

## Bearing Burdens, Binding Wounds

I want to remind of something important about us as a church. We have had one quality over the years that has made us different from many other churches and one quality that makes us special. I case you haven't noticed most of the churches that were here in this general vicinity, and doing quite well 30 years ago, have either declined significantly, died, or been taken over by new and different congregations. There is one overriding reason that none of those things has happened to us. You might be tempted to blame this on me, and I would concede that this is part of it. It is helpful to have had the consistency of having the same pastor who has been committed to this ministry over many years. It's good that the church has not been jerked around by one pastor taking it one way and then another coming in and pushing it another way every three to five years. The trust we have built up between pastor and people over many years is an important contributing factor to our stability as a congregation. But it is important for you to know that this is not the main thing.

It is also true that we have some strong supporting families that have been a part of this congregation for almost as long and even longer than I have been here. Their faithfulness and their sacrifice of time, energy, and money has been an important part of maintaining this ministry. Furthermore, we have a number of newer families and individuals who have chosen to bless us with their presence and parents who have honored us with the task of helping them raise their children in the Lord. And there are people long graduated to heaven who bequeathed us a church built on a solid biblical foundation.

But none of these is the main reason for us remaining a vital congregation, the main reason we have remained vital as a congregation is the presence of the Lord among us and the reason that the presence of the Lord has remained among us is that we have been obedient to His commandment to love one another. Turn with me to Revelation 2. John in his great vision is instructed to write in verses 1-5: "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lamp stands: I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that

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you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place.'"

The lamp stand represents the presence of the Lord, and returning to our first love--our love for the Lord and our love for one another--is the one requirement for the lamp stand to remain in place. This is something I have seen played out here over the years. Whenever there has been conflict and bad feelings between several people in our church, the church has always lost ground. When the conflict has ended, and relationships healed, the church has grown. It has to do with His Presence. Jesus said, "All men will know you are my disciples if you love one another." When we are loving one another, it is noticed--the presence of the Lord becomes visible. Those who come among us for the first time feel it; they may not know what it is but they can feel it and it draws them in for a closer look. The church becomes contagious then, and word goes out that something good is happening here. The word goes out that Jesus lives among us. The presence of God is recognized in our midst. But when that love is interrupted, when relationships are strained, His Presence fades and we begin to die. It is felt more than seen; good vibes bring people in, bad vibes drive people away. Love is like a magnet. A lack of love is like a repellent.

So it is imperative for us at all times to pursue the way of love. Paul says in Romans 12:18, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." Do everything you can do to keep the peace. But what does this require in practice? The first thing it requires is spiritual insight and a bit of distance from our roiling emotions. Paul says in Ephesians 6:12 "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." A brother or sister in the Lord may have said or done something that wounded us--something that hurt or angered us--but we need to recognize where that wound came from and what that wound

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is meant to accomplish. Satan is not just aiming to hurt individuals and mess up relationships within or between families; It's always bigger than that. Satan wants to wreak havoc in the church and destroy the body of Christ. He seeks to wound the Lord by tempting the Lord's children to wound each another. If the Lord's chief commandment is for us to love one another--and it is--then we better understand that the devil's chief aim is to use whatever ammunition he can find to interrupt or to destroy that love. Would you say, **"At all costs" "we must stand against" "every attempt of the enemy" "to terminate our love."**

First, we need to know who is behind the battle and what he is trying to accomplish and take a stand against him. A second thing that is required of us is that we be proactive in seeking healing with those who believe we have wounded them. Jesus says in Matthew 5:23 & 24, "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift." Please note where the responsibility to begin healing lies. When we know that someone thinks we have wounded them or mistreated them, whether we meant to or not, whether we know ourselves to be guilty or not, it is our responsibility to humble ourselves and go to those who feel offended and do whatever it takes to make things right. We seek forgiveness. We seek reconciliation. Because if we don't, the devil wins and the witness of the church is damaged. The Presence fades. Would you say, **"It's bigger" "than me."**

The third thing required to keep love strong is to display a Christ like attitude toward those whom we feel have offended us. This is a word especially to those who have been wounded, to those who have been hurt. What do we do when we feel damaged? Listen to Jesus in Luke 6:31-33; 35-37: "Do to others as you would have them do to you. 'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even "sinners" love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even "sinners" do that. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will

be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.' Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." Is this response to injury easy? Absolutely not. Is it life-giving and life-transforming? Absolutely. There is nothing else we can ever do that will bring us further along in our spiritual formation than this. To love and to do good toward those who have wounded us is tremendously freeing and empowering. Remember that the Holy Spirit is God's gift to those who obey Him. Would you say, **"Being like Jesus" "means sharing in His sufferings" "by forgiving and doing good" "to those who wound us."**

(1) For the sake of preserving love and for the sake of maintaining the presence of the the Lord in our midst, we need spiritual insight into the devil's schemes and we need to stand against him, rather than standing against each other. (2) When we know or become aware that we have hurt or left bad feelings in a brother or sister in Christ, we must not say "well that's their problem;" we need to go and do everything possible to make it right. (3) When someone offends us, we need to forgive them and do good to them in the name of the Lord. Then I think we need to do one thing more: I think we need to look at each other with realistic and compassionate eyes. It's easy to look at each other and pass judgment. That person is old enough and has been a Christian long enough that they should know better and do better. They shouldn't act that way or say things like that. And it's true: they should know better and they shouldn't act and talk that way, but they do. And guess what? In certain circumstances we do too. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," and as soon as we stand in judgment of another we judge ourselves. Or, as Jesus said, "Whoever among you is without sin, let him cast the first stone." So what's the alternative?

Jesus identified Himself in Luke 4 as the one who had been anointed of God "To preach the gospel to the poor; and to to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed; To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD." And in Galatians 6:2, Paul says, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

A key phrase in these scriptures is the phrase "to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." What is that? This is an allusion to two things all wrapped up in one. First, it is an allusion to the Old Testament Year of Jubilee, when all outstanding debts were to be canceled among brothers and sisters in Israel, all Israelite slaves set free, and all property returned to the household of the original owner.

Every 50 years in Israel, society was given the chance to end the old game and to begin a new one. There's no indication that they ever actually obeyed this command, but what a wonderful idea. Something like this exactly what we need to do today to get the economy's of the world back on solid footing. Let's forgive all debt and just start over. Why not? It would be much more humane than fighting world war III. But this is an aside.

The other thing the acceptable year of the Lord is an allusion to is the millennial reign of Christ, or to that day when the lion and the lamb will lie down together and no one will hurt or destroy each other in God's kingdom any more. Jesus is saying that those who hear and obey His word will have the Holy Spirit in them and they will live like this in the here and now. We are not just to live in hope of the coming kingdom. Or act like the year of Jubilee is still 49 years away. No, the kingdom of God is within us and we are to begin living that way right now. We are to live that way now that world may see the difference Jesus Christ makes in and among us. We are to bind up each other's wounds and willingly bear the burdens others put upon us, for the sake of His love. Would you say, **"And the world will know" "we are Christians" "because we love" "one another."**

Beloved, let us love one another because love is of God and everyone who knows God loves because God is love. There is no greater commandment than to love God and to love one another. We cannot love God unless we love one another.

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**Galatians 5:22-6:2; Luke 4:18-19**

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