

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "Christian Love: Real & Counterfeit" (Part 1)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of July 18, 2010

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Unity: The Foundation and the Pillars

At the present time we're considering a section of the book of Colossians that deals with the matter of Christian unity – unity within the body of Christ.

And as we begin today I want to once again read the verses we're considering, from Paul's letter to the Colossians, chapter two, verses one through three. Paul writes this:

I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Now, we're considering the fact that in these verses, Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit gives us the foundation of Christian unity, which is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and His written Word, and Paul also gives us four pillars of Christian unity that rise from that foundation.

We've seen that Christian unity is, first of all, a matter of the heart, but it is a matter of facts and not mere feelings.

Second, we're presently dealing with the fact that Christian unity is founded on what the New Testament calls *agape* love, self-sacrificial love.

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Thirdly, in a future message we're going to consider the fact that Christian unity is a matter of full assurance based on a concrete understanding of things that are well defined, and it is not based on something that is nebulous or uncertain. And fourthly, in a future message we're going to consider the fact that Christian unity is a matter of knowledge of mysteries that have been revealed, and these mysteries have been revealed not only to an elite few within the body of Christ, but to every believer.

So in our last message, we began considering the second pillar of Christian unity, the fact that it is based upon what the New Testament calls *agape* love, self-sacrificial love, love that is based on a realization and appreciation of the preciousness of the one who is the object of that love.

At the end of our last message, we said that every Christian needs to understand what it truly means to have *agape* love, and what it means to demonstrate *agape* love within the body of genuine believers. And one of the things we're going to see is that the love that is one of the pillars of genuine Christian unity is often a love that requires doing the difficult thing, in matters of right doctrine and in matters of right living, in order to maintain the right kind of unity – in order to maintain a church unity that is a genuine unity, and not a counterfeit.

A Parallel Passage

And last time, I asked you to do a bit of homework in preparation for today's message. I asked you to read one of the parallel passages of Scripture on the subject

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of *agape* love, and I said we were going to be looking at it as part of our message today. That passage is in the epistle of First John, chapter three, verses ten through twenty-four. So I'm wondering if you did the homework assignment I asked you to do.

I asked you to ask yourself a question as you read that passage. The question was this: What does this passage tell me about the difference between a counterfeit kind of love that actually can produce *disunity* in the church, and the genuine Christian love, the *agape* love that promotes genuine, Bible-based, Christ-centered unity? Well, even if you didn't take the time to read that passage in First John during the past week, I hope you'll listen to what I have to say about it today.

First of all, let me read that passage, which is a parallel of the one we're considering in Colossians. The passage, once again, is First John chapter three, beginning at verse ten. The Apostle John writes this:

In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother. For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous.

Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who

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does not love his brother abides in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, because He [Jesus] laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.

And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment. Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us. (1 John 3:10-24)

Six Characteristics of the Love That Unifies Believers

I want to focus your attention on a unique theme that we find in this passage, and that theme is the exceedingly practical nature of *agape* love within the body of

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Christ. The exceedingly practical nature of it. *Agape* love is one of the pillars of Christian unity, because it is one of the most practical things in the world. I want to give you six key characteristics of the *agape* love, the self-sacrificial love, which is to be practiced and exercised by every believer within the body of Christ. These are the characteristics of the love that Paul in Colossians chapter two, verse two, says is to knit us together within the body of Christ.

First, *agape* love is rooted in the person and work of Christ Himself.

Second, the exercise of *agape* love within the body of Christ is a key indicator that someone has in fact been born again, a key indicator of the fact that you believe the truth as it is found only in the Word of God and in the person of Jesus Christ.

Third, the exercise of *agape* love can involve the sacrifice of your reputation in the eyes of the unbelieving world – but never in the eyes of God.

Fourth, the exercise of *agape* love can involve the sacrifice of your worldly goods, but never without reward.

Number five, God Himself provides every resource that you need in order to exercise and exhibit *agape* love within the body of Christ.

And number six, the exercise of *agape* love within the body of Christ is not an option, it is a commandment.

So, let's look at each of these points in turn.

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Rooted in Christ Himself

First of all, *agape* love is rooted in the person and work of Christ Himself. First John chapter three, verse sixteen – “By this we know [or perceive] the love of God, because He [in the person of Jesus Christ] laid down His life for us; and so we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”

The Gospel of John chapter ten, verse eleven – Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd gives His life for the sheep.”

John chapter fifteen, verses twelve and thirteen – Jesus said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.”

Ephesians chapter five, beginning at verse one – “Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God...”

First John chapter four, beginning at verse ten – “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

First John chapter four, verse nineteen – “We love Him because He first loved us.”

Remember what we said last time about the nature of *agape* love. We saw that the basis of *agape* love, the basis of this love that is the second pillar of Christian

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unity – the basis of that love is the loving work of God in Christ on behalf of sinners. True Christian love, true *agape* love, is a love that springs from a sense of the preciousness of the object that is loved. That is something that is inherent in the meaning of the word *agape* – it is a love that springs from a sense of the preciousness of the object that is loved. Now what does that mean, when we speak about love as one of the pillars of Christian unity?

It means that genuine Christian unity begins with God's *agape* love for us. John 3:16 tells us that "God so *loved* the world" – *agape* love, self-sacrificial love, love that God exercised by His free grace because even when we were unclean sinners we were precious in the sight of God – "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes on Him, should not perish, but have everlasting life."

And the next step is that genuine Christian unity involves our response to God's *agape* love for us. We saw that in Second Corinthians chapter five, beginning at verse fourteen. Paul says this: "For the love of Christ constrains [or compels] us, because we judge thus: that if One [Jesus] died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again."

Genuine Christian unity involves Christians responding in self-sacrificial, grateful love toward God for what He has done. *Agape* love recognizes the fact that

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God is therefore precious to us. That is the basis of our love for Him. God loved us, step one. Therefore we love God, step two.

But genuine Christian unity therefore also involves a third step. You are to love other believers because they are just as precious to God as you are. True Christians therefore exhibit that same *agape* love of God, that same sacrificial love, in their dealings with our fellow believers.

Genuine Christian unity recognizes the fact that every believer in Christ is precious to God, and so therefore every one of your fellow believers in Christ should be precious to you. Genuine Christian unity is supported by *agape* love, and *agape* love is rooted in the person and work of Christ Himself. Genuine Christian unity is supported by genuine Christian love that is founded upon the genuine Christian Gospel, and not a counterfeit. That is the first characteristic of the love that knits true believers together.

A Key Indicator of Faith in Christ

Secondly, the exercise of *agape* love within the body of Christ is a key indicator that someone has in fact been born again. It is a key indicator of the fact that you believe the truth as it is found only in the Word of God and in the person of Jesus Christ.

To put it the opposite way, the absence of *agape* love in the life of a person within the visible church who claims to be a Christian, is a key indicator of the fact

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that that person is *not* truly in Christ. The presence or absence of *agape* love, accompanied by righteous living, is the way in which we can tell a true believer from a counterfeit.

We just read this a few moments ago, in First John chapter three, verse ten – "In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother." *Agape* love is part of the evidence of saving faith in Christ.

We find this also in First John chapter four, beginning at verse seven: "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him."

We saw back in Colossians chapter one at verse four, that Paul and Timothy rejoiced in the fact that the Colossians had placed their faith in Jesus Christ, and that this faith was being demonstrated by their "love for all the saints." The sense of the verse is that Paul was encouraged and even relieved to find out that this was so, because it meant that the faith of the Colossians was a real faith and not a counterfeit. Their love for all the saints demonstrated the fact that the Gospel had really taken hold, that the Spirit of God was truly at work, and that they, as Paul said in Colossians chapter one verse six, "knew the grace of God in truth" – in reality.

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So to briefly review, we've seen that *agape* love is first of all rooted in the person and work of Christ Himself, in the genuine Gospel. And we've seen, secondly, that the exercise of *agape* love within the body of Christ is a key indicator that someone has in fact been born again, that he has in fact believed the genuine Gospel.

How Do You Measure Up?

Dear friends, we have four more characteristics of *agape* love to cover, but we're just about out of time for this program and we're going to have to continue in our next message. But let me close today by asking you this simple but very profound question: As you think about the things we've considered today, and as you think about how they apply to your own life, how do you measure up? How do you measure up?

We've seen that genuine Christian love is rooted in the person and work of Jesus Christ. And so the first question needs to be this: Are you saved? Are you trusting in the sacrifice that Jesus Christ made on the cross for sins, His atonement as the perfect substitute for guilty sinners? Are you trusting in Jesus Christ alone for eternal life? Do you understand what is at stake?

Do you understand that good works cannot save you from eternal death? Do you understand that even your own acts and expressions of love toward others cannot save you from eternal separation from God in Hell? Do you understand that only Christ can save you? If you have never received Christ, I encourage you to call

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upon Him right now, right where you are, repent of your sins, and ask God to save you by placing your faith in Jesus Christ, and His sacrifice on the cross.

If you are trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ as your only Savior from the wrath to come, let me ask you a different question: Are you living like it? Are you living like it? Are you walking worthy of the Lord? Are you, as Paul says in Ephesians, an imitator of God? Are you, as a child of God through Christ, walking in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for our sins?

Do you look upon other believers within the body of Christ as precious to you, because they are precious in the sight of God? Do you treat them that way? The question in the pages of Scripture is not, "How do other believers treat you?" but, "How do you treat them?"

Someone long ago formulated the question this way: If you were living in a country where it is illegal to be a Christian, and you were charged in a hostile court of law with the crime of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Would there be witnesses who could point to your love for your brothers and sisters within the body of Christ, as the evidence that you are in fact a believer? Or would your case be dismissed for lack of evidence? Dear friend, that is not a hypothetical question. That is the question that God asks of you in the pages of His Word, in First John chapter three and in Colossians chapter two.

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Among believers, I don't think there is a single one of us who cannot say that we need to grow and mature and increase in the area of Christian love. And one of the things we're going to be considering in our next message is the fact that God will graciously provide every resource that you need to live that life of *agape* love within the body of Christ. So I hope you'll join us next time, as we explore that wonderful truth.

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