

Caribbean Union Conference of SDA
STEWARDSHIP MINISTRIES DEPARTMENT

SECOND QUARTER SERMON

LOVE: A STEWARDSHIP IMPERATIVE

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Scripture Reading:-Luke 9: 10-17

All the gospel accounts relate the stories of Jesus feeding the thousands, exhibiting the profound and unconditional love and compassion he had for all people. The motive that most deeply touched the lives of people in His day, the one that keeps His memory green in a troubled world, was His compassion and loving care for humanity. He was full of pity, sensitive with sympathy for the vague soul hunger and the suffering all about him. The miracles that drew the curious multitudes had, no doubt, their evidential value; but their strange variation from other miracles of legend or Scripture is the fact that they are performed for the relief of suffering humanity. The human family is the greatest object of God's love. Pity for the blind eyes, the deaf ears, the paralyzed limbs, the epileptic nerves, the leprosy-polluted bodies, the fevered children, even for bereaved families who lost loved ones, captivated and engrossed the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Behind, before, beneath, and above this motive of compassion was the greater motive of love. As no other man has been able to do, He saw the actual and potential worth in human beings and loved them for what they were regardless of their condition or status. How much more, those who reciprocated His affection and gave up all for Him. To those He declared, "As the Father loved me, so have I loved you." The depth of this love He demonstrated when He laid down "his life for his friends." The Christian steward who does not share this unconditional, immeasurable, unfathomable love of God to and with human beings is not a steward but a mechanical Christian.

Jesus' great transformational values are different than those of the world. The world we live in expects us to live by its standard operating procedure of self-service, self-preservation and self-fulfillment. But Jesus calls us to a life lived with radically different

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motives and actions. He calls us to "be perfect even as our Heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt. 5:48), which in all practical terms mean to receive into and nurture within ourselves the love of God, which indeed is agape love.

For instance, just as God has not let our hostility toward Him turn Him against us, so are we to demonstrate the same kind of persistent love toward those who are hostile toward us. Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt. 5:44). Christ taught his followers not only to love their enemies but also to be good stewards of their brothers and sisters. Imagine how Jesus looked deep into the eyes of those who opposed Him to see them as the Father would. Can you and I do less than to look into the eyes of our enemies and search deep for the image of God in them, because every human being is pictured with the presence of God even though sin has depreciated our existence.

It is agape love that enables the children of God to be as generous and openhanded as God has been to them. Such radical action may be termed as "bad stewardship" by the world's standards, but not by God's. After all, by the world's standards, loving those who love you is perfectly understandable. Doing good to those who do you good is just sensible reciprocal business (Mt. 5:46, 47). But kingdom economy has a very different dynamic. Those who are children of the "Most High God" give without reciprocity. Kingdom economics are flow-through accounts where God is the third party in the relationship between givers and recipients, givers cannot lose. They always receive what they give and more. That's the law of the flow-through economic of God's kingdom. Those who pass gifts on receive more abundantly from the source of all gifts. When a kingdom steward lives by this mode of operation the world looks at him or her and sees something different. They see the light (Mt 5:14) that comes from "the light of the world" (Jn 8:12).

God's ultimate gift of love is expressly demonstrated in the incarnation of the only begotten Son of God. The gift of God in Christ Jesus is the key to every act of Christian giving. We give because He first gave to us, riches "immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine" (Eph 3:20). The enormity of God's gift is also expressed beautifully in the provision of the "Comforter", the Holy Spirit, after the ascension of Christ. But in order that the sweetness of His mercy might be adorned with the beauty of His justice, He determined to save humanity by way of a rigorous redemption. And as this could not properly be done but by His Son, He settled that He should redeem humankind not only by one of His amorous actions, which would have been perfectly sufficient to ransom the world, but also by all the innumerable amorous actions and dolorous passions which He would perform or suffer 'till death on the cross, to which He destined Him.

He willed that thus He should make Himself the companion of our miseries to make us afterwards companions of His glory, showing thereby the riches of His goodness, by this copious, abundant, superabundant, magnificent and excessive redemption, which has gained for us, and as it were reconquered for us, all the means necessary to attain glory, so

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that no human can ever complain as though the divine mercy were wanting to anyone.

John 3:16 shows us that the biblical concepts of "love" and "gift" are inseparable. In fact, it is impossible to understand one without the other. Thus, because God's love is gifted love, our love must be expressed through giving as well. God's love is a gift, but gifts call for a response of gratitude. God's love to us cost Him something. He spared not His own Son, and that Son spared not His blood. But how little our love to Him costs us. Let us understand that where there is true, strong love to Jesus, it will cost us something. Love is the costliest of all undertakings. This means we are called to give sacrificially. After all, if Christ's example teaches us anything about giving, it teaches us that Christian generosity is radically sacrificial.

It will cost us self-denial. Christ and self are perfectly incompatible; to have the one we must be prepared to surrender the other. The heart subtly schemes to hold the both; but it does not deceive Christ. He knows in a moment when we have preferred to spare ourselves and to sacrifice Him, or to obey Him and sacrifice ourselves. We know it also. At first we may find it an effort to count all things but loss for Him; but as we go on doing it, and drink in the fresh air that breathes above the mountains of self-denial, above all, as we see the smile of pleasure and satisfaction on His face, our hearts leap for joy, and we love to give Him everything, not thinking of the cost, any more than Mary did when she broke the alabaster box of very precious and expensive ointment. After all, it is but fitting that we offer our bodies "a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is our reasonable service" (Rom 12:1).

The Christian steward is to put on a new self. It is self ruled by the love of Jesus (Col 3:14), characterized by forgiveness, harmony, peace and thanksgiving. Paul's overarching rule of life is that every word and every deed be done in the name of Jesus (Col 3:17). Following such a rule affects our outlook on life. We begin every day with the sense that we are serving Christ and our every thought and action must be in full compliance with the will and word of God. Who can describe the blessed bond of the love of God? What person can tell the excellence of its beauty, as it ought to be told? The height to which love exalts is unspeakable. Love unites us with God. Love covers a multitude of sins. Love beareth all things, is long-suffering in all things. There is nothing base, nothing arrogant in love. Love admits of no schisms, love gives to no seditions, love does all things in harmony.

The rule of love is to be applied, Paul implies that, in the stewardship of all of our relationships, both outside the family, in the public and in work life (Col 3:22), (Eph 6:5-9), and within the family (Col 3:18-21). True self-denying love is unknowable apart from the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The apostle John does not bother with theoretical definitions; rather, he grounds the concept of love in the historical event of Jesus' death. To know love is to experience Christ's death by sacrificially loving others. Knowledge of God's love is expressed and verified through giving ourselves and our material possessions to those who

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are in need. Love is not conveyed in words, but "with actions and in truth" (1Jn 3:18).

Our Christian life in the church aims to share an authentic love that draws humanity and God together. Such love is not a feeling, it is an act of the will. Jesus never said that we were to like our neighbors, but He did say that we were to act on behalf of our neighbor's good. And who is our neighbor? A neighbor is anyone in need, even and perhaps especially those we do not like, those from whom we are estranged. Jesus does not exhort us to wait for emotional feeling. As a matter of fact, mature stewards do not let their emotions control them, they control their emotions. The Christian love to which we are called is an active caring and concern for the intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being of our brothers and sisters.

Such Christian Stewardship love is unconditional, that is, it is given on the basis of need and not on the basis of deserving. It is unconditional also in the sense that it is given regardless of the response of the recipient, that is, it is given freely without the expectation of gains. And it is sacrificial, which may mean giving one's life for another, but may also mean the willingness to sacrifice our ideas for the sake of harmony in the church. True love is also the result of a rational decision. True love is not sentimental concern, but the result of intentional thinking. It is an act of the will. Deeds speak far more eloquently than a million words. A million words do not substitute for a single deed for the neighbor's good. It is in the actual living of life, not merely in pleasant words, that good works are done.

Consider these missionaries and pioneers of goodwill who imitated the love of Christ. David Livingstone, from the hour when his youthful imagination beheld Robert Moffatt's "smoke from a thousand villages whose inhabitants had never heard of Jesus" to the somber twilight in his premature old age when, fever-consumed and death-smitten, he staggered into Chitambo's village in Ilala, there to breathe out his dying prayer for Africa, is an illustration. Francis Xavier, on his knees before God, crying: "More Lord, more, only save thy pagan children." George Whitfield's "Lord, give me souls or take my soul," tells us how, in multiplied instances, God's faithful stewards have held their lives "not dear unto themselves."

Time would have us to recall the yearning of Wilberforce and of Lincoln for the child toilers of England, of Pitkin for the savage Boxers who murdered him, of Bashford for the millions of China, of Carey and Judson, and Thoburn and Fish for the sorrowing masses of India. Suffice it to remember that, in tune with the measureless love of Jesus for humanity, they offered the stewardship of time, talents, temple and treasure, that they might render to humankind the highest good.