

# LOVE IS THE AGENDA

Pastor Rick Henderson

September 21-22, 2024

I love, love, love her story. We're going to talk about love and generosity today. Something I appreciate about Lori's story is something many of you have learned through experience. When we serve, we serve together, and that cultivates a powerful experience of belonging. In giving ourselves to others, we discover profound connection and joy.

Why do you think that is? If you lean toward evolutionary theory, the only explanation that you get is that a feeling of joy is just a dopamine hit. It's natural selection's way of leveraging your selfishness to contribute to collective survival. Does that give you the warm fuzzies? It does seem a bit incoherent to conclude that at rock bottom, selflessness, and selfishness are really just the same thing.

There is another answer to why we feel so good when we serve and give to others. The answer from biblical Christianity is that you were designed for relationship by a relational God. We are all made in his image, and we are all made for relationship and unity. And every time we get a hit of joy from loving and serving others, it's like his signature in the code. It's a genius way to remind all people, in all places, in all time, from across all cultures—we were made for love, by a God who is love.

One of the ways that express and experience love with another is by praying together.

This is a season of common-focused prayer. We just completed week 2 in our prayer guide that centers on being a church of all cultures. Some of you shared with me that there was a line that really spoke to you this week. *We need to model that our **differentness** does not need to mean **divisiveness**.* That's good. It was written by a very godly, humble man in our church. Let's slow down and pray together for that.

## Prayer

I'm going to try and experiment. Let's see how I do.

Nothing in life is \_\_\_\_\_.

FREE

If you're at Thursdays on First, downtown, and a stranger comes up to you and offers you an unopened box of pizza, what are you immediately asking yourself?

WHAT'S WRONG WITH IT?

Who's thinking this?

If a salesperson shows up at your door and offers a service that is far cheaper than any competitor, what are you thinking?

WHAT'S THE CATCH?

If your child is approached by a stranger at a park who offers them candy, what do you want them to do?

RUN AWAY!

All of those are reasonable responses. They are certainly my responses. I don't know if it's something we're born with or something that our families and culture form in us from a very young age, but we have a complicated relationship with generosity.

Generosity that is unexpected, doesn't cost us, and/or is from an unknown person is treated as **suspicious**, even **dangerous**.

I'm not judging that. That is a natural consequence of living in a world where people use generosity as a ploy to get something from us, sometimes it's even used as bait to hurt us. That's why it's complicated. Whether we call it generosity or kindness, what we're talking about is love put into action. As much as we all love love, we have a complicated relationship with it.

Because of our complicated relationship with love and kindness and generosity, when we say love is the agenda, I think many of us translate that into something else and we don't even realize that we do it.

- Because so many of us have come to be wary of anyone who wants to use the trappings of love to get something from us...
- Because so many of us have been taught, or it's been modeled to us that the trappings of love are what we do to get what we want or need from others...

We naturally, subconsciously, without even realizing it—many of us translate this **[Pointing to the screen]** to, Love the strategy. Without any maliciousness, we sometimes love people so that they will...

- Love us back
- Accept us
- Align with us

There's nothing wrong with any of those desires. Those are good things to want. We need them. I do want to be clear: The way of Jesus confronts our default setting and complicated relationship with love.

Love is the **AGENDA**, not a **STRATEGY**.

Loving people is not a means to an end. It is an end unto itself. Let's get honest about what this means for Autumn Ridge. Loving people is not a means to get people to come to our church or to believe in Jesus. Loving people is an end unto itself. Do we want more people to come? Yes. Our church sits inside of a five-mile radius that has 110,000 people living inside of it. I want them to come. I want those people to know Jesus. That is what we are about. And yet, we don't love people as a means to an end. Some of us immediately feel refreshed by that. If any of you grew up with a church background like the one I grew up with, what I just said may feel very disruptive. So, let's do this. Let's see what God's word has to say to us.

Grab a Bible and find 1 Corinthians 13. It's in the second half of the Bible, called the New Testament. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, and 1 Corinthians. Next week we launch a new series from the Old Testament. Are there any fans of Jonah? That begins next week. Let me warn you. Jonah is a booger to find when you're flipping through the Old Testament. Maybe practice opening your Bible to it.

Here's an idea for you to try with your roommates or family this week. Have everybody get their Bible out after dinner. The last one to find Jonah has to do the dishes. Be ready next week. Hopefully right now you've found 1 Corinthians 13. We're actually going to start with the end of chapter 12.

**1 CORINTHIANS 12:27-13:13** *Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? Now eagerly desire the greater gifts. And yet I will show you the most excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.*

How many of you have had this experience? You see someone out in public, and your first thoughts are all the reasons you don't like them, what they've done to you, and all the reasons you hope they don't see you and come talk to you. Anyone like that?

Or, who in here immediately starts imagining a conversation with that person where they say something that gives us the green light to put them in their place? I do that! I'm not proud of it. But I do that.

Love doesn't do that. Every time I do that, every time you do that it's a reminder to repent and take our next step. I had to do that this week.

*Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

If we are followers of Jesus, we should be gripped by this question. What does love require of me?

You've probably heard us say this.

Leadership is a **DESTINATION** of discipleship.

A misguided view, a misunderstanding of this, a counterfeit version, thinks leadership is a ladder you climb. Some people are higher than others. Some people are more important than others. I get it. That's the way of the world. That's not the way of Jesus.

*Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? Now eagerly desire the greater gifts. And yet I will show you the most excellent way.*

We should desire the kind of gifts that make a greater positive impact on others. We don't desire to be greater. Those two things are miles apart. The way of Jesus is pretty great, but it never leads to greatness.

**MATTHEW 20:25-28** *Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your **slave**—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

In a message coming this November, I'll tell you a story about people who voluntarily became slaves so they could make a greater gospel impact. We can argue about whether or not Jesus was using hyperbole. Was this an exaggeration to make a point? Wherever you land in that

debate, hyperbole and exaggeration cannot be used as an excuse to avoid the point. What was the point? At the very least it's this.

In the way of Jesus, no one **ASCENDS** to leadership. We **DESCEND** into it.

Leadership is more than serving. Leadership requires much more than acts of service. The status of a **leader** never rises above the status of servant. A leader in the way of Jesus willingly and happily takes on the disposition of slave to all.

Anyone who wants to lead must shackle himself or herself to this mindset. You are above me. What you need is above what I need. What's important to you is above what's important to me. If any of us feel even the tiniest amount of sentimentality about this, I want you square up and stare that sentimentality down. And punch it right in the face.

We can't afford to feel sentimental about this. Sentimentality about being slaves will lead us to celebrate it as an abstract Christian concept and adopt it into our vocabulary, but it will never be our identity. I heard a pastor once say to a room full of pastors, "Everyone wants to be a servant until they're treated like one."

We must start to by coming to terms with how radical and revolutionary this is. This is weird. This is strange. This is uncommon and peculiar. And yet, this is the way of Jesus. It's the way that Jesus loved us. This is his way and once you step into it you discover life that is truly life.

When we serve, we never serve down. We only serve up. When give generously to others, we never give down. We only give up. When we truly see each other, we never look down. We only look up.

Pity looks down on people. Love looks up at each other. Until we get this, we will not get what it is to be the church. Until we get this, we will not truly understand and live out mutual submission. Until we get this all the way down to our bones, we will be suckers for confusing prominence with importance. Until we get this all the way down to our bones, we will be suckers for appealing to power, control, shame, and manipulation.

We want to walk in the way that's greater. The way that is truly great is the way of love. This passage in 1 Corinthians gives us a reality check.

*If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

We are vulnerable to overestimating \_\_\_\_\_ performance at the expense of love.

- Intellectual
- Moral
- Humanitarian
- Religious

In the way of Jesus, love is everything. And best of these other things, without love, they are nothing.

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.*

I want to quickly make some observations about what love is not.

Love is not **TRANSACTIONAL**.

In the way of Jesus, we don't give to get. We give, or we love, or we serve because we want for others, not from others. There is another kind of counterfeit version of love that's not as grotesque as this. I'm talking about a misunderstanding of love that misses the mark—but it's not quite as ugly as that.

Love is not **PRAGMATIC**.

That is, it's not something we do because it results in the outcome we want. Sometimes we love people, and we are not trying to get anything from them for ourselves. We want for them, not from them. That is very, very good. And yet, in that wonderful desire we can still accidentally settle for a counterfeit. This fool's gold version of love sees love as a means to get people to do what's good for themselves. We can be tempted to love and use love to get people to...

- Believe like we want them to believe.
- Act like we want them to act.
- Achieve what we want them to achieve.
- Give what we want them to give.
- Change the way we want them to change.

Maybe all the things we want for them are good and right. And yet, if we fall into this approach, if we love only to get these outcomes, we will be weak sauce at love.

We don't love people because it **WORKS**.

Sometimes love doesn't work. When I was in middle school, I was a horrible student. My dad did his best. He told me how critical my studies were. He didn't want me to be limited in life the way he was. So, he did everything he could. He told me that I had to get it right in middle school because my grades would count once I'm in high school.

So, in my knuckle-headed, middle school brain, I translated that to mean grades don't count now. I'd calculate what I needed to make a D and then only do that much. He kept me from fun events. He grounded me. He made me do extra schoolwork at home. Nothing worked. On my first report card in high school, I was on the honor roll.

He thought it was a mistake. He asked me what changed, and I told him, "it counts now." Years later he told me he wanted to slap my mouth. I was one of those kids that it didn't matter what my dad did. It wasn't going to work. Some of you have kids like me. Some of you have adult kids whose choices you break your heart. Nothing you do or attempt works to woo them into a better way of living.

Should you stop loving them because it doesn't work? No way! Love never fails. If we only love because it results in the outcomes we want, we will be people who lose our stamina when we perceive it doesn't work. And we'll end up just loving people who are easy to love, the people who don't cost us anything. That's why this approach to love will make us all weak sauce at love.

Love doesn't ask if it worked. Love asks if **NEEDS** were **SERVED**.

Today is a day we are gearing up for Ridgefest. I hope you will be inspired to put love into action by donating candy, expressing generosity at the Missions store, or signing up to serve. All of that is available in the lobby.

The reason that we do this is not because it's an effective strategy at getting people to come to our church. Yes, new people come to our church because of Ridgefest. Some of you joined our church family and it was because of your experience at Ridgefest. I'm crazy about that.

Some people in our church serve on and lead ministries, and their first experience with our church was Ridgefest. It shouldn't surprise us that receiving love and generosity is attractive and persuasive. While love is persuasive, we don't love to persuade, and while generosity is attractive, we don't give to attract.

Love is an end unto itself. And we simply want to serve needs because we love people. Years ago, our church learned that this city needs low-cost, family-friendly events. Because we love people we wanted to serve that need. What I'm going to say next could be misunderstood, so I want you to lean in. If the day comes that low-cost, family-friendly events are no longer needed in our city, Ridgefest will go away. But as long as our city has that need, Ridgefest

some other effort by us isn't going anywhere. Even if it never results in a single person coming to our church. Why? Love doesn't ask if it worked. Love asks if needs were served.

I want to wrap up with three quick thoughts and a few stories.

Love isn't transactional. It is **TRANSFORMATIVE**.

Love isn't practical. It is **POWERFUL**.

Do you know what I know about you? We're inspired to love because of what it does for other people. And here's the deal. We aren't giving from our best efforts and from our own ability. We're sharing with others what's been shared with us. We have an infinite reservoir of love and generosity because we have been loved by Jesus. And he makes us able to love others the way we have been loved by him.

I want to share three stories with you. I could tell many, many more. I just don't have the time to tell them all.

There's a woman in our city who lost her job and couldn't afford groceries for her kids. She received a big box that one of you put together. If you don't know what that is, it's a big box of groceries. She got an new job and got back on her feet. She was so moved by your generosity that she wanted to join in the generosity effort. She wanted to give financially to the next big box initiative, but she was afraid that if she gave us a check we wouldn't cash it. So, she sent us a cashier's check to force us to take her money. She didn't just once. She did it twice. Love is transformative and powerful.

Because of your giving we can support missionaries around the globe. We don't just send them money. We also provide support. Because of your generosity we paid for counseling services for missionaries. When the counseling service we used learned that you all were paying for the care of missionaries, they decided they weren't going to charge and now offer it pro bono. Love is transformative and powerful.

The last story I want to share is anonymous but is shared with permission.

"Approximately two years ago, something happened to me that I wish no one ever had to deal with. My marriage was over and for the next two years I would be fighting in court and with divorce lawyers to finalize it. I have two small children who at the beginning of this process were one and three. I was trying to pay my bills and keep life as normal as possible for them. For the first year or so, I was OK. I had enough in my savings account to pay my bills, pay my lawyer and have enough for day-to-day expenses. As time went on, things got tough. My funds in my accounts had run out. I had racked up about \$20,000 worth of credit card debt trying to pay bills.



"I have had my job for 17 years, had paid off my car, paid off my student loans. I have always been good with my money. All of the bills and all of the debts with the lawyers and the divorce became overwhelming. This is when I had talked to Pastor Svea and she told me about the benevolent fund. I met with the team told them my story. It was emotional. But it was also a moment of relief. I didn't have to keep my story hidden. I didn't need to be ashamed. The group of people working on the benevolent team listened to my story, asked questions, were compassionate, and lent a listening ear with no judgment. No matter what they decided that day it was refreshing to have the support of people that I didn't know who understood that I was trying, but I was struggling. The committee helped me and my family to pay two of my credit card bills for one month. What an amazing gift. I was overwhelmed with emotion and gratitude.

"This provided me and my kids relief for one month to not have to worry about paying the bills or continuing to get more debt. The benevolent fund was a special gift given by generous donations of members of Autumn Ridge. Although I am still paying my debt and bills today, I look forward to the day that I can contribute to the fund that helped me and my kids in a huge moment of need. We are so thankful for the generosity of this monetary gift. Thank you just doesn't seem like enough.

"With deepest gratitude to those who donate to the fund."

Love is transformation and powerful. Here's my last thought.

**BOTTOM LINE:** Love doesn't always work. It does put us to **WORK**.

Love doesn't always result in the outcomes that we know our best. It just doesn't work that way sometimes. But love does put us to work, to serve the best interest of others. We're going to end a little early because we want to give you time move around the lobby and engage with Ridgefest sign ups, candy donation, and the missions store. I don't want you to feel hurried. We are going to end now the way we end each week. Will you stand with me as I read 2 Corinthians 5:14-15.

**2 CORINTHIANS 5:14-15** *For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.*

You are dismissed. Let's go out compelled by the love of Jesus.