

Once I visited a couple who had started attending church regularly. Neither the husband or wife came from a Presbyterian background. I said, "Don't worry. Most Presbyterians don't come from a Presbyterian background." But then the wife asked me a very good question. She asked, "What is the main teaching in the Presbyterian church?" I thought for a moment. In my mind I was thinking about predestination and election. I wondered if I should try to explain the five points of Calvinism. What should I say? Finally it came to me that I had to make it simple and plain. I said the most important teaching in the Presbyterian church is this, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Most of us have been familiar with that verse from our mothers' knee. This is the first verse of the Bible that Kay and I have tried to teach our boys. Nearly every night when I put the boys to bed I will repeat this verse and encourage Andrew and Philip to repeat it with me. Let's us now re-

peat this verse together, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

The theme of my sermon is love. And, first of all, I want to talk about our need of love as human beings. Think about just how basic the need of love is for us. If we are not loved, if we do not experience love on a human level we develop anti-social behavior, we can even get sick and die. We perish. I can remember my high school psychology book. I can still the picture of two monkeys that psychologists had-been-experimenting with. One monkey was raised from infancy by its mother. That little monkey grew up surrounded by the love and affection of his mother. She was warm. She was soft. She fed him. She played with him. He grew up to be a healthy and happy monkey.

The other monkey, however, was taken away from his mother at birth and raised by a machine that fed him. He never knew the love of his mother. He didn't experience her softness, her warmth, her affection. That monkey was subject to far more

sickness than the loved monkey. Eventually the monkey died for no apparent reason other than he was not loved.

Don't you think our need of love is every bit as great as that of monkeys? A child who grows up in an atmosphere of criticism becomes distrustful and morose, and sometimes anti-social. In Sioux Falls, South Dakota, a church began a halfway house where men released from prison could live for a nominal rent until they could get jobs. Leighton Ford relates a story of the effects of loving concern on one man. "One parolee in his thirties had been in reform school or prison every year since his mid-teens. One day as he sat in the living room, the three year old daughter of the couple in charge crawled up in his lap, put her arms around his neck, and gave him a hug. With tears rolling down his cheeks, he said, 'You know, this is the first time I can remember anybody touching me in love.' A few weeks later that man publicly expressed his commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour." \*  
 A child needs love, lots of love to flourish and and grow and live life to its fullest.

I think of a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay. She writes, somewhat saraastically at first,

Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink  
 Nor slumber nor a roof against the rain;  
 Nor yet a floating spar to men that sink  
 And rise and sink and rise and sink again;  
 Love can not fill the thickened lung with breath  
 Nor clean the blood, nor set the fractured bone;  
 Yet many a man is making friends with death  
 Even as I speak, for lack of love alone.

Do you believe that? I do. There are people who make friends with death for lack of love alone. Just as <sup>we</sup> perish for lack of human love, we also perish for lack of God's love.

And that leads us to the second point. God meets that basic need by loving us. He shows us how much he loves the world by giving us his only Son. Charles Spurgeon once said, "Men who love much will give much, and you may usually measure the truth of love by its self-denials and sacrifices. That love which spares nothing is love indeed." God loved the world so much that he gave himself, he gave his only Son.

Have you ever wondered if God loves you? I have a hunch that deep down many of us feel that

God may have it in for us. Many people stay away from church because, they say, they are afraid the roof will fall in on them. They don't show much interest in God because deep down in their hearts they have doubts about God's love for them.

There are two reasons why so many people doubt God's love. For one thing some of us doubt God's love because we experience so little of human love.

I think of a little battered puppy who has been abused and mistreated by someone. That puppy distrusts everyone who comes near. He snarls if you draw close in kindness. He snaps. And if you aren't careful he might bite you. That's the way we often react to God. We have been bruised and battered by life many times. We have been hurt by other people, often by religious people who condemn and judge us. And as a result we lunge out at God when he draws near to us. We think he must be coming to judge, perhaps to torture us forever, to condemn us and our ways. We know, each one of us knows, that there are areas of our lives that we are ashamed of and for which we condemn ourselves. If we condemn ourselves and if religious people condemn us, certainly if God

were to come close to us he would condemn and judge us all the more we think. But God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him.

I wonder if there is anyone here this morning, perhaps a visitor who has always kept God at arms length because you have experienced so little of human love that you think that God may have it in for you. Let our text assure you that no matter how little of human love you have experienced, God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Some of us doubt God's love for another reason. We doubt God's love because we think he loves only good people, religious people, church going people. We doubt that he loves worldly people. "If God loves me," some of us may be thinking, "he certainly cannot love me as much as that elder who has always gone to church." The divorced man or woman thinks, "Certainly God does not love me as much as that Christian couple who have been married fifty years."

The young girl who has had an abortion thinks, "If God loves me, he certainly must not love me as much as he loves that religious girl who goes to church every Sunday." Don't we all sometimes fall into the trap of thinking that God loves religious people more than non-religious people. That he loves good people but not bad?

This is something that many of the Jews in the days of Jesus believed. They knew that God loved Israel. But it was quite shocking to hear Jesus say that God loved the world. The world was under God's wrath and curse. And it was scandalous that Jesus became such good friends with the worldly and unchurched of his day. He chose people who had been unreligious and unchurched to be his closest friends, people like Matthew the tax-collector and Mary Magdalene who had been a particularly sinful woman before she met Jesus.

The Bible tells us that God commends his love to us while we were yet sinners. He especially loves those who are not particularly religious and who are unchurched. Jesus once told three short stories illustrating this. He said that God is like

a waiting father who runs out to meet his prodigal son returning home in shame from the pig-pen. God is like a shepherd who leaves the 99 good sheep and goes out looking for one bad sheep that has wandered off and rejoices when he finds it. God is like a woman who <sup>strips</sup> ~~sees~~ her house and thoroughly cleans it in search of one lost coin. God has a special love and concern for those who are not in church every Sunday, for those who are not particularly religious, for those who are down right sinful. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

That brings us to our third point. Our text speaks of our response to God's love; "whosoever believeth on him should not perish but have everlasting life." Before we can trust someone we have to make sure that person has love for us. When we know a person loves us it is easier to trust him or her. Think of the ~~people~~ <sup>people</sup> that you really trust. Aren't they the people that you know really love you? It's easy to trust someone who really loves



you. So what could be easier than trusting the One who so loved the world that he gave his only son? What could be easier than trusting someone who loves us so much?

And yet I am sure that some of you have never asked Jesus Christ to come into your hearts and lives. You have never acknowledged him as your Lord and Saviour. God gave his Son and yet so many don't receive him. Why is it? Why haven't you come to Christ for eternal life? Why haven't you received the gift God has given? Why haven't you stood along with God's people and before them to confess your faith in Jesus Christ? Why will you cheat yourselves out of eternal life?

It may be that you have never received Christ as your Saviour for the same reason I almost cheated myself out of the joy and happiness of getting married to Kay. I knew Kay loved, me, and that frightened me something awful. How could I possibly live up to her love or deserve her love? I was terribly frightened of marriage. I loved her but I was afraid to take the plunge. Marriage is forever. How could I be sure I could live up to

those vows and promises? I knew I needed her but I was afraid to take that step of commitment. And so many of us date Jesus for years without ever saying "I will" to him.

I remember going to see a friend in State College (PA) to talk about my dilemma before I got married. We began to talk. He helped me see that I was afraid to be loved. He helped me to see that it was because I felt so unworthy of Kay's love that I was frightened. He asked me, "Will you cheat yourself out of marriage? Will you rob yourself of the person who will bring you joy?" And finally he said, "You don't really feel that you deserve her love, do you?" Before I could answer I broke down in uncontrollable sobbing in a most undignified way. I sobbed aloud for about five or ten minutes, really loud sobbing, while my friend sat across from me in sympathetic silence and some embarrassment. I sobbed away all my fears, all my anxiety as I realised that I am loved even though I don't deserve it; and that I could trust Kay for the rest of my life. I could trust her because I

knew that she loved me. So I decided to marry her.

And so I am asking you to say, "Yes" to Christ this morning. Say to him, "I will". "I do not deserve your love but you have given yourself to me anyway. I take you to be my Lord and Savior. And I do promise and covenant; before God and these witnesses; to be thy loving and faithful servant and friend; in plenty and in want; in joy and in sorrow; in sickness and in health; as long as we both shall live-- which is to say forever."

AMEN

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 \* Leighton Ford, Good News Is For Sharing as  
 quoted by Hervie M. Conn in Evangelism: Doing  
 Justice and Preaching Grace, Zondervan, 1982,  
 p. 69.