

HOW TO LOVE A SON OF THUNDER

by

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1999

Theme: With God's help we can keep on loving one another in our families even as we pass through difficult periods in our lives together.

Theme Text: 1 John 4:7-11

Presentation Notes: The notes presented in this section do not constitute a prepared sermon script. The following helps are designed to offer a framework, supportive resources, and illustrations toward the development of a sermon on the stated theme. You will want to shape these ideas in your own style, drawing upon your own study and experience, to meet the particular needs of your congregation. Throughout the following outline, numbers in parentheses (1), (2), (3) will indicate illustrations, quotations and other material found in the section called *Sermon Illumination* that may be helpful in your sermon development and delivery.

A couple of generations ago, it was common for Bible salesmen to go from door to door throughout the United States and Canada selling great large family Bibles. We remember seeing them in our grandparents' homes—big books with heavy, padded leather covers and large print with artistic letters. There were pages for recording births and deaths and weddings and other family events. Many of them had a place for recording your family genealogy, your "family tree."

They became collecting sites as well for photos and postcards and letters from family members. Often, in the centerfold of these huge Bibles were a number of reproductions of great paintings. One painting that was frequently included was a painting of Jesus and his disciples, seated at a table celebrating the Last Supper. It was interesting that Jesus and the group were only seated along one side of the table. In truth, families in the Holy Land in Jesus' time didn't even use tables like that. But never mind, it was the face of Jesus and the faces of the disciples that captured attention. Closest to Jesus was the youngest of the disciples, hardly more than a boy, with a shy, childlike face. It was John, the son of Zebedee. The painting pictured him leaning on Jesus, his cheek to Jesus' breast.

1. The Son of Thunder

With this painting, "The Last Supper," renaissance artist Leonardo Da Vinci has popularized the characterization of John the disciple as a gentle, lovable sort. But the portrait of him in the Gospels is quite different. John was a rough, coarse, high spirited young man. His untamed spirit and hot temper earned for him the nickname "Son of Thunder" or "Thunderman" (Mark 3:17). Hot tempered and easily angered, he was not by nature meek and yielding. He craved power and authority, and he craftily plotted to be chief among the apostles. On one occasion, he and his brother attempted to manipulate Jesus into granting them the highest positions in His kingdom by putting their mother up to requesting it (Matt. 20:21). This really angered the other disciples and they sputtered about it among themselves until Jesus intervened.

John possessed a spirit of criticism. He was racially and religiously prejudiced, and jealous for his own group. He wanted nobody else stepping on what he considered the private turf of Jesus and the disciples (Luke 9:49). It was John who was angry, indignant and ready to fight when the Samaritans were inhospitable to the Master. In revenge, he wanted to destroy them by fire (Luke 9:54, 55). E. G. White in *The Desire of Ages*, p. 295, characterized him as evil-tempered, critical, proud, violent of spirit, combative, and indignant.

2. Love That Looks Inward

On several occasions, John speaks of himself as "the disciple Jesus loved" (John 13:23; 19:26; 21:7, 20). On the surface these verses seem to imply that John was "likeable" and that Jesus was instantly fond of him. Da Vinci's painting has probably helped to perpetuate the idea that Jesus loved John because he was so gentle and kind and good. Actually, Jesus loved John *when the very opposite of these qualities ruled his life*

In contrast to the word "like" or "be fond of" (Greek *philos*) which is used of Jesus' fondness for Lazarus (John 11:36), John uses a different word in describing Jesus' attitude toward him. It is the special word in the New Testament for God's redemptive love (*agape*). John's gospel frequently showcases this love in action; Paul provides a Christian essay on its qualities (1 Corinthians 13). (1) Jesus commands His followers to love like this (John 15:12), but this is a radical love, unknown to the human heart (John 5:42) except as God's Spirit pours it upon us (Rom. 5:5).

John's gospel was written late in his life. It was a time for reflection on his youth and the constancy of Christ's love for him even in the midst of his unloveliness. The structure of the verb "loved" in these verses in the original language has the sense of "kept on loving." Wonder of wonders, Jesus kept on loving him in spite of the traits he possessed.

The Lord's insight. Two verses give us insight into Jesus' love for His difficult youthful disciple. "The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out" (Matt. 12:20).

Looking on the heart. The first verse conveys God's care for the inner life and well-being of an individual. It is as if Jesus looked at John through special eyeglasses. (2) John and those like him present exteriors with appearances, behaviors and attitudes that are difficult to live with, even offensive. These things which make this person—whether child, youth or adult—so hard to love actually reveal to us important information about what the person is feeling and experiencing inside. Jesus described the close connection between the exterior and the interior of a person elsewhere when He said, "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34).

Bruised reeds. John fits the gospel description of "a bruised reed" or "a smoldering wick." These expressions come from Matthew, who identifies Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy of the Messiah found in Isaiah 42:1-4. Jesus is gentle, compassionate, patient, persevering. He does not snap off the reed bent over by the wind; rather He carefully straightens it, binds it up, so that it can stand against the wind again. The flickering wick, nearly extinguished, He does not snuff out but revives it, and fans it into a bright flame. Jesus knew that all persons suffer from the legacy of sin which leaves them broken inside. He viewed people such as John as especially wounded within.

Just what has caused the bruising we may not know or fully understand. We do know that the crises of life leave indelible marks on people. Many spend their lifetimes recovering and trying to cope. We know that God intends for mothers and fathers to provide children with physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual nurturance. They need—touching, holding, caressing, a soothing, caring voice of understanding, expressions of love, protection, security, and a sense of belonging. In a very real sense, when this kind of caring is missing or minimal in childhood,

individuals face life having to cope with some deficits. When overly strict, harsh, unkind, abusive treatment, or other physical, mental or emotional trauma is added to the absence of primary nurture, additional damage is sustained. All these experiences eventually find expression through an individual's personality and behavior. Parents and others who care for children should be on the alert for the increased needs of young people at times of crisis in their lives. (3)

Unfortunately, human behavior being what it is, people who are hard to love often bring out unlovely qualities in others. It is so natural to respond with cold silence, lecturing, arguing, threatening, ignoring them, or some form of punishment. But not Jesus. While we see only the outward appearance, He takes note of what is needed inside.

How Jesus Loved A Difficult Disciple

The Lord set about to provide John with that for which his heart craved—redemptive love. It is a love that has compassion for the brokenness that people feel inside, a love that accepts, a love offered as a gift. This kind of love expresses itself in some specific ways:

Agape love trusts. Jesus drew John close to Himself, bringing him into the most trusted inner circle of the disciples. Note the repeated references to John being in a small, select group with Peter and James (Matt. 17:1; Mark 5:37; 14:33; Luke 8:51). Our Lord shared Himself with John, granting special insights and revelations, such as those on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:2ff). Trust is likely to beget trust.

Agape love is vulnerable. Jesus opened His deepest feelings to John and the disciples. When others were abandoning him, He asked, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" (John 6:67) In Gethsemane, the Savior made Himself especially vulnerable before John and the others, seeking their support and encouragement (Matt. 26: 37, 38). We are more willing to face ourselves and our limitations in the presence of someone who is transparently honest and vulnerable with us.

Agape love builds bonds of intimacy. Jesus sought a friendship with John and the other disciples, rather than assuming the position of a master with servants (John 15:13, 15). He considered them His family (Matt. 12:49). He communicated freely with them. "Everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15). He spent time alone with them (Mark 3:7; 6:31; John 6:3; 11:54). One reference indicates the familial love and fondness which Jesus came to have for John (See John 20:2, where the word for "loved" literally means "the one of whom Jesus was fond"). (4, 5)

Agape love gives responsibility. As He hung upon the cross, Jesus gave to John a most significant responsibility—the care of His own mother (John 19:26, 27). This was not the first responsibility Jesus had given John (see Mark 6:7; Luke 8:51), but it was clearly a most significant one and signaled the depth of trust and attachment He found with John.

Agape love corrects with kindness and firmness. Jesus' love for John reached out to him in rebuke and correction when his course strayed from the values and convictions of Jesus (Matt. 20:22-24; Luke 9:52-56). Following the rebuke, Jesus used the opportunity to clarify the principles of life in His family. (6, 7)

Agape love makes sacrifices. At the cross, with the mother of Christ in his care, John looks upon the crucified One and sees the supreme manifestation of love—Jesus, the very embodiment of love, dying there. He remembers, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). The greatest Lover of the ages has become his substitute, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, the atonement for his sins. With eyes to see truth that only the Spirit can inspire, he recognizes on the cross his hasty temper dying, his revengeful spirit being vanquished, his unbridled prejudice meeting an eternal end. His untamed nature is crucified there. John is crucified with Christ (Compare Gal. 2:20). The Son of God is made to be sin for John (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21)—made to be the Son of Thunder, unlovely and unlovable—that in Him,

John, and all of us, might be made righteous, might be made loving and loveable. With the Son of Thunder on the cross, he recognizes that he is now God's son, and he falls to his knees in worship before the cross. "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" he would write later (1 John 3:1). From that cross flows redemptive, life-changing love that provides for the deepest needs of his soul.

In so many ways, Christ had portrayed His love for John. These touched and changed his heart. "The depth and fervor of John's affection for his Master was not the cause of Christ's love for him, but the effect of that love. John desired to become like Jesus, and under the transforming influence of the love of Christ he did become meek and lowly. Self was hid in Jesus" (*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 544).

Conclusion

The challenges we face in rearing our children can be great. There will be moments when we may be surprised, disappointed, angry, perhaps horrified, by their conduct or our own as we interact with them at various crisis points along the way. But there is a power in love to change hearts and lives. (8) Two quotations can inspire us:

"You may be evangelists in the home, ministers of grace to your children" (*Child Guidance*, p. 479). Whatever the challenge, whatever the crisis, we are called to minister grace to our children at that time.

The second quotation notes the probable result of manifesting Christ's redemptive love to our young people:

"The more unlovely they are, the greater pains you should take to reveal your love for them. When the child has confidence that you want to make him happy, love will break every barrier down. This is the principle of the Saviour's dealing with man; it is the principle that must be brought into the church" (*The Adventist Home*, p. 198).

May the love of Jesus transform us, soften us, make us more kind and caring. Let its power renew our home and family relationships, especially our relationships with our children, that it might be true of us as He said, "All . . . will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

Sermon Illumination

One (1): The New Testament uses the Greek word *agape* to describe God's love. God's *agape* love differs from human love in at least three ways:

- a. Human love is conditional; God's love is unconditional. It flows from Him independently of our goodness or self-worth (see Acts 15:11; Ephesians 1:7; 2:8, 9; Titus 1:14).
- b. Human love is changeable; God's love is unchangeable. His love never fails (see Jeremiah 31:3; Romans 8:35-39; 1 Corinthians 13:8).
- c. Human love is self-seeking; God's love is self-sacrificing (see Philippians 2:6-8).

The supreme manifestation of God's unconditional, unchanging, self-sacrificing love was demonstrated when Jesus died the second death on the cross for all humanity (see Romans 5:8; Hebrews 2:9) (Sequeira, 1993, p. 27).

Two (2): A family once visited a science exhibit where each visitor was asked to observe a wall-sized colored photograph of an orchard of fruit trees in full blossom. Then, each exhibit visitor was given a pair of three-dimensional eyeglasses to wear. The room was filled with exclamations of, "Oh, how magnificent!" "What a difference!" "I feel like I'm right in the middle of the trees!" It seemed as if the branches had emerged from the picture and stretched over the heads of the visitors. Some thought they might even be able to reach out and grasp the lush blossoms. The 3-D glasses provided a radically different way of viewing and experiencing the portrait.

Three (3): Recent research shows that the loss of a sibling in death is one significant crisis that can result in the manifestation of specific problem behaviors—arguing, demand for attention, disobedience at home, stubbornness, irritability, self-consciousness, and lack of concentration. Preschoolers, aged 4 and 5, and school-age youngsters, 6 through 11, showed the highest incidence of troublesome behaviors.

"Bereaved families . . . should be alerted to children's increased need for attention after a sibling dies, and should be prepared to enlist other family members and friends to help them meet the youngsters' increased and intensified needs" (*Growing Child Research Review*, 1995, p. 4).

Four (4): "The more a parent makes eye contact with his or her child as a means of expressing their love, the more a child is nourished with love and the fuller is his emotional tank. . . . We tend to like people who are able to maintain pleasant eye contact with us. Eye contact is pleasant, of course, when it is accompanied by pleasant words and pleasant facial expressions, such as smiling" (Campbell, 1988, pp. 39, 40).

Five (5): "Appropriate and consistent physical contact is a vital way to give your teenager that feeling and conviction that you truly care about him. This is especially true when your teenager is noncommunicative, sullen, moody, or resistant. During these times, eye contact may be difficult or even impossible. But physical contact can almost always be used effectively. Seldom does an adolescent respond negatively to a light, brief, touch on the shoulder, back, or arm. For example, suppose your teenager is just sitting in a chair watching TV. What a simple thing to briefly touch him on the shoulder as you walk by. . . .

"Even when your teenager is not consciously aware of your physical contact, it registers. Its effect is to help him feel, 'My mother and father love me and care for me, even during these times when relating to them is hard for me'" (Campbell, 1981, pp. 48, 49).

Six (6): "It is not love but sentimentalism that palters with wrongdoing, seeks by coaxing or bribes to secure compliance, and finally accepts some substitute in place of the thing required" (*Education*, p. 290).

Seven (7): "Children should not be left to wander away from the safe path marked out in God's word, into ways leading to danger, which are open on every side. Kindly, but firmly, with persevering, prayerful effort, their wrong desires should be restrained, their inclinations denied" (*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 391).

Eight (8): The teacher had been kind and loving to John, a troubled young African boy very much in need of kindness and love. One day he brought her a friendship gift, a seashell of lustrous beauty. "Where did you ever find such a beautiful shell?" the teacher asked as she gently

fingered the gift.

John told her that there was only one spot where such extraordinary shells could be found. When he named the place, a certain bay several miles away, the teacher was left almost speechless. "Why, it's gorgeous—wonderful—but you shouldn't have gone all that way to get a gift for me." His eyes brightening, the African boy answered, "Long walk part of gift." (Adapted from Mala Power, *Follow the Year*.)

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