

Love or Die: An Introduction to Ephesians
Acts 18:1-19:41; Rev. 2:1-7

*"The aim of our charge is **love** that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith"*

Paul, to Timothy at the church at Ephesus

Introduction: Love is a term and concept that everyone wants, few understand, and even fewer truly experience. Love engages our feelings, emotions, and affections, but is far greater than any of these alone. **R.C. Sprout** said, *"In the New Testament, love is more of a verb than a noun. It has more to do with acting than feeling. The call to love is not so much a call to a certain state of feeling as it is a quality of action."* Love not only defines WHAT we do but WHY we do, the hope of outcome AND the MOTIVE behind action. The reason so few truly experience the fullness of love is because love is defined by God Himself – "GOD IS LOVE" (1 John 4:8) – and thus only by knowing and understanding the God of love can we truly live out and experience all that love entails.

Tracing the idea and definition of love in the Bible, we see there are three overarching ways love plays out: **God's love for His people in Christ, our love in response to Him, and the overflow of love that joyfully serves others.** In each of these, love is demonstrated in action out of an internal desire.

1. God's love for us, demonstrated in the Person and work of Christ

- God loved us first (1 John 4:19) freeing us to love Him, and love is from God (1 John 4:7)
- God abounds in steadfast love and faithfulness, from which He is merciful, gracious, and slow to anger (Ps. 86:15)
- God demonstrates His love toward us that while we were STILL sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8)
- God loves, which means that we are more than conquerors AND are SECURE in that love, since NOTHING can separate us from His love (Rom. 8:37-39)
- God brought us from death to life through crucifixion and resurrection, and now we LIVE BY FAITH IN the Son of God, who loves us and gave Himself up for us (Gal. 2:20).

2. We are freed up to love God in a new way

*"God loves us by **liberating** us from the bondage of self so that we can enjoy knowing and admiring Him forever."* John Piper

- Loving God actively and freely includes singing to Him, telling of His salvation, declaring His glory among the nations, ascribing to Him the glory due His name, worshiping Him in splendor and holiness, giving thanks, and blessing His name forever (1 Chronicles 16:23-37)
- Loving God entails seeking His Kingdom and His righteousness (Matt. 6:33)
- Loving God means setting our minds where our life truly is hidden, with Christ in God, who is above (Col. 3:2)
- Loving the LORD our God with all of our heart and with all of our souls and with all of our mind becomes our greatest command and joy, defining the course of our life and keeping us radically dependent on Christ (Matt. 22:37)

3. Our love for others and each other is an overflow of God's love in Christ
"If we love God most we will love others best." Jon Bloom
- Loving our neighbor is an explicit command sourced in our love of Christ (Matt. 22:39)
 - Loving each other is **DISTINCTIVE**, flowing from Christ's love for us, creating a picture that all people will know we are Jesus' disciples (John 13:34-35)
 - Loving each other is the foundation of true unity (Col. 3:14)
 - Loving each other should be sincere, pure, and fervent (1 Pet. 1:22) and providing covering for a multitude of sins (1 Pet. 4:8)
 - Loving each other is not optional, but flows out of those who were born of God and know God (1 John 4:7)

As we begin our study in Ephesians, we see this same pattern and emphasis. Love is used in some form **20 times** in 6 chapters, bracketing the beginning and the end (1:4 and 6:24). There are 8 times where God's love is expressed for humans (1:4, 2:4, 3:19, 5:1, 2, 25; 6:23, 24), and eleven times of believers loving each other (1:15, 3:17, 4:2, 15, 16; 5:2, 25, 28, 33, 6:24) and one mention a believers love for Christ (6:24). We'll see that love is a dominant theme for Paul's ministry, the life of this church, and the cautionary tale of its perpetuation. Ephesians is a unique epistle since there is no major issue being addressed, no point of admonition given, and no problems pointed out. However, we will see that they faced real challenges and real temptations which we face today. We are facing unceasing false narratives, calls to think like the culture (be afraid of everything) and potential disunity brought about by polarizing responses. We must fight for truth, but we must do so with the goal and motive of **love**, because a lack of love will lead to a deterioration of our joy, effective mission, and tangible love for the world to see. We must **love or die, since love caused us to live**.

THE FOUNDING OF THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS (Acts 18:18-28)

One hundred years from now, if someone would want to know about Grace Church of Simi Valley in the year 2021, they would have traveled some context to understand the true makeup of the church: what was Simi like at the time, what was technology like, what was the makeup of families and nationalities, was there a global pandemic, etc. To understand this letter, we need to understand it in its larger context.

In the Fall of **52 A.D.**, after spending 18 months in the city of Corinth (Acts 18:11) on his 2nd missionary journey, Paul travelled to Ephesus with his companions Priscilla and Aquila. He only stayed a brief time, perhaps a week or up to a month, and reasoned with the Jews in the synagogue, a common practice of Paul's ministry (Acts 18:19). He left the couple there and went on to Caesarea and Antioch, before visiting the disciples in Galatia and Phrygia. *What did Paul find when he got to Ephesus? Why was this a city that was important to reach? What was it like there?*

- **City of Commerce and Culture** – Today the ancient city of Ephesus is 4 miles inland from the Aegean Sea on the west coast of modern day Turkey. But in Paul's day, it was a thriving port city (but they had a silt problem...don't we all!) aligned on the western end of the **Royal Road**, a major thoroughfare linking the East to the West (see map). The city housed between 200,000 and 250,000 people, and was ranked only behind Rome and Athens in terms of influence and rank. Traveling would have been easier, and it was a main hub to reach the rest of Asia. A modern city in every definition of the word, it contained baths, gymnasiums, a stadium for gladiators, civic and commercial agoras, but one of the most prominent feature would have been **the theater** (see slide) which is fantastically well preserved. Covered in and carved out of marble,

it would have seated an immense 24,000 people. This is where Acts 19:23-41 took place. **Why was this such a strategic place? Why did Paul strategically move to large cities?**

- **City of Worship and Magic** – But more than this, Ephesus was known throughout the world because of its centrality of worship of the **goddess Artemis** (or her Roman name **Diana** — **see slide**). Artemis was seen as the protector of the city and its people, and to honor and worship her, a Temple was built for her glory. It was the largest building known in antiquity and was considered one of the seven wonders of the world. For centuries much of life in Ephesus revolved around the temple of Artemis. Not only this, but it was a central hub for the whole world to come and worship (Acts 19:27), meaning the nations were present in Ephesus. It also created a backdrop for a distinct God and distinct gospel, as the natives of Ephesians were already in tune with the supernatural.
- **Influence of Apollos** – The church was formed and highly influenced by the ministry of Apollos. He was **eloquent, competent in the Scriptures, bold in the synagogues, fervent, accurate, and powerful in his ability to refute error and false teaching** (Acts 18:24-28). Priscilla and Aquila took him under their wing and helped clarify the way of Christ more accurately, since he was lacking this level of teaching. It's interesting that in a city that was full of false worship, the magic arts, and idol worship as its central commerce, God provided a bold lion to shape and lead. The church had to stand firmly, boldly, and unified in a city that heavily tilted away from God and toward demonic influenced worship.

Why was it so important to be clear and accurate with the Scripture in Ephesus given the culture (18:25-26)? Why was it imperative that a young, bold, powerful leader like Apollos have more mature guidance and mentoring in his life? What does this teach us about roles and functions in the church?

THE FLOURISHING OF THE CHURCH AT EPHEBUS (Acts 19)

On Paul's third missionary journey, from the Fall of **53 A.D.**, Paul returned back to Ephesus, where he would spend the next **three years**. (Til the Spring of 56 A.D – Acts 20:31). Paul loved the people of Ephesus. His goal of instruction was **love from a pure heart, good conscience, and sincere faith** (1 Tim. 1:5). He served the church with tears (Acts 20:19), with trials from the Jews plotting against him, and in humility working night and day (Acts 20:31). Under his leadership, the believers there thrived, influencing not only the city but the world around.

- **The outpouring of the Holy Spirit** (19:1-7) – When Paul returned he found disciples, trained under the training of Apollos. They had understood the teaching of John the Baptist, which was focused on repentance (Matthew 3:1-12, and were baptized accordingly. But when Paul explained the work and ministry of Jesus, they were baptized in His name and received for the first time, the Holy Spirit. The first time any group received the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2:4; 10:46), they spoke in tongues and prophesied. This was NOT a second blessing, but the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that would come on every believer, Jew or Gentile, from this time forward. The Spirit is Who brought unity in the church (Eph. 4:3)
- **The Effective Philosophy of Ministry** (19:8-10) – How did the church grow? How was it effective in the city and beyond.? He started with discussing and dialoging in the synagogue, seeking to persuade the Jews, but when it was clear that their hearts were hard, he moved to the public

square and taught, discussed, and dialogues daily in the Hall of Tyrannus (think of a local university where philosophy and life is argued, debated, and discussed). He did this for 2 years, mixing in public proclamation, hard work, and house to house ministry (Acts 20:20). This was a mixture of evangelism, equipping, and teaching. After 2 years, something incredible happened: *“so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the LORD, both Jews and Greeks (Acts 19:10).* This would have meant 2 million people heard about Jesus, His Kingdom, and the need for repentance when they had never heard of it! It meant that those who were taught were sent out, that one church can have a reach of millions while maintaining health and unity in one place.

- **The Inroads of the Gospel brings opposition, opportunities (19:11-41)** – Paul was granted the ability to do miracles by the Holy Spirit, to validate his message and position as a n Apostle. It makes sense that in a city where magic arts was taught, bought and sold, these miracles would be effective. He healed the sick and drove out evil spirits. In a foolish mimicry by seven sons of Sceva, they tried to invoke the name of Jesus to cast out a demon, but instead got overpowered and worked over by the spirit possessed man. But as a result, many came to know the Lord and they began to confess and divulge their wicked practices, choosing to burn their paraphernalia which was valued at **50,000 silver pieces**, equivalent to 50,000 days wages (or as some would say, it cost zero dollars!). As a result, the word continued to increase and prevail mightily.

When the gospel takes hold of people, radical change follows, and that begins to effect culture. In this case, it began to effect the economics of the city, which led to a riot. They grabbed two of Paul's companions, and in confusion, brought them to the theater. In a fascinating scene, the crowd began shouting **“Great is Artemis of the Ephesians”**. With the crowd in a frenzy (most in the crowd did not know why they were there!), the city clerk finally settled them down and compelled the crowd to follow normal protocol in the courts. After this, the crowd dispersed.

What does all of this show us about this church? They were born out of clear teaching, functioned in the midst of opposition, and knew the cost of following Christ. There was a clear distinction between the church and world around, since those that came out of false worship had to repent and turn completely. There was no middle ground. They knew the miraculous work of God, and the supernatural work of Christ in their hearts. They also saw the people of the city follow in ignorance, like lemmings plunging off a cliff. This church saw the **work ethic of Paul**, how teaching and equipping resourced the church to be effective where they were planted. This church was in a position to be influential with all churches, leaving a legacy of faithfulness. But though this church was in the 50's, and Paul taught them in Ephesians in the 60's, they lost by the 90's.

THE FLOUNDERING OF THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS (Rev. 2:1-7)

But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first

When John wrote the Revelation he had received in 95-96 A.D, things had changed in Ephesus. They were still working hard, laboring well, enduring patiently, and vetting out what was true and false. They were bearing up under trials and not growing weary, which would be a great encouragement if given for us. If this was listed on a church evaluation, we would be pretty happy. However, there was a HUGE indictment against the church.

Apparently, the church continued to DO, continued to teach, continued to work, but they stopped **loving. This would have encapsulated love for God, Christ and others.** They did ministry, but failed to

pursue God. They did the external and right things, but did not thirst for Christ. They could call out what was false, but ceased to feast on the truth.

This is the corrective thought for us today! As we study a deeply theological book, as we see mysteries revealed and God's glory in Christ and the church, the question we must ask ourselves is this: *Are we loving God in Christ? Do we do all things out of that love? Are we satisfied with Him? Are we doing the RIGHT things but our hearts are far from Him?* God is doing some great things with this church, but the true test is our temperature gauge of love. This is what Jesus found in Israel during His ministry, which was just like Israel of the OT "*This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me,* (Matt. 23:8-9). This is what Paul prayed for at Ephesus, "*so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith — that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*" (Eph. 3:17-19).

John's counsel to the church: "*Remember, therefore from where you have fallen, repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place, unless you repent*" (Rev. 2:5)

Has your love for Christ waned? Are you going through the motions but are not engaged in your pursuit of Him? Are you loving others on your own terms? In a weary time where opposition is growing and unity is hard to come by, we must recalibrate our minds, time and affections. What needs to change? Spending time differently? Changing your intake of information? Growing in your understanding? My prayer is that our love for God in Christ will grow, and our love for each other will overflow, and that will breed unity unmatched, so that the world will see a clear picture of God's love in His church.