

Acts 8:26 – 40, 1 John 4:7 – 21 & John 15:1 – 8

I was listening to a podcast about finding your life's purpose. And they were saying that to find what your purpose is in life, you should follow what you love to do, what sets you on fire and fills your heart with love. And this is a pretty well-known answer, you obviously aren't going to be able to find fulfillment doing something you despise or are not good at. We probably all know the quote attributed to Confucius which says, *if you love what you do, you'll never work a day in your life*. But on this program they took it even further than that and said, it's not only *find what you love to do*, but **strive to show love in ALL that you do and your life's purpose will find you**. And I thought that was really interesting because looking at it this way- it isn't only a self-oriented kind of thing, it is also a process by which we bring love into even the most mundane matters.

All Christians know that according to our faith we are to love one another. Even non-Christians know that according to *our* faith, Christians are supposed to love others. But what exactly that means, surprisingly, is a source of great confusion among Christians. As it turns out, many people aren't sure *how* to love others... which might sound kind of strange at first- I mean, it seems kind of obvious. But if you think about it, it *can* be really confusing. Take the story of the kid watching the butterfly struggle to emerge from the cocoon. He loves it and wants to help it so he cuts it free of the cocoon. Subsequently, not having grown strong from the struggle to free itself, it cannot fly and soon dies. The kid thought he was loving it, but it turns out his actions were harmful.

I think of the person who is addicted, many friends and family try to love them by helping them in various ways that actually just enable them to continue in their addiction. Out of love, parents often fail to teach their kids the hard lessons in life and instead cater to their childish behaviors. Or, a big one in our country today- how do we love those with whom we strongly disagree?

Love one another- yes, we know we are supposed to do that... *Love one another*- yes, that is what we *think* we are doing... but, *love one another*... is that actually what we are really doing? How do we know? And how do we decide who is right when two people's loving actions are completely opposite of one another? Love, love, love... yes- but how, how, how?

And boy, there are no easy answers to this! A couple of rules, though, do provide some general guidance. First, from the scriptures it is clear, *in this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins... and since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another*. From the scriptures we learn that love is hard, love hurts, because love involves sacrifice, it involves giving one's self for the other. In the end, of course, this brings the greatest fulfillment we can ever know- but in the midst of things, it's a difficult process. So it isn't all a touchy-feely kind of good feeling... true love is born of strength and determination- a willful choice to lay down your life for the sake of the other... so *that*- I think is helpful in trying to figure out how to love one another- **look to God's love in Christ**.

The next general rule is that much of what it means to love someone is determined by the other person. This is why Jesus didn't offer the same pat answer to everyone, but responded to people in many and various ways. Now, this is a little tricky because it isn't always going to feel like love to them. Take for instance, a shot or some kind of painful treatment for an ailment. It's not going to feel very good at the time, but it will help them become better in the long run.

Part of this, is discerning the person's situation. If they are hungry, don't give them a glass of water- give them something to eat. If they are naked, don't try to feed them, give them something to wear. If they need someone to just listen and love and accept who they are and where they're at- do that, don't try to get them on course. If they are looking for answers, don't be passive, offer guidance when they seek it. Loving- looks a little different in each situation.

Philip is a great example of this. He discerns exactly what the Ethiopian in the carriage needed and then offered it to him. It so happened, he was in the position where he was looking for answers, and that is what Philip opens his mind to. The right thing, at the right time, for the right person- that is a big part of what it means to love others.

Oh great, you may say, no pressure there, just the right thing at just the right time? How are we ever supposed to do that? I thought these rules were supposed to make loving simpler not harder, clearer, not more confusing. Well, it's not easy- but it is very simple... pray... but not just any prayer, to love as God would have us love- for each person in each situation we must say a very special prayer and mean it from our hearts. To love others as God loved us, we need to pray, *God, I'm listening...* and then really mean it, and really do it. Listen, as Philip did for the Spirit's instructions.

Of course Jesus gives us the clearest instructions on how to do this, *abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing...*

To abide means *to be with*, and to be with means to listen to... if you aren't praying, *God, I'm listening- then we aren't listening, and we aren't abiding.* And if we aren't abiding, our opportunities to love others will pass us by. How many times do we hear the Spirit say, *hey do this*, but because we distracted or doubt it or hesitate we miss the chance? This happened to me just the other day. It was raining and an older woman was loading her many shopping bags into the back of her car at the store. And the Spirit said, *offer to help her out-* But I hesitated, and rationalized, and debated excuses in my head— and the moment was gone. How many opportunities to show our love like that do we miss because we are not listening— and therefore, not doing?

Think about the rich history of Christianity in Ethiopia- centuries of powerful witness... none of that may have come about, if *Philip* had hesitated, if he had not first- been listening **for** the Spirit... and second, if he had not been listening **to** the Spirit- actually willing to instantly obey his command!

It's not that easy... but it is that simple. And don't think that just because you may not get out very much or may not interact with other people very often that you don't have the opportunity to love- because every single second, of every single day, we are always in the midst of an opportunity to love. Even if we are all alone, we are never *really* alone, our minds are filled with thoughts; of people, of places, of events. Listen to what the Spirit is telling you... is it asking you to pray for them, is it asking you to call or write a letter or email, is it asking you to forgive them, is it asking you to change your thinking? The same rule applies, pray; *God, I'm listening. Show me what it means to love right here, right now, this person in this situation... God, I'm listening.* And if you do pray that from your heart and are really willing to do what the Spirit tells you, I promise you the Spirit will not keep silent.

So if we want to grow in our faith, obey Jesus and love others- then pray. If we want to know what it *means* to love others- then listen. If we want to *love* others- then *love* them... Amen.