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## Chapter One: Love Beyond Love

What does the term "love beyond love" mean?

We open our heart, mind, body, and soul to loving God and loving others through Him, removing all distance and hostility, keeping us from those moments in life where Christ has intended for us to love and be loved.

The framework for this definition comes from within the response of Jesus when asked what commandments were most important.

Mark 12:29-31

**Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."**

In these words, there is a specific calling and direct command from Jesus to love the way He loved. His call asks us to go beyond our limited love ideas, to move outside of our personal feelings of hostility and flawed perceptions of love for Him, others,

and ourselves. Jesus asks His followers to love as He loved (John 13:34, 15:12-17). For a Christ-follower, loving beyond love is intended to be a daily function of life – more than feelings, timely gestures, or good deeds. Love beyond love must be initiated by a passion for truth and activated by faithful obedience. Passionate obedience takes us beyond what we are thinking and feeling. We share the love shared with us, open, intentional, and filled with genuine hospitality.

Often, American Christians will mistake this for some "cause or mission," but it is not the same thing. Yes, each of those is an essential part of sharing the message and means of Christ's love to those who need it when they need it most. We all agree that God has clear expectations of all Christians in sharing the message of Christ's love through temporal means (Matthew 25). But God's plans for humankind do not stop there - they go beyond the limits of where we can take them, with expectations of loving beyond worthy causes or meaningful missions - beyond the place where His love begins. His expectations continue beyond those merciful beginnings to an ongoing unknown journey of faith requiring a love capable of going beyond where we started - to get us where we need to go. God's commanded love is intended to go beyond our endings and beginnings.

His love for us becomes our better way to live and love. Our love for Him takes us beyond ourselves to becoming His version of ourselves.

We are more personal, more intimate, and enduring, more like Him. It is a journey, not an event, a journey of love that goes the distance, and then some. Some will

debate this, but this love beyond all loves is more demanding and challenging than sharing a message, a measure of mercy, and a communal meal once a week.

Love beyond love in a "Jesus context" demands depth and substance that most often requires sacrifice and suffering. The love of Christ Jesus carries the weight of the world, when the world seems to be falling in on you. It is never as simple or shallow as just showing up on social media with tweets, likes, messages, shares, or posts and then immediately checking how many friends can make us feel good or better about ourselves. That process is self-serving and shallow. No matter how many times we click "like" for someone else, we are waiting for it to come back to us. If it does, we feel good. If it does not, we feel bad; we are stuck in our feelings. Jesus never intended for loving and being loved to be static or self-focused. His love is fluid, intended to flow selflessly through and beyond us, far away from our rather large appetite for just feeling good about ourselves. The love of Jesus goes beyond feelings of self to feeling for others. Which means, "day-in-day-out" we are going to love and be loved by people who will reciprocate with our love - and people who will reject both us and our love. Regardless of how that makes us feel, we have the truth in Christ to bring us back to reality. Just because what we are feeling is real does not make what we are feeling reality.

As Christians, we learn to move forward toward one another, just as Jesus did. And He did so regardless of the reception or rejection of His love. The reality is that He created a welcoming space in and around Himself for people to love and live life together. By extending His love and grace, we can also create a welcome space for love and life together in Christ. In His love, Jesus put a template in place for us; we

welcome life together for anyone who will hear or believe His message of love beyond love. And although it is not without boundaries or expectations, that place is loving, and the space is welcoming. Without that reality, to love people the way Christians should love is not possible.

As each of us searches for God's real heartbeat and the mind of Christ Jesus, we learn it is His love that opens the door to a welcome place for all kinds of people. We will also understand that no one is shut out (more or less) from that place or space.

As Christ-followers, we extend to others what Christ extended to us.

John 13:34-35

**"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. 35 By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."**

What Jesus asked of us was that we give a sincere, non-pretentious, non-religious invitation for others to live and love together in Him. Pastor, theologian, and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it best when he wrote,

"Love for our neighbor and for one another should stretch widely across all space and distance; and should be equally distributed throughout every

portion of it – in the same way the sun casts out light. Christ invited us to share the perfection of the heavenly Father by imitating His indiscriminate gift of that light (love)."

Bonhoeffer confirms that we should love completely, not only completely, but entirely consistent with the truth we know about God's heart and character. In doing this, we can be in step with who God has called His followers to be. We know from the teaching of Jesus and personal experience how He has personally reached out to us. We know that His love is indeed open to all and that it knows no limits. Jesus has called us to love people in the same way. It is also clear there can be no disconnect between preaching the message of Christ's love and how we are to live life with others in His love. At Reunion Church, the community discovered the need to go beyond ourselves with His love; even beyond men's religion, to make a home-place in Christ for all.

Now let's shift gears. As you may have already guessed, settling and sorting through our relationship in Christ is a big part of clearing the way to loving relationships with others. It is the same in discovering the purpose and meaning Christ has for our life. They are uniquely connected, and once settled, then the question for you and I is no longer – Who are we, and what are we to do? Rather,

**How does Christ want to love His community and the others through us?**

Matthew 22:9-10

**"Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.' 10 And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good."**

How far does He want you to go with His Love?

Psalms 103:17

**"But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children."**

We can start with God's desire for everyone to have someone and someplace to connect.

Matthew 11:28-30

**Then Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light."**

God does not want people to be without a place or to be shut out and disconnected from the community. What we are describing is not just a physical or visible place. It is that and much more. It is the DNA of the community's culture that will unmistakably define us as open to loving and being loved as Jesus loves. He gives us His "DNA" by freely and openly loving us, sending us people to love in the same way. This culture is shared and imparted as a gift. It creates the love and compassion needed for being open to people and relationships in an environment that fills the human need for connection and belonging.

The community is a place of meaning where the Holy Spirit is always shaping and reshaping us while being surrounded and loved by God's people. In this place, we know that God is growing our roots deep down to be able to send out our new branches to love beyond love – just like Jesus loved. This growth shapes and forms us, and we continue learning while being stretched and trimmed by all kinds of personalities and people up close and personal. There is always the need for help in learning to grow this way - it is not easy! God sends new people into our lives to love and love us, helping the process along. He wants us loving beyond ourselves, moving towards each other, teaching and learning, training, giving, exchanging, and encouraging—the investment of love beyond love. We are to equip ourselves in this way for the calling and leadership needed for the ever-changing road ahead. As we faithfully do this, we must remember it is a slow process; one that requires vision and the will to persist and patience to wait.

It is good to remind the community that God has birthed something extraordinary in them - divinely included in God's plans for a time and a place like this.

We also experience that God's timing for building and loving His kingdom in this way is seldom the same as ours. We do our part. We seek first God's Kingdom, pray His will be done, follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, and then we love beyond love.

1 Peter 4:8-10

**"Most important of all, continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins. 9 Cheerfully share your home with those who need a meal or a place to stay. 10 God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another."**

As followers of Jesus, we are open to connecting with people through what essentially is an invitation to walk with us on the journey of life and faith. Along the way, we experience many extraordinary circumstances and settings where a genuine sense of God's Spirit is at work among us. His presence is the confidence needed for a journey of this magnitude with others. The shared experiences of loving beyond love inspire and give the necessary insights to continue with those we genuinely love. There is real spiritual growth in those shared experiences. Observing change within us is one of those good things that naturally encourages us to push even deeper into our faith, even when love seems too overwhelming. Still, there are those times in relationships and community when everything positive comes to a dead stop. With no movement, loving is tough and



can be painful, which is confusing for many Christians. The confusion creates questions and periods of doubt that often cause us to feel like giving up on loving difficult people under challenging circumstances. But remember, love beyond love requires steady movement and growth towards Jesus. Just because there is no visible change with the ones we are trying to love through difficulty, it does not mean there is no movement. Keep moving - move toward Jesus.

Because this is so important to understand, we should continually filter what we feel through grids of biblical truth that help us maintain focus and clear the path toward the mind, heart, and command of Jesus to love. When we become distracted by feelings of discouragement or weariness while loving individuals under challenging circumstances, it is God's truth that stabilizes us and keeps us moving in the right direction. By turning to God's truth (Jesus), the Holy Spirit provides assurances and confirmation to leads us back to the true path of love beyond love, despite what we do not know, what we cannot control or do not see. Along with this renewed movement, we can experience an unseen momentum that sometimes carries us forward even when closing down from evident frustrations, difficulties, and disappointments. We learn through these experiences. Experiences wherein our perceived gains or losses of momentum are useful for loving and being loved in God's Kingdom. We continue to be faithful at loving beyond love, as Jesus asks us. If this sounds like work, remember that the calling to a community where the priority is to love God and one another does not just quickly happen. There is a lot of "stuff" to work through. By openly looking at the things we have just talked about, we begin to work through a good deal of who we are to be Christ. From our being comes our doing. So for now, we will talk about who we are to be in Christ.

Part of belonging to Christ means we have a specific mission to teach and impart God's truth to those who will gather with us. Fulfilling that mission requires equipping those we are called to (another part of the journey to loving beyond love). Training is what Jesus did for those He actively loved and those who desired to love beyond themselves. A genuine and sincere Christian community should have both an expectation and opportunity for discipleship training and equipping. Everyone participates, not just the paid or professional staff; discipleship is a shared mission.

We reconcile that most of the traditional or the popular culture-sensitive growth models for Christian church ministry do not fit with what God has for His home here among us. However, we do not believe we are right and others wrong, or that we are just a gathering of believers going through the motions. We are a community that believes in the call to follow Jesus, with a strong sense of worship and learning as we live and love together in Him. Many good people believe in Jesus, but not all good people follow Him. We want to follow Jesus and lead others to follow. Because of that, we know that ultimately many discover they are not willing to love beyond love, to truly open themselves to a life together (even figuratively) with anyone that does not think, look or act like them. To love as Jesus loved would mean wrapping one's arms around all of it, believing, following, and creating space for life together with others in Christ. Unfortunately, not all Christians want to think or love in that way. That way is something special, but it is also not received or embraced by everyone. We have taken ownership and

invested ourselves in what we have believed. As far as learning who we are to be in Christ, we have adopted five equipping actions from the First Church of Jesus.

Acts 2:42-47

**"All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. 43 A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. 44 And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. 45 They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. 46 They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—47 all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people."**

We have committed (like the first Church) in mutual covenant to worship together, serve together, learn together, pray together, and break bread together. Equipping actions such as these are at the core of who we are - resulting in understanding what we do. We are aware that millions of other Christian homes and communities are on the same spiritual path worldwide. They are experiencing the same pulling force of the Spirit and the same passion for the real message of Jesus - to love beyond themselves and love beyond their little world. Like us, they are trying to figure it out, and like Jesus, making an open and welcome spiritual home place for all. Knowing that many others like us exist is liberating and faith-building. It is

encouraging to discover we are not alone on this journey, and that we walk with others who have heard God's call to love beyond love as well.

“Yes, praise God, love abides! Then whatever the world may take away from you, though it be the most cherished, then whatever may happen to you in life, however you may come to suffer in your striving for the good that you will, if people turn indifferently away from you or against you as enemies, if everyone disowns you or is ashamed to admit what he owed to you, if even your best friend were to deny you—yet if in any of your strivings, in any of your actions, in any of your words you truly have had love as your confidant, take comfort, because love abides. What you know with love as your confidant is recollected to your comfort—oh, more blessed than any achievement any human being may have accomplished, more blessed than if the spirits had been subject to him, more blessed to be recollected by love! What you know with love as your confidant is recollected to your comfort. Neither things present nor things to come, neither angels nor devils, nor, praise God, your own troubled mind’s fearful thoughts will be able to take it away from you, neither at the stormiest and most difficult moment of your life nor at the last moment of your life—because love abides.”

- Sören Kierkegaard, Works of Love