

What is Love? Part 2

Romans 9:3b

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

We have talked together enough to know that love is not just desire or need such as most of society talks about in physical and emotional relationships. In these relationships you say, "I love you" to cover up a sense of guilt in desecrating someone else's body. Or you say, "I love you" to make your husband or wife feel better when what you mean is, "I need you or want you." That isn't love. Love in marriage is different than that. Nor is love just parental or filial affection because even animals have some sense of affection for their offspring. In a way, most of us would admit that if it is only that, then love is very much tinged with self-reproduction, self-defense, or projecting yourself into your son or daughter and loving yourself in them. Those things aren't love.

What is love? Don't you often think we all bandy the word around rather glibly? I'm sure you have had the same feelings that I have had at times when people say they love me. You take it at face value and you know they mean well, but aren't a lot of us lonely and feeling pretty down a lot of the time because we don't really believe that anyone does love us? Lots of people say they love us, but we have a feeling inside our hearts somewhere that love is something deeper than what they are talking about. Isn't it true that we are all happily giving definitions of love? We are all singing about love and talking about love. It is the thing we most need and yet that is the thing we don't do.

What is love? Probably all of us would say that we know nothing about love if love is what is seen at Calvary. Isn't that right? If love is what we see in Calvary, then probably most of us know nothing about love. John 3:16 states, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life." If that is love, then probably all of us would say we love very little. Jesus on Calvary took the worst of you and the worst of me and allowed it to be destroyed in himself and himself with it. That is what God says is love. It is Jesus taking you, the very essence of you, that perversity in you, that streak of irrationality in you that makes you want to burst all bonds asunder to get your own way --into himself and allowing it to be destroyed in him. You can be pure today because Jesus allowed your impurity to be destroyed in him. You can be obedient and trusting today because Jesus allowed your disobedience and suspicion to be destroyed in him. You can be what you are today because Jesus allowed the leprosy in you and the cancer in you to be burned out in himself.

That is what love is. Love is being prepared to put yourself in the other one's shoes, to put yourself in the other person's place and to be willing to bear whatever is needed so that they can be free. Loved ones, I know you can't take the evil in me and allow it to be burned out in yourself as Jesus could. We are just human beings. We would never stay alive. We would never come through that experience. I agree with you -- I can't take the jealousy in you and put it in myself and allow Jesus to burn it out in me. But, you have to be willing to -- you have to be willing to do that. I know you can't take the anger in your boss and put it in yourself the way Jesus did and even be prepared to die as it is destroyed -- I know that because you are just another human being. But you have to be willing to do that. That is what love is. You have to be willing to let the atonement be reproduced in you. You can't, of course, only Jesus can -- and he has done it. But it only becomes effective in someone else's life if you are willing to do that.

That's what real love is. Maybe you would look at the way Paul puts it in Romans 9:3, (It is parallel to Moses' request that God blot him out of the book if God is going to condemn them.) "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race." Now it is important to see the tense of the Greek verb there at the beginning, "could wish", it's the imperfect -- he can't wish it. If you're going to heaven today, you can't exchange your place in heaven with someone else. It actually isn't possible, but he says if it was possible, he would wish it. That is how much he is committed to them coming into heaven and coming to know God as their Father.

That is what love is. I know it is hard, but nothing less than that is love. Don't you agree? We talk about involvement, "What we need is more involvement today." But even our idea of involvement is something detached -- where we will involve ourselves in the human rights cause, or we will involve ourselves with this person in the office for a little while to see if we can help them at all. Or, we will involve ourselves in United Fund, or we will involve ourselves in a little bit of work for the lepers. But on the whole, it is a detached kind of, "we are in control of our own sacrifice" attitude. Do you see that real love is not that? Real love is what we see in Jesus on Calvary. It is, "I love you so much that I'm ready to give my whole self -- I'm willing to be lost myself for you that you can be saved."

That is what real love is and unless you and I begin to know love like that, dear ones, our lives will never experience the world-shattering power of intercessory prayer. The world and our friends and relatives will never have released in them the Holy Spirit's power from God -- really! That is why you find that so many of your prayers take a long time in answering --if they ever do get answered -- because they are not deep intercessory prayers. They are not prayers filled with love. They are a detached kind of request, "Lord, touch my boss. Father, try to influence my son or my daughter." But they are not death-feeling prayers. They are not, "Lord, if you want, I would rather be lost myself." They are not that kind of prayer.

I will try to tell you some stories now that I hope will make it plain. In 1880, a Welshman was born call Rees Howells. His biography is called, "Intercessor". He was born in a coal-mining village in Wales. For those of you who have read any of Dylan Thomas' poetry, it is that kind of atmosphere. Rees Howells was converted when he was in his twenties, and one of the things that the Holy Spirit began to show him was the meaning of real love for his friends and neighbors. The Holy Spirit began to show him the truth that we see in Romans 9:3, "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race."

Rees began to see the truth that he had to be willing to put himself completely in the other person's shoes if God was going to answer his prayers. The first person the Holy Spirit laid on his heart was a man called Will Battery. He had had meningitis and it had affected his mind so that when he returned to his home village he felt bewildered, inadequate, and lonely. He began to drink heavily and became the village drunkard. He was just a hopeless case in everybody's eyes. The Holy Spirit said to Rees Howells, "Alright, that is the man that I want you to pray for." Of course Howells reacted much as we would have ourselves, "It wouldn't have come to my mind to love him," he said. "But when the Holy Spirit comes in, he brings the love of the Savior. It seems I could lay down my life for this man. There was a love pouring out of me that I never knew before. Naturally speaking, he'd be the last one with whom I'd spend my spare time and the tin mill would be the last place."

You see, this man Battery was such a mess that he never tied his shoes, never wore socks and was

dirty and unshaven all the time. At night he wouldn't sleep at his uncle's house, where he normally lived, but he would go to the tin mill and sleep on top of the boilers. The Holy Spirit said to Rees Howells, "Unless you are willing to be with him and to be his friend, I cannot move in him myself because I, your Savior, was like that to him."

So from that day on, Rees Howells began to spend all his free time with Will Battery. Howells himself was a coal miner, so he was down in the coal mine from seven in the morning until five at night. But then at five he would go and pick Battery up and take him places and he would sleep with him in the tin mill on the boilers. All his Sundays he spent with Will Battery. Rees was looking forward to his first Christmas as a Christian because he had Christmas day off from the coal mine -- and he knew what he was to do. It wasn't the Christmas present he was going to get that concerned him. He was looking forward to spending the whole day with Will Battery, a man that he would not have normally touched at all.

His mother made up a picnic lunch for him. He left at 10:00 a.m. and he spent the whole day with Will Battery. That evening, Battery made the first move toward God. He came to a cottage meeting and that was the start. Rees Howells continued with him for the next three years, and at the end of three years, at last, after Rees Howells had prayed for him for an hour or two hours every day and lived with him and been his friend, Will Battery received Jesus.

There were lots of times when it had looked the other way. There was a time when Rees Howells had gotten him a job and gotten him lodging, but when he came to see how he was, the landlady was ready to throw him out because Battery had come straight up from the mines with coal dust on his boots and clothes, and jumped right into the clean bed. Howells had to say, "Okay, clean it up and I'll pay for the laundry." Eventually, after that kind of intercessory prayer and love, Will Battery came to Jesus.

Loved ones, God dealt with Rees Howells on the point of his pride because Battery was the kind of man that Rees Howells would never have been seen dead with. God first dealt with him on the point of pride, "Are you willing to do anything so this person may come to me? Are you willing to be thought a fool? Are you willing to humble yourself?" And brothers and sisters, God is probably trying to deal with you and me in some way like that in connection with someone that we say we love. I would speak to even those of you who have sons and daughters. You would say, "Oh, I love them so much." But loved ones, do you see that love is expressed by putting yourself in the other person's shoes?

The second person that Rees Howells was asked to deal with was a man called Jim Stakes. Stakes was a fellow of whom people in the village said, if the devil wouldn't do it, Stakes wouldn't do it -- but if the devil would do it, Stakes will do it. Jim Stakes was just the worst kind of criminal the village had ever seen. Eventually, he was converted himself, but through heavy drinking he was always in poverty. He had a house full of children and had no money. One day, Howells was praying and God began to lay on his heart Jim Stakes in such a way that he actually saw Jim Stakes. He said, "At 10:00 this morning," which was exactly when Howells saw him in a vision, "I saw you right beside me and I knew I had to come to you." And Howells knew what he was to say. He said, "What do you need?" Stakes said, "I'm behind two years in my rent and the bailiffs are coming to take my furniture. My children and my wife will be out in the street." Howells knew what he had to say, but he didn't quite say it. He said in fact, "Well, I'll pay for a year's rent and I have a friend who will pay for the other year's rent."

He carries on this way with the story. "The Holy Spirit spoke to him, 'Didn't you tell me this

morning that you would give all that you have to save him? Why are you only giving him half? Did not the Savior pay all your debt and set you free?' Rees Howells turned and ran down the stairs and said to the man. 'I'm sorry I told you I would only give one year's rent. I am to give you two years' rent and all you need besides. I am to deliver you in such a way that the devil can't use this situation any longer to get at you.' 'The moment I said that,' Howells declared later, 'the joy of heaven came down. It was as if something snapped in my nature and it became more blessed to give than to receive.'"

The two year's rent actually cost him all the savings he had, but he gave it to Stakes. That afternoon, Stakes' wife received Jesus as Savior. God was getting at Howells on the point of money, "Would you be willing to give all your money if this person were to come to me and treat me as God?" And it is possible, loved ones, that somewhere in your life God is speaking to you on that level. You are getting down and praying very holy prayers and very pious prayers and God is saying, "But I answer your LIFE, not your prayers. You want me to hear your prayer but I hear your life. Now, are you willing to do anything that you can to bring this person to me?"

One of the things that Howells learned was, never ask God to do something that you can do yourself for a person. Always be prepared to do everything you can. When you have done everything you can, you can afford to go before God. George Mueller said the same thing, "When I've emptied my pockets for God, then I can expect God to empty his pockets for me." That is what real love is.

In Britain, we call them "tramps". By "tramps" we mean "down-and-outs". In the States, we don't call them tramps -- we say "bums". Howells always talks about tramps, the bums that everybody despises in every society. Those were the next people that God laid on his heart. The Holy Spirit said to him, "You're to be used by me to show my life and my love to the bums and the down-and-outs in your town."

It repelled Howells completely because nobody wanted anything to do with these people. He himself, as a hard-working, industrious coal miner, thought they were nothing. They weren't worth a place on the earth. But the Holy Spirit said, "I want you to love these dear ones through me." So Howells began to pray for the down-and-outs in the town. It wasn't long before one of the tramps turned up at their meeting. The Holy Spirit said, "Give him a new set of clothes and provide him with lodging." So Howells did that for this tramp. Well, the publicity was better than a commercial on television because at the next week's meeting, they were packed out with all the tramps in the town.

One of the things that God said to Howells was, "Are you prepared to endure what they have endured? Are you prepared to live as they've lived? Are you prepared to put yourself in their shoes? Because that's what my Son, Jesus, did." And Howells said reluctantly, "Yes". He was reluctant because he knew that in the government houses the bums received only two meals a day and it was only bread and cheese and soup in the evenings -- whereas Howells had always gotten four good meals a day. The Holy Spirit said, "You're to live like that." So Howells lived like that for the next two and a half years as he interceded for the tramps and the bums in his town.

He did come through some battles in his own faith. For instance, for a long time he worried, "Would there ever come a time when we wouldn't have enough money or food for all the tramps that come to our meetings?" And for a long time, he worried about that and came through the three stages of faith. One is where you're struggling, the other is where you are clinging, and the other is where you're resting. "Struggling" is when you're in the water, struggling to save yourself and you have

no time to help anybody else -- you're in such trouble yourself. "Clinging" is when you cling onto a lifeboat and you can hold on, but you can only use one hand to bring somebody else aboard. Then "resting" is the place you come to in faith where you're in the boat and you're secure in the Father's arms -- and you can use all your hands to help everybody else because he himself has taken care of you.

Howells came through that in regard to the down-and-outs. He came to the place where he just regarded himself as a waiter in a restaurant. He just regarded himself as an employee in God's restaurant -- and he trusted God for enough money for all the bums that should come. There would come times when they would turn up at the grocers to pay the bill they had incurred the previous week for the meal and they would need another five cents -- and that was just what one sick brother had to give. So Howells says, "We rejoiced more in having just exactly the right amount of money because it convinced us that we were not in charge of this thing than if we'd had ten pounds more than we needed."

Eventually, it came to a difficult place where God brought the thing home very closely to Howells himself. He says, "After months in this school of faith, the Holy Spirit put such love in our hearts towards these people that we would rather be without ourselves than allow them to be in want. We became fathers to them." And then he says that God spoke to him and said, "But you live in a beautiful home. Are you prepared to let these tramps come into your home?" Now in fact, the home was not Howells' -- it was his parents'. Yet, he knew God was saying, "Would you let these tramps come in and share your home with you?" Eventually that is what Howells did.

Often in the evening his father would come home and there would be one of those tramps sitting in his father's chair. He wouldn't even get up, but would just lie there all day. That is the way it went, until the family rose up and said, "No! We're not having any more of this." But then the father spoke with great wisdom, "If I stop the tramps, are you willing for me to stop your friends coming? We bring all our friends home and if Rees has sunk so low as to have only tramps for his friends, then he must be free to bring his friends home too." The victory was won -- and the strange part of it was that after that, not another tramp came to the house.

Do you see that he was willing to do "whatever" so that these people would come to God? Now loved ones, that is it! That is what love is. Love is putting yourself in the other person's shoes completely, not only in your own imagination, but in reality. It is dealing with the Holy Spirit so realistically that you know in your heart that there is nothing that the Holy Spirit might ask you to do that you would not do for this person.

Loved ones, could I just bring it down to the people with whom we live? Isn't that just the agony in our own homes? Isn't the agony that we don't know what it's like to live outside our own skin? We don't! We stay securely in our own skin. We look out from inside this head of ours and we see everybody else as outside us. We do not know how the other person feels. As husbands and wives we always say that, don't we? Aren't we always being increasingly surprised that we didn't really know how the other person felt at all? Aren't we constantly coming up against situations where our dear wife is in tears or our husband is quiet? And after a long session you discover that you were doing something that you didn't know hurt the other person -- and then you realize, there's a world of feelings in the other loved one you don't know anything about.

Loved ones, think of those of us who aren't married, those who live with roommates or live with others in houses and apartments, or those of us who work with other people. How many of us here

tend to respond and say, "But we're not called to think how they think. We're not called to feel the way they feel. We're called to do it for our husbands and wives because we don't want a divorce to break up the home. We have to do it there -- but we don't have to do it with the others." Loved ones, that is what we have to do! That is what love is! Love is putting yourself in the other person's position and being willing to be in it. Not just in your imagination, not just, "I wonder how so-and-so is feeling today? I wonder, are they enjoying being out in the water? I wonder what they're doing?" It is not that. It is being willing to do whatever God would ask you to do to bring that person to Himself. That is what intercessory prayer is and that is what real love is.

Brothers and sisters, do you see? It isn't a matter of getting yourself into all kinds of contortions. It isn't a matter of you responding this morning and saying, "Well, that's dumb. What do you want me to do? I'm not going to do that kind of thing. I can't go on two meals a day." Don't go home and say, "Now let me think, what can I do to get my boss to come to Jesus? Okay, I'll give all my money away." Don't -- because that is silly! Don't you see that isn't the issue? The issue is, in what way does the Holy Spirit want you to share Jesus' experience? You see, Jesus took all that is rotten and all that is spoiled in all of us into himself. The Holy Spirit wants you to know in what sense you are to share that -- and he'll tell you. Maybe with many of us, it's just fasting from ice cream or something like that. God will start you as he started Howells, in the baby stages. Then, he'll work you up and up until he comes to the thing that is most precious in your life. Then he'll ask you, "Are you willing to let that go, too?"

Let us pray. Dear Father, we don't want to be chocolate soldiers -- and we don't want to be snow bunnies who talk about you and Jesus, your Son and our Savior, and do nothing about it. Father, we want to be real children of yours. We want to be used by you to change this dear world according to your plan. Will you show each one of us, Holy Spirit, how to become intercessors, and how we can begin to love the people that we say we love -- how we can begin to love them as you love them? Lord, we know that when we do that, your power will be released in their lives. Amen.