

**BE LOVE**  
James 1:17-27

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I was sitting in a theology class in college, furiously scribbling notes during a lecture on St. Augustine. My professor was brilliant and Augustine could be complicated, so I was concentrating hard. Then the professor paused and walked to the chalkboard and said, “Really, you can sum up all that Augustine wrote in these two short phrases.” And he wrote on the board, “Love God, and do as you please.” We discussed how the two phrases go together. If you truly love God, if God comes first in your life, if the love of God is at the center of your life, then you don’t need to worry about memorizing a whole lot of rules or commandments. Let the love of God dictate your other decisions and influence your choices. Love God, and do you as you please.

Is it really that simple? Can we find a way to live by this ethic of love? What would it mean to try to live as more loving people at home, at work, at school, in traffic, in politics?

The book of James has been described as wisdom literature for Christians. Imagine that this piece of scripture is a letter from a teacher who wants her students to live their everyday lives well, that is, with integrity, in line with what they believe. The truly wise, truly faithful individual is known not by what he says he believes, but in how he lives what he believes. Wisdom is about being able to live well the truth that we believe and the faith that we embrace.

The question this letter is asking is this one: “How do we let God’s word, already implanted in our hearts, have its full effect in our lives?”

This letter is written to the early church, to communities of people who are striving to let their lives be wholly transformed by a God who is active in their world. And if God is active in our world, we who love God are called to be active in the world too. James puts it simply: “Be doers of the word.” Put your faith into action.

I got home from vacation last week and caught up with my colleagues. When I chatted with Nate and we were talking about plans for the fall, he mentioned that he is having all of his youth leaders read a book by a man named Bob Goff (book title: Love Does). I was intrigued and started reading it myself. Bob Goff is involved in many humanitarian enterprises around the world, including a new hospital in Iraq. His books tell stories illustrating his very simple life philosophy - which is, “love people the way Jesus does.” In other words, love all the people all the time. One of my favorite stories in the book is the story about the Sunday that Bob was driving home from church in the vehicle he loved, a bright-red jeep. A car came darting out of a side street. It crashed into the side of Bob’s Jeep and he was sent flying. This is how he describes what happens next: “I regained my senses sitting upright on the asphalt, my arms propped up behind me like I was watching a ball game at the park on a summer ay. The Jeep was upside down 30 feet away.” But, amazingly, he was not hurt. He got up, dusted himself off, and walked toward the other car, the car that had hit him. The other driver was stunned, and the window slowly started lowering.

Still clutching the steering wheel staring blankly forward was a small frail woman. Goff introduced himself. “Hi, I’m Bob. What’s your name?” The stunned woman kept staring straight ahead, fists still clenched around the steering wheel. She was barely able to speak. “I’m Lynn.” “Lynn, are you ok?” “I think I’m ok,” she whispered. Lynn

was 87 years old, 5 feet tall, 100 pounds. “I guess I forgot to stop,” Lynn said.

Goff writes, “That was indeed correct. But who could be mad at someone like Lynn?” Bob assured her that he was ok, he told her not to worry, they began to get to know one another. She confessed she was afraid that she wouldn’t be able to drive again. “I just don’t want to be dependent on anyone.” Eventually the police cleared the accident scene. Bob and Lynn said their goodbyes.

A few days later, Bob got a call on his cell phone. After a few seconds, he heard a brittle and remorseful voice, “I am SO sorry.” It was Lynn. Bob assured her he was fine. A few days later, she called again. She couldn’t believe that Bob had forgiven her and moved on. But he didn’t want to get a call every other day from Lynn, so he hatched a plan. He called the local florist and had them put together a huge bouquet of flowers and deliver them to Lynn. The card said, “Dear Lynn, it was great running into you. [I forgive you and I love you.] Now stop calling me.”

He finishes this vignette by saying, “I wanted Lynn to forgive herself, to realize we all make mistakes. And Lynn made me think I should stop asking God to forgive me over and over when I know I’m already forgiven.”

Bob Goff shows us what it looks like to respond to a difficult situation in a spirit of love. It’s really possible.

The book of James says, plainly, that faith only matters when it’s put into action. “Be doers of the word,” James says. If you believe something, don’t just talk about it. Live it.

The primary purpose of the Bible is not to give us a source of intellectual stimulation or academic debate. It is to call us to a dramatically new way of living. By

introducing us to the God of unconditional love, the Jesus who showed dramatic extravagant love to all people, the Bible intends to change our worldview, our whole way of seeing things, our way of thinking and living.

The writer Marcus Borg puts it this way. Christianity is not a matter of having the right beliefs. Following Jesus is not so much about believing, as it is this similar word, which Borg coins: *beloving*. One word: *beloving*. To believe in God and Jesus is to *belove* God and Jesus. Some of you grew up reciting the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed. In Latin, they both begin with the word "credo" which has often been translated as "I believe." Borg claims that the Latin word really means, "I give my heart to..." The root of our religion is not a set of rules or beliefs, but a commitment made from the heart. What a difference that shift in translation can make. Instead of saying, "I believe the following affirmations to be literally true," we can say, "I give my heart to God, I give my heart to Jesus." Believing the right things doesn't change our lives. But Christianity is not about right beliefs. It's about embracing God's love and sharing it with the world.

We can be love in large ways and small ways, whenever we embody the compassionate spirit of Christ in an everyday faithfulness.

Wednesday morning I got online to check out when a movie was playing. I knew it was in town for a short time, and it was something I didn't want to miss. I'd assumed it was a movie we'd see over the Labor Day weekend. But when I checked the schedule, I realized the movie was leaving the theater on Thursday. So Doug and I drove to the Cedar Lee theater on Wednesday to see a documentary called "Far From the Tree," based on a book by Andrew Solomon. I heard Andrew Solomon talk about this book in 2014, and it was one of the best presentations I have ever heard. I was so impressed I

bought and read the very long and thick book. In it, Andrew Solomon seeks to understand the dynamics of families in which parents are raising children who don't fit society's definition of normal. He has chapters on autism, Downs syndrome, deafness, schizophrenia, transgender, among others. In each chapter, he interviews parents and children and spends time with families, exploring the ways that parents and children relate in each situation. The documentary follows four families. One child is a dwarf, one has Downs syndrome, one has autism, and one has committed a horrific crime. Each child has at least one parent who shows that child unconditional love. There is nothing sentimental about this documentary. It portrays difficult and challenging situations. The book and the movie both helped me empathize with all kinds of families and all kinds of individuals, none of whom are ever summed by a label. It is a celebration of the power of love, and a reminder of the kinds of people Jesus sought out and embraced.

“Love God, and do you as you please.” It's simple to write, easy as pie to memorize, and sometimes an excruciatingly demanding way to live. But who would want to live any other way?