



Love out of Acceptance

Begin with a few minutes of silence, preparing yourselves for giving and receiving. Share something of the difficulties you find in spending time with God. (20 minutes)

Growing in Love

God's command to love causes much confusion because of the prevalent notion that love comes with or as the result of good feelings. The idea that we must first feel good about someone before we can love them is hard to shake off.

If we are not to love using good or bad feelings as a basis for loving, then what is this love that God is asking of us?

The following applies to love of others, love for God, as well as love for ourselves.

Love begins as awareness

The essence of love is the acknowledgement and esteem of the loved one. This can only come with awareness of them, seeing them as they are, focusing our attention on them and receiving them.

Awareness brings choice

Having seen the person as they are, we then have the choice of accepting them or not. At this point we may perhaps start putting conditions on their acceptability: 'If only you were more this or less that, then . . .'. Acceptance and change are two separate issues that thus mistakenly become joined.

Love is based on the choice of unconditional acceptance

Love says 'I love you as you are now. There is nothing you need do or be to have my love. It is my choice to love you and is not dependent on the feelings that come up in me, so you can rest secure in our relationship. I will give you any space you need to grow and change.' To be like this, we need first to have received and experienced this kind of unconditional love from God, since no human person can love us like this. If we have not or cannot experience this love, we will not be able to accept and love ourselves in this way and we will not love our neighbour in any real way other than out of duty.

Change happens in an atmosphere of love

Since all change involves the risk of letting go of old ways and defences and making oneself vulnerable during the change, this can only happen in an atmosphere of acceptance, gentleness, patience and unconditional love.

Change for growth cannot be forced, pushed and threatened, it can only be invited and gently encouraged. Feeling safe is a basic requirement for any change.



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God has created the situation where we are not required to first 'fix ourselves up', to 'fulfil the last letter of the law', to 'put our house in order' before we are loved and offered life. No – if that were the case, none of us would be Christians yet.

'This is love, that while we were still sinners God loved us and Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8). While he was still smelling of pigs, the lost son was embraced by his father, who then called for the servants to start a feast. God's love for us is one thing and his desire that we change and grow free is another. Our changing begins only after he has already been loving us. There is never a suggestion that he will love us only if we change. This is the Gospel, that through Christ's death all the conditions for entering into a love relationship with the Trinity are met. Works or payment or conditions to change never enter into the picture. In fact, there is nothing that we can do to have his love except to receive it gratefully.

Changing, working to put things right in ourselves, is then part of the ongoing relationship we share with God. Unconditional love challenges, encourages and supports growth. It stimulates a healthy desire to live creatively, to be gentle and patient with one's failures. There is a wholesome acceptance of oneself with a sense of humour which balances the awkward engagement of our dark side.

If God loves us unconditionally, then what right have we to put conditions on ourselves before we will love ourselves?

This applies equally in our love for others. It needs to be given fully and without condition, which will create a climate for growth and change for the other and for the relationship as a whole.

The one thing we can and must do is to learn to accept love and acceptance. I need to accept the love God has for me. Any feelings of unworthiness or disbelief that emerge when I contemplate God's love for me should be explored to see what they are saying about the prejudices I carry about myself.

When we receive compliments or offers of help, how do we react? Do we feel uncomfortable or even unbelieving? Can we begin to take the compliments as truthful and put on one side our doubts as to their validity? Try to do this with any affirmation given you and acknowledge what it is saying about you. Try affirming others as well and see what it does for you and for them.

Consider

- Romans 15:7: 'Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you.'
- 1 John 4:19: 'We love because he first loved us.'
- Romans 5:8: 'But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.'

Reflect on the above for 20 minutes, journal and share as you feel may be appropriate.

During the week, reflect on your different relationships as you 'meet them' and consider what conditions you may impose on them.



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