



PART 3

BE Like Jesus: *Who Am I Becoming?*

PARAPHRASED FROM *THINK, ACT, BELIEVE LIKE JESUS* by Randy Frazee:

Jesus used the analogy of fruit to teach about the spiritual growth process. He said becoming like him is much the same as growing a crop.

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." – John 15:1-5

What does it mean to prune? Why do you think Jesus used this analogy in this passage. Why do we, as Christians, need pruning?

Definition of pruning: verb, **pruned, pruning**. 1. to cut or lop off (twigs, branches, or roots). 2. to cut or lop superfluous or undesired twigs, branches, or roots from; trim. 3. to rid or clear of (anything superfluous or undesirable). 4. to remove (anything considered superfluous or undesirable).

Christians — those who believe in Jesus for salvation — are the branches, flowing and growing from the trunk or vine.

> God is the gardener who intervenes in the life flow of the branches to eventually produce and bear fruit.

> In gardening the vine is complete. Roots, stem, branches, and fruit are all a part of the vine.

< This shows that Christians are not a separate entity, but as "branches" we are part of Christ.

< We need the vine in order to survive and be fruit bearers.

As long as we stay connected to Jesus, we will "bear much fruit," but if we separate from "the vine," we will produce nothing. How do we "remain" in Christ?

>The word means "to stay put; to continue in a specified condition; to endure."

<We stay attached in our relationship with God through Christ through all seasons of life—good and bad.

<We trust his hand and his process, and, in the end, we will bear much fruit.

In John 15:9-10 Jesus says: *"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love."*

> Loving relationships keep us focused on what God desires for us. “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind*”; and, *Love your neighbor as yourself.*” *Luke 10:27*

< These are the commands referred to in John 15. This points out two very important types of relationships.

^ Our *vertical* relationship with God invites us to engage in the spiritual disciplines or practices, as we’ve previously discussed in our BELIEVE chapters. These spiritual acts, inside biblical community, express and reinforce what we think and allow us to become like Jesus.

^ Jesus’ second command has to do with the *horizontal* relationships in our lives

} It is quite simple: “*My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.*” *John 15:12*

< These actions then express and reinforce the way we think like Jesus.

In Jesus’ teaching, there is always an end goal. In John 15:11, Jesus says, “*I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*”

> He desires for his joy to go into us. The vine feeds nutrients into the branch.

Our joy is brought into maturity through remaining in him.

> Mature joy will be steadfast, secure, and solid in the face of any circumstance.

> Joy will develop on the outside of our lives by first developing on the inside.

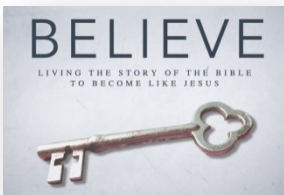
< People like being around a joyful person, because their joy is contagious and uplifting.

Thinking like Jesus develops us into *acting* like Jesus, which then directs us into *being* like Jesus.

> In the final 10 chapters of BELIEVE we are about to discuss outward life change in us that will be seen by others.

> While Jesus speaks in John 15 about joy, ultimately he wants to see ten varieties of fruit grow on the branches of our lives.

> In the next ten chapters, we will focus on key virtues of who we are becoming in Christ: love, joy, peace, self-control, hope, patience, kindness/goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and humility.



CHAPTER 21

Love

KEY IDEA

I am committed to loving God and loving others.

KEY VERSE

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. – 1 John 4:10-12

BEGIN BY RECITING THE KEY VERSE AND THE KEY IDEA TOGETHER AS A GROUP.

LESSON

INTRODUCTION:

Generations of poets and musicians have been attempting to define and capture the essence of love from every possible angle throughout time. Love is such a powerful and vast force that we never seem to grow weary of hearing about it. Even still, we all struggle to adequately comprehend and express love on a daily basis. -RANDY BRAZEE

The Bible is a complex narrative. But what is the big — yet simple — idea behind all the stories and teachings contained in this ancient book? Love — love dominates God’s story. First Corinthians 13 provides us with an earnest description of love that resonates throughout Scripture.

1 Corinthians 13 (CEV)

¹What if I could speak all languages of humans and of angels? If I did not love others, I would be nothing more than a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

²What if I could prophesy and understand all secrets and all knowledge? And what if I had faith that moved mountains? I would be nothing, unless I loved others.

³What if I gave away all that I owned and let myself be burned alive? I would gain nothing, unless I loved others.

⁴Love is kind and patient, never jealous, boastful, proud, or ⁵rude. Love isn’t selfish or quick tempered. It doesn’t keep a record of wrongs that others do. ⁶Love rejoices in the truth but not in evil. ⁷Love is always supportive, loyal, hopeful, and trusting. ⁸Love never fails! Everyone who prophesies will stop, and unknown languages will no longer be spoken. All that we know will be forgotten.

⁹We don’t know everything, and our prophecies are not complete. ¹⁰But what is perfect will someday appear, and what isn’t perfect will then disappear.

¹¹When we were children, we thought and reasoned as children do. But when we grew up we quit our childish ways. ¹²Now all we can see of God is like a cloudy picture in a mirror. Later we will see him face to face. We don’t know everything, but then we will, just as God completely understands us.

¹³For now there are faith, hope, and love. But of these three, the greatest is love.

In this chapter, Paul described the lifestyle of love that Christ produces in his followers. It has been called the Love Chapter because of its powerful description of love.

> It's easy to talk about love; it's much harder to do the tough work of living it.

< Love as God intended it is more than just passion, romantic feelings, or sentimental expressions.

< It involves commitment, sacrifice, and service--things that benefit both the giver and the receiver.

SUMMARY OF CHARACTERISTICS OF GODLY LOVE.

Love and Oneself

- Does not rival for attention (jealous)
- Does not brag on itself (boastful)
- Does not inflate it's self-view (proud)

Love and Relationships

- Does not tread on another's feelings (rude)
- Does not seek another's things (selfish)
- Does not take offense easily (quick tempered)

Love and Sins

- Does not keep a record of wrongs suffered (wrongs that others do)
- Does not make unrighteousness its object of rejoicing (not evil)
- Does celebrate others' achievements in righteousness (always supportive)

Love and Sinners

- Does keep all things in confidence (loyal)
- Does know what God can do (trusting)
- Does hold out holy ambitions for others to achieve (hopeful)
- Does survive under every condition (never fails)

We learn to love like this from God. We receive this kind of love from Christ. In order to love others, we need to accept Christ's love for us and commit ourselves to expressing this kind of love in our life and relationships.

> It is love that enriches the gifts of the Spirit and gives them value.

> Ministry with love enriches the whole church.

> Eventually the gifts will no longer be needed (when we reach eternity), but love will endure forever.

Do you feel some people have misinterpreted or mistaken Biblical love for something different?

It appears that, in New Testament times, there were at least four different Greek words that we can translate as the English word 'love'. Each of the four different Greek words carries a slightly different definition from the other three. This makes it a little clearer as to what the original means.

These four types of love are:

> **Storge Love**

< This is family love that is commonly found in the Bible.

< It is vital to the proper function of families and can sometimes be found in extended families.

< Biblical illustrations of this type of love can be found.

^ Martha and Mary who lost their brother Lazarus.

^ Abraham for his son Jacob.

^ Noah for his wife and children

< It is the kind of love that any father and mother has for their children as well as the children's love for their parents.

< Storge is a Greek word for family love and frequently used for natural affection.

> **Eros Love**

< This is the erotic love between men and women which is a sensual love. It is acceptable within the confines of marriage but outside of marriage, it is seen as sin.

< This love is what gets many people, even Christians, into serious trouble because they can commit adultery if left unchecked and not resisted, it can become an idol in itself.

< While this level of love is necessary and healthy within marriage, outside or before marriage it can be totally destructive.

> **Philia Love**

< This is the type of love that David and Jonathan had.

< It is as intense as it can be outside of the love that God displays. This love produces a bond that eros and storge love cannot compare with.

< This is the love that Christians are commanded to have for one another (Rom 12; 1 Cor 13). *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you"* (John 15:12-14).

< This love is unselfish and is like the love where someone dies or risks dying for someone or others in order to save or protect their lives.

> Agape Love

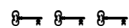
< Agape love is the most supreme love of all and is an attribute of God. It does not come naturally to humans.

< This type of love is supernatural as Jesus displayed on the cross saying *"forgive them for they know not what they do"* (Luke 23:34).

< This love is not as much what is felt, but what someone does.

^ It is what Jesus did in dying for us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:7-8).

^ It is not a love that condemns, but one that brings salvation (John 3:17b).



THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

Love as the greatest commandment can be found early in God's story with his people. For example, near the end of his life Moses gathered the Israelites together to remind them of what truly mattered as they readied themselves to enter the promised land. His words, recorded in the book of Deuteronomy, include a passage known as the Shema (Hebrew for "hear"), which later became the Jewish confession of faith, recited twice daily at the morning and evening prayer services. As the Shema articulates, the love between God and his people has always been the driver behind a life of faith.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (CEV)

⁴ Listen, Israel! The LORD our God is the only true God! ⁵ So love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, and strength. ⁶ Memorize his laws ⁷ and tell them to your children over and over again. Talk about them all the time, whether you're at home or walking along the road or going to bed at night, or getting up in the morning. ⁸ Write down copies and tie them to your wrists and foreheads to help you obey them. ⁹ Write these laws on the door frames of your homes and on your town gates.

God gave the Commandments for the Israelites to use as their way of governing. It was a moral compass of what God desired for His holy people. But at times they lost sight of the very heart of the covenant—loving God.

> Without love for God, the observance of the commandments became an empty form.

> God himself gave the central commandment to love God, along with the other commandments.

< This central command helps to define the spirit in which all the other commandments must be kept.

< If the commandment to love is God is not being followed, the other laws are not being kept either.

Vs. 5} Heart and soul and mind are not three distinct small pieces of ourselves that we may offer. They all point to what we really are.

> The Bible shows that our heart is central: *“The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks”* (Luke 6:45).

<Everything we are and have, beginning with our priorities, commitments, and all our thoughts, must be devoted to loving, adoring, and serving God.

Some people today understand “love” as merely a happy feeling of friendliness or good will. They think that, provided they feel good about the idea of God, they may do as they please. This is a type of “situation ethics” that claims that love *replaced* the commandments.

>But that is not a Biblical conception of loving God. Love does not replace Commandments. Love gives us the right motive so that we genuinely can obey the Commandments.

Flowing from the priority to love God with our whole heart, soul and strength was the command to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Leviticus 19:17-18 (CEV)

¹⁷Don’t hold grudges. On the other hand, it’s wrong not to correct someone who needs correcting.

¹⁸Stop being angry and don’t try to take revenge. I am the LORD, and I command you to love others as much as you love yourself.

What do you think society’s stand on revenge and vengeance is?

Loving God empowers us to love other people.

>The Commandments, not to murder and not to steal, etc., are not just about refraining from evil.

<When seen in the light of the fundamental principle of loving others, they imply that we should look for positive ways to improve the life and prosperity of our neighbors.

<The focus on love helps us not to settle for a minimum concern for neighbors, but to reach out to them wholeheartedly.

<Love helps us to understand the real intention of the commandments, and to give us concern for actual obeying, not merely listening.

Without a right relationship with God, our relationships with others will not be right, either.

>The cause of the world’s problems is that man needs to be reconciled to God.

<We will never love our neighbor as ourselves if we do not first love God with all our heart, mind, and soul. All of man’s best efforts toward world peace will fail as long as men are living in rebellion against God.

Jesus confirmed these two commands from the Old Testament — love God and love others — as the greatest of all the commandments during an encounter recorded in the New Testament between Jesus and the religious leaders.

Mark 12:28-34 (CEV)

²⁸ One of the teachers of the Law of Moses came up while Jesus and the Sadducees were arguing. When he heard Jesus give a good answer, he asked him, "What is the most important commandment?"

²⁹ Jesus answered, "The most important one says: 'People of Israel, you have only one Lord and God.' ³⁰ You must love him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.' ³¹ The second most important commandment says: 'Love others as much as you love yourself.' No other commandment is more important than these."

³² The man replied, "Teacher, you are certainly right to say there is only one God. ³³ It is also true that we must love God with all our heart, mind, and strength, and that we must love others as much as we love ourselves. These commandments are more important than all the sacrifices and offerings that we could possibly make."

³⁴ When Jesus saw that the man had given a sensible answer, he told him, "You are not far from God's kingdom." After this, no one dared ask Jesus any more questions.

Jesus answered this leader with the Shema – from Deuteronomy 6.

> The Jews had 613 commandments from the Old Testament law. Here Jesus reduces those 613 commandments to two.

In 1 John 4:19-21 we read: "We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother".

- > God is Love, He knows the importance of this characteristic in bringing His kingdom back to Him.
- < It is love that is used to do works of compassion and service.
- < It is love that allows families to model relationships the way God intended.
- < It is love that makes people feel needed and wanted.
- < It is love that desires to see others come into a relationship with the Savior.

Followers of God are to live lives distinctly different from those around them. They are to be forgiving and self-giving, showing love to all. The command to love God and other people did not fade into the sunset with the rise of the church. The same principles that guided Israel remained essential for the church in New Testament times, as it does for the church today. Love is the ultimate fulfillment of all the laws of the Old Testament. The law of love is the only one that should rule the hearts and lives of Christians.

Matthew 5:43-48 (CEV)

⁴³ You have heard people say, "Love your neighbors and hate your enemies." ⁴⁴ But I tell you to love your enemies and pray for anyone who mistreats you. ⁴⁵ Then you will be acting like your Father in heaven. He makes the sun rise on both good and bad people. And he sends rain for the ones who do right and for the ones who do wrong. ⁴⁶ If you love only those people who love you, will God reward you for that? Even tax collectors love their friends. ⁴⁷ If you greet only your friends, what's so great about that? Don't even unbelievers do that? ⁴⁸ But you must always act like your Father in heaven.

Jesus said that loving one another is not an option for the believer; it is a commandment. We are commanded to love others as Jesus loves us. (John 13:34-35)

The love of God transcends our anger or hatred; it allows us to forgive those whom we otherwise would be unable to forgive.

- > If you have difficulty in loving others, remember that it was a command of Jesus.
- > It is God's will for us to love and He would not command us to do something that He will not enable us to do.
- > In order to experience and share this type of love, we must trust God's promise that He will give us all that we need to do His will on the basis of His command and promise.

Through faith, that supernatural, divine love of God will reach out where nothing else can go to capture men and women for Christ. The love which results from that faith will captivate people everywhere so that, as we live and love by faith, we will spread God's love throughout the world.

Romans 13:8-10 (CEV)

⁸ Let love be your only debt! If you love others, you have done all that the Law demands. ⁹ In the Law there are many commands, such as, "Be faithful in marriage. Do not murder. Do not steal. Do not want what belongs to others." But all of these are summed up in the command that says, "Love others as much as you love yourself." ¹⁰ No one who loves others will harm them. So love is all that the Law demands.

To love each other is the basic principle of the Christian life. It is the new commandment that Christ gave to us.

- > When we practice love, we need no other laws because love covers them all.

Jesus greatly expanded the scope and importance of love, saying love of God and love of fellowman are the most important of all the commandments.

- > Paul said Christian love was the greatest and most essential of all the spiritual gifts.
- > Throughout the New Testament, we are encouraged and commanded to live in peace with all God's people and commit ourselves to genuine love and caring for others. (See Romans 12:17-18; 1 John 3:17-18).
- < These are ways we can put our faith into practice in everyday live.



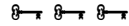
KEY QUESTION: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SACRIFICIALLY AND UNCONDITIONALLY LOVE OTHERS?

PARAPHRASED FROM *THINK, ACT, BELIEVE LIKE JESUS* by Randy Frazee

There is likely not a more abused word, particularly in the English language, than the word *love*.

- > We don't have a good method by which we can rate the degree to which we are expressing the emotion. As a result, we love chocolate, and we love our children. The same? Of course not, but how does one differentiate the meaning?
- < While concepts of love come from entirely different places in our hearts, we use the same word to describe our feelings for each.

The New Testament writers understood this dilemma. They wanted to talk about this new brand of Christian love made possible through a real relationship with Jesus. There was just one problem — they couldn't find a word in the vocabulary of the Greek language to adequately describe the nature and quality of this new divine experience. So they took an existing word in the Greek language — *agape* — and infused it with new meaning to reflect this powerful concept of “God-centered love.”



The noblest form of love is agape.

>Bible Commentator, William Barclay, noted:“**Agape has to do with the mind: it is not simply an emotion which rises unbidden in our hearts; it is a principle by which we deliberately live.**”

<It is the kind of love that we must have for all men — even our enemies (Matthew 5:44).

>The Christian must always act out of love, in the best interest of his fellow human beings.

< Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13, gives more than a dozen examples of how this type of love should be.

^ See list on page 4.

^ These directives become a challenge as we try to measure up to the divine ideal in our concern for others.

Agape is love which is of and from God, whose very nature is love itself. (1 John 4:8)

> Everything God does flows from His love.

> God loves because that is His nature and the expression of His being.

< He loves the unlovable and the unlovely (us!), not because we deserve to be loved, but because it is His nature to love us, and He must be true to His nature and character.

God's love is displayed most clearly at the cross, where Christ died for us, the unworthy, not because we did anything to deserve it, but because He loved us.(Romans 5:8)

>The object of God's agape love never does anything to merit His love.

< We are the undeserving recipients upon whom He bestows that love.

< He showed His love when He sent His Son into the world to “seek and save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10) and to provide eternal life to those He sought and saved.

^ He paid the ultimate sacrifice for those He loves.

In the same way, we are to love others sacrificially.

>Jesus gave the parable of the Good Samaritan as an example of sacrifice for the sake of others, even for those who may care nothing at all for us, or even hate us.

>Sacrificial love is not based on a feeling, but a determined act of the will, a joyful resolve to put the welfare of others above our own.

> This type of love does not come naturally to us. Because of our fallen nature, we are incapable of producing such a love.

<If we are to love as God loves, that love—that agape—can only come from its true Source.

^ This type of love comes from the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5).

> Only God can generate within us the kind of self-sacrificing love which is the proof that we are His children. “*By this we have known the love of God, because He laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers*” (1 John 3:16).



KEY IDEA: I AM COMMITTED TO LOVING GOD AND LOVING OTHERS.

THE CAPACITY OF LOVE

Left to our own sinful nature, or flesh, we move away from unconditional and sacrificial love and instead crave to satisfy our own wants over the needs and interests of others. Living a life of love requires the presence of God's love and power within us. When we yield to this presence in our lives it produces within us love for others. The law provides some instruction regarding how to live a life of love; the Spirit empowers us to actually do it.

Galatians 5:13-25 (CEV)

¹³ My friends, you were chosen to be free. So don't use your freedom as an excuse to do anything you want. Use it as an opportunity to serve each other with love. ¹⁴ All that the Law says can be summed up in the command to love others as much as you love yourself. ¹⁵ But if you keep attacking each other like wild animals, you had better watch out or you will destroy yourselves.

¹⁶ If you are guided by the Spirit, you won't obey your selfish desires. ¹⁷ The Spirit and your desires are enemies of each other. They are always fighting each other and keeping you from doing what you feel you should. ¹⁸ But if you obey the Spirit, the Law of Moses has no control over you.

¹⁹ People's desires make them give in to immoral ways, filthy thoughts, and shameful deeds. ²⁰ They worship idols, practice witchcraft, hate others, and are hard to get along with. People become jealous, angry, and selfish. They not only argue and cause trouble, but they are ²¹ envious. They get drunk, carry on at wild parties, and do other evil things as well. I told you before, and I am telling you again: No one who does these things will share in the blessings of God's kingdom.

²² God's Spirit makes us loving, happy, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, ²³ gentle, and self-controlled. There is no law against behaving in any of these ways. ²⁴ And because we belong to Christ Jesus, we have killed our selfish feelings and desires. ²⁵ God's Spirit has given us life, and so we should follow the Spirit.

Paul tries to explain that love is the one word that encapsulates the entire law.

> Listen to what the Lord is telling you in your heart

- Is it a practical expression of love?
- Is it a moment of intercession for someone?
- Is it sharing an encouraging word?
- Is it extending mercy?

> All this is done in love.

Furthermore, our capacity to love begins with receiving God's love for us. From this reservoir we pour out love toward each other. The presence of God's Spirit in us, working through us to overcome our passion for self in favor of loving others, is confirmation that we are in fact children of God.

1 John 4:7-21 (CEV)

⁷ My dear friends, we must love each other. Love comes from God, and when we love each other, it shows that we have been given new life. We are now God's children, and we know him. ⁸ God is love, and anyone who doesn't love others has never known him. ⁹ God showed his love for us when he sent his only Son into the world to give us life. ¹⁰ Real love isn't our love for God, but his love for us. God sent his Son to be the sacrifice by which our sins are forgiven. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God loved us this much, we must love each other.

¹² No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is truly in our hearts.

¹³ God has given us his Spirit. That is how we know that we are one with him, just as he is one with us. ¹⁴ God sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. We saw his Son and are now telling others about him. ¹⁵ God stays one with everyone who openly says that Jesus is the Son of God. That's how we stay one with God ¹⁶ and are sure that God loves us. God is love. If we keep on loving others, we will stay one in our hearts with God, and he will stay one with us. ¹⁷ If we truly love others and live as Christ did in this world, we won't be worried about the day of judgment. ¹⁸ A real love for others will chase those worries away. The thought of being punished is what makes us afraid. It shows that we have not really learned to love.

¹⁹ We love because God loved us first. ²⁰ But if we say we love God and don't love each other, we are liars. We cannot see God. So how can we love God, if we don't love the people we can see? ²¹ The commandment that God has given us is: "Love God and love each other!"

God is love. Therefore, if we are His, if we are abiding in him, we will, like him, love others.

Perfect love casts out fear. How is this so?

> If I understand that God really, truly loves me, I can have absolute confidence that whatever happens at any given moment is the best for me. Regardless of what the doctor may say, what the IRS may declare, or who wins the election—when you are sure of God's love for you, you don't have fear.

> The answer to fear is to become saturated in God's love.

Although we may love our brother or sister, all relationships have their issues. Unfortunately, dissonance can replace the love when we leave those hurts and offenses unresolved. When Peter approached Jesus with a question about forgiveness, Jesus answered the question and followed it up with a poignant parable to illustrate his point. It is forgiveness that keeps relationships connected and prevents a root of bitterness from dividing people.

Matthew 18:21-35 (CEV)

²¹ Peter came up to the Lord and asked, "How many times should I forgive someone who does something wrong to me? Is seven times enough?" ²² Jesus answered: "Not just seven times, but seventy-seven times!" ²³ This story will show you what the kingdom of heaven is like: One day a king decided to call in his officials and ask them to give an account of what they owed him. ²⁴ As he was doing this, one official was brought in who owed him fifty million silver coins. ²⁵ But he didn't have any money to pay what he owed. The king ordered him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all he owned, in order to pay the debt. ²⁶ The official got down on his knees and began begging, "Have pity on me, and I will pay you every cent I owe!" ²⁷ The king felt sorry for him and let him go free. He even told the official that he did not have to pay back the money.

²⁸ As the official was leaving, he happened to meet another official, who owed him a hundred silver coins. So he grabbed the man by the throat. He started choking him and said, "Pay me what you owe!" ²⁹ The man got down on his knees and began begging, "Have pity on me, and I will pay you back." ³⁰ But the first official refused to have pity. Instead, he went and had the other official put in jail until he could pay what he owed.

³¹ When some other officials found out what had happened, they felt sorry for the man who had been put in jail. Then they told the king what had happened. ³² The king called the first official back in and said, "You're an evil man! When you begged for mercy, I said you did not have to pay back a cent. ³³ Don't you think you should show pity to someone else, as I did to you?" ³⁴ The king was so angry that he ordered the official to be tortured until he could pay back everything he

owed. ³⁵ *That is how my Father in heaven will treat you, if you don't forgive each of my followers with all your heart.*

Do you think "forgiving love" is the most difficult love to attain in our Christian life? Why? Why not?

Forgiveness is a prominent theme throughout the Bible. Yet Christians have questions about forgiveness.

>The act of forgiving does not come easy for most of us. Our natural instinct is to go into self-protection mode when we've been injured.

< Mercy, grace and understanding don't come naturally when we've been wronged.

Remember, forgiveness is a conscious choice, not a feeling.

> It is a choice made through a decision of our will motivated by obedience to God and his command to forgive. (Colossians 3:13)

>How do we forgive when we don't feel like it?

<We forgive by faith out of obedience.

^ Since forgiveness goes against our nature, we must forgive by faith, whether we feel like it or not.

^ We must trust God to do the work in us that needs to be done so that the forgiveness will be complete.

>How will we know if we have truly forgiven?

<Lewis B. Smedes wrote in his book, *Forgive and Forget*, "**When you release the wrongdoer from the wrong, you cut a malignant tumor out of your inner life. You set a prisoner free, but you discover that the real prisoner was yourself.**"

<We will know the work of forgiveness is complete when we experience the freedom that comes as a result.

<We are the ones who suffer most when we choose not to forgive.

<When we do forgive, the Lord sets our hearts free from the anger, bitterness, resentment and hurt that previously affected us.

< NOTE: Most times, however, forgiveness is a slow process.

^ In Matthew 18:21-22 the answer Jesus gives makes it clear that forgiveness is not easy for us.

} It's not a one-time choice and then we automatically live in a state of forgiveness.

} Forgiveness may require a lifetime of forgiving, but it is important to the Lord.

} We must continue forgiving until the matter is settled in our heart.

>Is it okay to feel anger and want justice for the person we need to forgive?

<We can pray for God to deal with the injustices, for God to judge the person's life, and then we can leave that prayer in God's control.

< We don't have to carry the anger. Although it is normal for us to feel anger toward sin and injustice, it is not our job to judge the other person in their sin. (Luke 6:37)

>Why must we forgive?

> Because Jesus commanded it. Matthew 6:14-16 *For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*

> So that our prayers will not be hindered: Mark 11:25 *And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.*

If God loves us then we have no other recourse but to forgive people who have knowingly (or unknowingly) offended us.

> Again, remember, forgiveness doesn't have to do with feelings. Forgiveness is a decision we make.

< If we decide to forgive, feelings will follow in due season.

< Only those who are living in God's love can forgive as God forgave.

Is there someone(s) in your life that you are having difficulty in forgiving? If you can't forgive as God does, you can't love as God does. Seek God in prayer to overcome this issue in your life.

If you're having a hard time forgiving someone, ask the Lord to give you a glimpse of your own sin, a peek at how much he has forgiven you.

PARAPHRASED FROM *THINK, ACT, BELIEVE LIKE JESUS* by Randy Frazee

The biblical word *love* has three unique and distinct characteristics.

>Unconditional: Agape love is not dependent on love being given back. While it is always great for feelings and actions to be reciprocated, there are no conditions or requirements for God's love to be experienced.

< Simply put, agape love places no conditions, expectations, or stipulations on the other person for love to be expressed or displayed. It is *unconditional*.

>Sacrificial: Agape love places the other person first.

< Sacrificial love will take a risk by stepping out to show intent, regardless of the other's response.

>Forgiving: In our relationships with others, we often set each other up for failure by expecting perfection.

< Agape love expresses that one doesn't have to be perfect "for me to love you."

< Agape love expects imperfections, so forgiveness needs to always be in effect.

< Agape love does not need to be earned

Have you ever been around someone who always expects their "love" to be reciprocated? Is this a hard love to live up to?

This is what God does for us daily. He is a God who forgives, and this is his assurance: *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."* (1 John 1:9)

>Jesus invites us to do the same thing for others.

Love is the greatest power known to man. Through faith, that supernatural, divine love of God will reach out where nothing else can go to capture men and women for Christ. The love which results from that faith will captivate people everywhere so that, as we live and love by faith, we will spread God's love throughout the world. This love is contagious, attractive and aggressive. It creates hunger for God. It is active -- constantly looking for loving things to do, people to uplift, and lives to change.



KEY APPLICATION: WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES THIS MAKE IN THE WAY I LIVE?

FROM *THINK, ACT, BELIEVE LIKE JESUS* by Randy Frazee

Jesus' love in our hearts enables us to love those we could never love before.

In the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in Matthew's gospel (Matthew 5:43-45), Jesus is telling us that hatred is no longer an option for his followers. Regardless of how we are treated by anyone, the only choice is to love.

Jesus' love in our hearts enables us to love the unlovable.

Matthew includes in his gospel Jesus' teaching about the gathering of the nations and the separating of the "sheep" from the "goats" that takes place when Jesus comes again: *"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'"* Matthew 25:34-36

Our world today has little time to spare for the homeless, poor, hungry, orphaned, diseased, elderly, and imprisoned. But Jesus clearly states that his followers will be about his business in those very places — to show love to the unloved.

Jesus' love in our hearts enables us to show the world what true love looks like.

Jesus lays out the ground rules for anyone who wants to be his follower: *"Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me."* Matthew 10:37-38

Jesus is saying here that our love for him should be so strong and committed that all other loves can't possibly compare. The amazing thing about God is that when we do love him to this degree, our devotion and care for all people, including our families, will grow in ever-increasing measure.

Each day as we live out our lives, Jesus loves us unconditionally and sacrificially, and he offers ongoing forgiveness. He asks us, his followers, to offer the same in our relationships. Why? This new breed of love allows us to be involved in healthy relationships and also to be free to express God's love to the world.

The apostle John sums it up: *"We love because he first loved us."*

