



ENCOURAGING RELATIONSHIPS

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When I was young I was a keen astronomer and had a chart on my wall that looked something like this SOLAR SYSTEM. Here we had the sun and it's nine planets orbiting it. There's another chart from NASA. If you compare it with the previous you'll find some additions. The solar system no longer has nine planets but 13. How come? Because technology has changed that has allowed us to find new planets and look more closely at other objects we never thought were planets at all.

Actually the main tool for the job has not been the Voyager probes sent out into the outer solar system but the HUBBLE SPACE TELESCOPE which is able to see further than any ground based telescope.

It sometimes comes as a shock to discover that our view of the universe has to change because of something new. The problem is not the universe – it's been there for a very long time, but our ability as human beings to perceive it.

You'll remember last week that we looked at these verses in Matthew and we found that Jesus said that the two most important commandments were these. All Jews at the time and even now are familiar with these – they call them the Shammah.

VERSES

In fact that all the commands and ways of God are summed up in these. They are key, important; because understanding and following them would make all our actions conform to the will and ways of God. Remember what agape is. It's a love that will always place the needs of other before our own.

As I said last week. You can't command someone to love someone else. Love is something that wells up out of us. It's a natural human emotion – given to us by our Creator – recognises Him – desire to love Him. And we have every reason to love Him with all our heart soul and mind as we consider what He has done for us. Out of His love He has shown us grace – unmerited favour.

If that's the case, why a commandment? So that we might be able to make our love-response to God in the correct way. Love always takes us out from ourselves – not just to God but to the people that He loves too and the shammah does this for us.

Actually, did you know that Jesus added a third? A third? Here it is A NEW COMMANDMENT. He's added to the shammah. It's like the solar system. The ways and purposes of God have always been clear to Him. But not to us. He knew what was going to happen on Calvary. He knew that a new body – the church would appear. And when it did, Jesus applies agape for relationships within the body of Christ – a new command I give you. What was new? It took the focus of neighbour and related it to what God had brought into being through Jesus and that's the church – you and me. God takes the general and emphasises the specific. It's preparation for heaven – after all, we are spending eternity together! And that quality of our love, our agape will show the rest of the world we are His.

Therefore our relationships our vital. So just what should agape mean in our relationships as church? I'm going to try to be practical in three ways to help us understand the agape way – the way we apply Jesus' new commandment. They are not the only three but they do cover some major areas.

1. RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

When we trusted Jesus, God rescued us and gave us the **right** to be called children of God. We have rights – we were nothing but now we are accepted, secure and significant in Jesus. But with rights come the responsibilities of not using who we are in Christ to lord it over others. What should be our attitude? Loving God means we obey Him and His desire is that we become like Christ in our character and for meeting the needs of others. How does that work in practice – by always placing our responsibility for the needs of others before ours.

Here is one way PHILIPPIANS VERSE Love brings humility in our relationships. Our attitude should be the same as Christ Jesus. Love also means looking at things with God's perspective. In my role as Pastor I

often have to hear about problems that one person in the church may have with another. The emphasis is always "they've offended me" – do something about it Mark – "I have the right to an apology". But as ones who love, surely the response is the other way around. What about our responsibility to them to come to an amicable peace with them. Maybe what they've said or done is indicative of a problem or issue in their life. Love doesn't establish rights; it gives birth to compassion. So responsibility borne from love is surely not the words "give me an apology!!" but "can I help?"

2. BEING AWARE OF OUR OWN SINS

One of the biggest problems Christians have with loving one another is they are often quick to judge. Judgement is not a gift of the Holy Spirit. Judgement is in the perview of God alone. God doesn't accuse and condemn people right now, He just offers forgiveness, acceptance, life, hope. So guess what – neither do we. *When a man points a finger at someone else, he should remember that four of his fingers are pointing back at himself.* Louis Nizer

LOG Jesus said this (Matt 7:3-5) *3 "And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own? 4 How can you think of saying to your friend, 'Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,' when you can't see past the log in your own eye? 5 Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye.*

Jesus correctly identifies the problem. People who constantly criticise and point the finger usually have issues and problems they need to deal with. It's a mark often of a lukewarm relationship with God because it is a mark of overlooking one's own sins to point out the sins of another.

3. WHEN OUR CHARACTER IS ATTACKED

You may say "It's all very well talking about people who point the finger. But it's a bit different when they point the finger at me!" I know, I'm a Pastor so criticism of what I do comes with the territory. I know people who have been absolutely crushed by criticism, gossip and back-biting. What do we do when people question our character? How did Jesus react *1 Pet 2:23 When he was insulted, he did not answer back with an insult; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but placed his hopes in God, the righteous Judge.* Here's a couple of guidelines that I would suggest follows the agape principle.

DEFENCE – always be quick to own up if the mistake is yours. Don't be a politician! Relationships heal quickly when you know you're in the wrong. Making our peace quickly is just important when we are in the wrong just as much as when someone offends us.

If you're right you don't need one – just examine your heart before God. How do we deal with our critics – remember compassion that is borne out of love. If they are judgemental, or a gossip or just have a loose tongue; our loving duty is to show compassion. So rather than be resentful about being at the end of a wrong accusation agape places the question before us: "Can I help?"

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We have been put together as a church as an expression of the body of Christ here at Maidstone Road. Our responsibility to one another is to show grace and love so that we grow and mature in Christ. I've already suggested some ways in which love makes our actions different to maybe what many of us have experienced in the past.

A NEW COMMANDMENT

Maybe as we have examined ourselves this morning, there have been times when we have had a critical spirit rather than have shown compassion. Maybe we have been hurt by someone and don't quite know how to deal with it but know we must show love and grace. Maybe we just feel we have been squashed and crushed by the harsh words of others that may have not been true. We know we need to forgive, love, show compassion – but it's difficult. Jesus died to give us freedom in all these areas. Let's re-affirm what we should be this morning and ask God the Holy Spirit to give us the grace and strength to be what we should be.

Prayer

*Preached by Mark Reid
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Based on the Freedom in Christ Discipleship Course
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Matthew 22 Verses 34-40

34 When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they came together, 35 and one of them, a teacher of the Law, tried to trap him with a question

36 “Teacher,” he asked, “which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

37 Jesus answered, “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.

38 This is the greatest and the most important commandment. 39 The second most important commandment is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as you love yourself.’

40 The whole Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets depend on these two commandments.”