

Lesson Three

1. Line from O Holy Night

- **Truly he taught us to love one another...**

2. Scriptural approach

- When we read the gospel accounts of the life of Jesus we are drawn to a couple of themes: miracles, encounters with religious leaders, prophecy and teachings.
- Jesus was often called *rabbi*, which a Hebrew word for “teacher”. Like many rabbis in his day, they started to draw students to themselves, a circle of disciples who were loyal to that particular rabbi. Jesus would have been one among many.
- But there was something different about the way Jesus taught. In Matthew 7:28 we read, “*When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.*”
- Yet, Jesus had no earthly authority. He had not been “ordained” in our institutional way of thinking nor was he a member of any of the religious political groups, Pharisees or Sadducees. He was known as the son of a carpenter, not the son of a rabbi or a priest or a prophet.
- When compared against the people who did have recognized authority because of their profession position, Matthew’s gospel places Jesus’ teachings above those others. “Authority” took on a different meaning, not related to official endorsements or charisma.
- Authority, the Greek word is *exusia*, had more to do with the character of Jesus as he spoke. An authority that seemed to be based in a deep-rooted truth and knowledge that came from beyond human dispositions.
- And what did Jesus teach? A wide range of lesson, to be sure. Just read the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and you will see a dozen or more topics all crowded into a single sermon event.
- But Jesus’ teachings went beyond academic explanations of Old Testament law or even the proper application of the law (see John 8 and the story of the woman caught in adultery). Jesus dug beyond the “letter of the law” to teach the “spirit of the law”, often times opposing what religious leaders were doing.
- One of the main lessons Jesus taught was how to relate to one another. Whether that relationship was servant to master, or Jew to Gentile, children to parents or individuals to society.
- Central to all these teachings was the lesson of how to love one another.

- There was nothing new to that at the most basic level. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, he responded by saying that we had to love God and love our neighbor (Matthew 22:34-39). Every little Hebrew boy learned that in Hebrew school. But Jesus expanded their understanding and application of those two commandments, especially about loving our neighbor.
- The most obvious example was the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). The story sounds fairly harmless to us today. But looking at the details you discover how radical Jesus' teaching was for his culture. The hero of that parable was a *Samaritan* and the failures were respected authorities. The outcast showed he knew how to fulfill the law of love better than the experts in the law!
- Even the fine detail about the word "love" itself has to be understood here. Most of you probably know by now that there are three major words in Greek that are translated as "love" in the English language. The word "eros" describes physical love and is not found in the gospels at all. The word "philea" describes a type of brotherly love (hence where the city of Philadelphia gets its name) and finally there is the Greek word "agape" describing a selfless, over-the-top, undeserved, unmerited love. Jesus always pushes people to reach for and practice agape love as the best way to imitate the Father's love for us.

3. Pastoral approach

- So, yes, Jesus did indeed truly teach us to love one another. He taught us through Scripture. He taught us through parables. He taught us through example, even sacrificing his own life for us out of his agape love for us.
- Why does one teach anything? So that it can be learned and put into practice.
- If we have been reading and studying this for so long that we can even find it in a Christmas hymn, then we have to ask – How are we doing at putting this lesson into practice?
- OUCH!
- If we are honest, we probably find that there are times when we get it right and live up to the standard that Christ set for Peter and for us. But we also admit to living most of our faith life in the *philea* love level, enjoying others, helping them, serving them, but reserving the primary place for ourselves and our close family rather than others or strangers.
- And, in the same way that Peter was not disqualified for failing to reach the *agape* level of faith, neither are we! Instead God pours out more of His Holy Spirit within us to continue the maturing process, as the fruit of the Spirit continues to ripen at the right time in our lives.
- What we want to avoid is becoming stale fruit, that begins to rot because it is not growing.

4. Question to consider

- Read John 21:15-17. Three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves him. Three times Peter says yes. But let me insert the actual Greek words from earlier in this lesson to show you a bit more depth.
- The first time, Jesus asks “*Peter do you agape me?*” And Peter responds, “*Yes Lord, you know I philea you.*”
- The second time, Jesus asks again, “*Peter do you agape me?*” And again, Peter says, “*Yes Lord you know I philea you.*”
- But the third time through, Jesus tones it down a bit. He asks Peter, “*Peter do you philea me?*” And Peter is hurt that Jesus asked a third time, but he responds, “*Yes Lord you know I philea you.*”
- You see, Jesus wanted much more out of Peter. By this time Peter had seen all the miracles, heard all the sermons, watched the crucifixion and the resurrection, yet he still could not reach the level of love Jesus expected of him.
- Notice, Jesus does not reject Peter, but keeps him in the loop as an apostle. His lack of reaching the highest level does not disqualify him from service to the Kingdom of God.
- We know that Peter will indeed grow into an agape love for Jesus in later years and agape love for Jews and non-Jews alike. But it will take time.
- That’s a long way to reach the question for this lesson – How are you doing with that “agape love” lesson? Do you really love God that much? All the time? Do you really love others with agape love? All the time? All people? Even the guy that cuts you off in traffic?

5. Final thoughts and closing prayer

- So, Christ taught us to love one another. We have learned by study and by example how to love one another. But now the task for the rest of our lives is to put that lesson into practice. Without God, that is impossible, so allow the Spirit to ripen the fruit of love in your heart.
- Let us pray. God of all love, there is no greater example of unconditional, agape love than what you showed us in your life, your death and your resurrection. We confess that too often we fail to rise to that same level of love in our daily lives. Forgive us we pray, but do not leave us in this state of faith. Instead, empower us to greater levels of love for you and for our neighbors. IN Jesus’ name and for the sake of his people. Amen.