflessness and a willingness to give oneself for another. Until we get over ourselves and past our impatience, we will never know love.

The Love Chapter Experiment (2):

Love Your Family

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

It is bitterly ironic that we tend to be on our worst behavior around the people we claim to love the most. We take our families for granted and expose them to habits and tantrums that we would never display before strangers or neighbors. Perhaps this is why so many close relationships break down in time—they just cannot stand the strain of so much familiarity and turn thus to contempt.

Discussion

I. Husbands and Wives

A. Wives, Submit to Your Husbands

1. in the verses that follow an admonition to submit “to one another out of reverence for Christ,” the inspired writer discusses the different roles of husbands and wives, but that overarching principle must remain imperative throughout the marital union—submitting to one another because we love the Lord

2. wives, however, are given the most prominent and permanent aspect of submissiveness (Ephesians 5:22-24)

a. this kind of language sounds dated and politically incorrect, and is, in fact, both, but our experiments with other paradigms over the last 50 years have not proven to be superior

b. we have tried to turn the distinct roles into one without headship or submission and we have earned skyrocketing divorce rates and a culture where broken homes are the norm

3. where love is in the home and both spouses are content to submit their wants and needs and customs to the other, womanly submission should not prove to be the kind of thing that destroys her happiness or self-image; few marital problems are entirely one-sided and no marital success can be

a. her role is supportive and submissive (First Peter 3:1-6)

b. she belongs to her husband in the same way that he belongs to her (First Corinthians 7:3-5)

4. love for your husband means trying to get along with him, even though he is different from you; remember, “It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife” (Proverbs 21:9, 25:24).

a. “A continual dripping on a rainy day and a quarrelsome wife are alike; to restrain her is to restrain the wind or to grasp oil in one's right hand” (Proverbs 27:15-16).

b. “An excellent wife is the crown of her husband, but she who brings shame is like rotteness in his bones” (Proverbs 12:4).

B. Husbands, Love Your Wives

1. for all those husbands who salivate at the prospect of a submissive wife, the teaching continues, but also clarifies that no husband is fit to be a dictator or a malcontent (Ephesians 5:25-28)

a. love for your wife is not merely about satisfaction with her tasty meals, shiny floors and the eradication of ring around the collar; it is mostly about giving yourself up for her happiness

b. much of her emotional health is dependent upon feeling loved—by her children, but mostly by you

c. this is where the golden rule goes platinum, because you can't just treat her the way you want to be treated—you must treat her even better; “Husbands love your wives, and do not be harsh with them” (Colossians 3:19).

2. remember that, “He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord” (Proverbs 18:22).

a. she is on loan from God to you and chances are that if she is suddenly not pleasing to you, it is mostly because you have overlooked pleasing her for a very long time

b. “An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels ... Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her” (Proverbs 31:10, 28).

3. family men are stewards of their wives and their children and God expects them to be faithful (First Peter 3:7)

a. love is not just a sweet word with a cherry on top for Valentine's Day

b. love, especially over the long haul, is about self-sacrifice and giving oneself for somebody

else, just as Christ did for all of us

II. Parents and Children

A. Children, Obey Your Parents in the Lord

1. one of the 10 commandments compelled children to honor their parents and the Law of Moses even included a statute that called for gluttonous and drunken children to be stoned to death if they struck or cursed their parents (see Exodus 20)

2. today, that threat has dissipated, but the command to love and honor one's parents is unchanged even though these are troublesome times (Ephesians 6:1-3; cf. Second Timothy 3:1-2)

a. your parents' rules and guidance are generally not designed just to frustrate you or your ambitions, but are crafted out of love and concern for your potential and inexperience

b. although they are imperfect, you have to love them enough to trust that they have your best interest in mind regardless of how it looks

3. even punishment is evidence of love, for God also punishes all of his children (Hebrews 12:7-11)

4. "Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord" (Colossians 3:20).

a. obey more, argue less

b. offer more, take less

c. listen more, speak less

d. love more, hate less

B. Parents, Love Your Children

1. today, we have gone so far in the other direction that it is hard to find children who respect their parents, and it is sometimes hard to find parents who seem to deserve much respect

2. we cannot realistically expect our children to be respectful and turn out right if we are physically or emotionally disengaged from them, or if we have not the heart to encourage and chasten them

3. we require the same kind of leadership that God recommended in Israel and that Joshua exemplified (Deuteronomy 6:1-9)

4. it is frustrating to a child when he does not know what his parents expect of him and when he does not receive instruction at home (Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3:21)

5. love your children by giving them what they need, but without spoiling them, by holding their feet to the fire, but with mercy when they have learned their lesson, by teaching them ideals, but with warnings that few things are ideal

Conclusion

Think about how many times during a day or a week that we fall short in proving our love to someone close to us because we are being impatient, unmerciful or just plain selfish. There has to be a more excellent way (First Corinthians 13:1-8a).

The Love Chapter Experiment (3):

Love Your Neighbor

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

It is one of the most famous aphorisms of Christianity—"Love your neighbor as yourself"—but fame doesn't make it any easier. Sometimes our neighbors are as unlovable as ice cream on a cold day. That is when faith is tested, though—when consistency just is not easy.

Discussion

I. Even Under the Old Law

A. As Yourself

1. it is unnatural to love anyone as much as one loves himself, at least in the sense of self-preservation and promotion

2. sometimes, however, one can love the people who love him sufficiently that he is willing to sacrifice those things in their interest, but seldom will a person so love his neighbors or strangers to that extent

3. yet, even in the Law of Moses, which is often described as being less spiritual and emotional than the New Testament, that was the kind of love enjoined (Leviticus 19:9-18)

4. just as is true under Christ, God's people were taught to learn to love others as much as they loved themselves, in practical and effective ways

B. The Law Hangs Upon These Two

1. when Jesus began to teach about the relationship between his will and the Law of Moses, he extolled the promise of love for others (Matthew 22:34-40)

a. the rabbis of the age exchanged in an ongoing debate about which laws were weightier than others—which were mortal and which were venial in Catholic parlance

b. Jesus brushed them aside and asserted that every law, whether regulating human relationships or divine, was important

2. to love one's neighbor as himself is a natural progression from love for Jehovah God, and signifies the absolute responsibility we share in seeking good for others besides ourselves

3. commenting later, Paul wrote, "the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Galatians 5:14).

4. and perhaps that is why we see hospitality as such an important commandment throughout the Bible—so important that Lot would invite strangers to sleep in his home and would risk his own daughters for their protection; so important that no man can be thought faithful or worthy to oversee a church unless he is given to hospitality

II. Especially Under Jesus

A. Who Is My Neighbor?

1. as we have noted, a lawyer once quizzed Jesus about the limits of neighborly love, hoping to test the rabbi and discredit him with some unanswerable puzzle (Luke 10:25-37)

2. Jesus answered by putting the onus back on him, but the lawyer's reply, while simple, was all-encompassing and correct—love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and everything else will fall into place so that you might inherit eternal life, including selflessness toward other people

3. like the rich young ruler and the praying Pharisee, this lawyer trusted in himself that he was righteous and simply wanted to justify his present behavior against future challenges and so he asked, "And who is my neighbor?"

4. the parable of the Good Samaritan follows, in which the question is answered indirectly—the identity of the neighbor is not defined by whom we help, but by whether we help at all—I decide that I am the neighbor and prove it by showing mercy to those who need it

a. they might be next-door neighbors or people whose paths I cross on a trip around the world, but the status of neighbor depends entirely upon my response, not his location

b. suddenly, a whole world opens up and things like race, class, nationality and gender are eliminated as excuses (James 2:8-13)

B. Self-Justification

1. self-justification is always the means by which a person attempts to disavow his duty to a neighbor while still feeling neighborly
2. Jesus took that away, teaching that, “One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much” (Luke 16:10).
3. the Christian cannot trust that keeping a few of the commandments from his youth will relieve him of the duty to sacrifice for the poor, or that fasting and worshiping alone will make him better than a self-abasing tax collector (see Luke 18:9-23)
4. justifying inaction is an art form, one which deludes the selfish and apathetic into feeling religious about ignoring the plight of his neighbor (First John 3:16-24)

C. Loving Neighbor as Oneself

1. before you can love your neighbor as yourself, you must make certain you don't hate your neighbor
 - a. people sometimes hate the poor and the rich—anyone who needs help and anyone who appears to have more than I do; they hate the weak and the well for the same reasons and try to find excuses for abdicating responsibility to assist them
 - b. the Preacher wrote, “I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is a vanity and a striving after wind” (Ecclesiastes 4:4)
2. some get confused by the standard—love a neighbor as one loves himself—because they don't love themselves very much or understand how much Jesus cautions against excess of self love
 - a. love of self merely means the lengths that we are willing to travel to preserve life and limb, as well as our spiritual and emotional welfare
 - b. “For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it” (Ephesians 5:29)
3. we make sure our tummies are filled, our backs are clothed, our wounds are bandaged and our little psyches are soothed, and we ought to be willing to love our neighbors to the same end (Romans 13:8-10)
 - a. this is where loving God and loving a neighbor come together (Romans 15:1-3, 5-7)
 - b. “Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor” (First Corinthians 10:24)

D. Neighborliness

1. be honest (Ephesians 4:25)
2. be kind (Proverbs 11:12)
3. be helpful (Proverbs 3:28-29)
4. be pleasant (Proverbs 27:14)
5. be there (Proverbs 27:10)

Conclusion

The Good Samaritan should always be our example when it comes to loving a neighbor as oneself.

The Love Chapter Experiment (4):

Love Your Enemies

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

Saving the best for last, we come to think about the doctrine of Christ regarding a believer's love for his enemies. Nothing could be more difficult than loving someone who plainly does not love you. At all.

Discussion

I. You Have Heard That It Was Said

A. Love Your Neighbor and Hate Your Enemy

1. in his groundbreaking sermon on the mount, Jesus acknowledged what had been interpreted and taught among the Hebrew people, including the permission to hate one's enemies (Matthew 5:43-48)

a. the Old Testament never quite tells its readers that they may hate their enemies, but the presence of so much war and crime makes it logical that they would be tempted

b. this fact reminds us that it was never God's hatred of people that occasioned these wars, but rather his long-term need to promote the Jewish people as an incubator for both truth and a universal messiah

2. sometimes you hear a thing so frequently that you never bother to wonder if it is really true or not; urban legends and myths are like that—is there any scientific evidence that feeding a fever or starving a cold is an effective treatment?

a. if the first century Hebrews had been taught for years that it was all right to hate their enemies, no doubt they had occasion to hate the Egyptians who enslaved them, the Romans who conscripted them and anyone else who did them wrong along the way

b. the gospel of Christ, however, would not be constructed around hatred, but love, and that would have to extend further than the people who love the disciple if it was to be any different from all the popular philosophies of the age

3. the only way a believer can really be a child of God is by a willingness to love his enemies and to pray for his persecutors, because—believe it or not—God loves your enemies and shows it every day

a. when you become capable of speaking kindly to one who ridicules you, you are displaying the power of Christ in your heart

b. if you merely respond in like manner to an insult, then you are denying Christ any influence at all

B. But God Hates Evil

1. sometimes a man's hatred is personal and at other times, it is more general; at one time, we were even enemies of God (Romans 5:6-10)

2. Israel had apparent cause to hate its national enemies, but individuals are just as likely to feel wronged by persecutors, criminals, and rivals on a much more personal level

3. some people are very hateful, but most people just occasionally do hateful things; almost everybody is hated by somebody, whether for personal reasons or more generic ones

4. God doesn't hate by race or ethnicity or handicap or making a poor choice in one's favorite football team

5. God hates not the sinner, but his sin and that has to be where our hatred begins and ends, so that we love the sinner and desire only his conversion, not his collapse (Second Timothy 2:22-26)

C. Blessing Your Enemy

1. it is completely unnatural, but godliness should render you capable of eschewing hatred for an enemy and hoping for his conversion instead (Matthew 5:10-12)

2. one has to remember that a persecutor is ignorant and one who chooses strife over peace is to be pitied; to the extent that we can inject hope for resolution into such rivalries, we ought to be on the side of peace (Romans 12:14-21)

3. who knows how many conflicts might be resolved if we would simply rejoice with our enemies when they succeed in something good and weep with them when they suffer some indignity, rather than choosing to resent their gains and celebrate their faults?

4. blessing your enemy is not a matter of overlooking his sins or promoting his evil, but of praying for him to change and overcoming any pettiness that keeps him as an enemy

II. Friends and Enemies

A. Making Enemies

1. perhaps we also need to think about whether we are guilty even in a small way of making someone into an enemy (Galatians 5:25-26)

a. are we doing something that we know gets under his skin or do we proudly boast or assert ourselves in such a way that he is provoked to hatred or rivalry?

b. perhaps we are completely guiltless, or the offense that exists is in his mind or is unavoidable because of conviction, but is there some little thing that we could humbly change to relieve the tension, why wouldn't we?

2. nothing is worse than when "a person's enemies will be those of his own household" (Matthew 10:36)

a. the potential for our pride or idiosyncrasies to create enemies is very apparent at home where familiarity can breed more than just contempt

b. if our habits create strife, why can't we modify them to seek peace?

3. if it really is truth and conviction that create the strife, then that is one conflict that simply must be, as Paul risked unpopularity among the Galatians and had "become your enemy by telling you the truth" (Galatians 4:16)

B. Hyper-Sensitivity

1. there are times when strife is created because a hearer or observer is simply too sensitive and easily provoked to anger, even hatred by an innocent comment

2. remember that love "is not easily provoked" (First Corinthians 13:5, KJV); it is patient and extends the benefit of the doubt to its object

3. love doesn't put a negative spin on an innocent comment or action, seeking to find cause for hurt feelings and accusations of insensitivity

4. hyper-sensitivity is the cause of as many conflicts as insensitivity

C. Resignation

1. we recall that, upon the cross, Jesus looked out at his creatures, celebrating his death, and prayed, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34)

2. in like manner, Stephen, as persecutors' stones rained down upon his precious head, said to Jesus, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60)

3. we will never endure anything worse than that, so why can't we find the courage to love our enemies instead of resorting to hatred?

Conclusion

It is not easy to love someone who abuses you, but God is not suggesting that we have the same affection for our enemies that we have for our friends and loved ones, but that we have enough that we hope for their conversion instead of their destruction and that we do nothing to make matters worse.