

# **Your Love is a Great Gift**

*By Bobby Schuller*

So we're currently on a series on that creed, and today's the last day. And we're going to talk about this calling to share His love with the world. Now the world's a big place, and of course it's God's job to love the world, but for us as believers, our job is to love our neighbor. And can I tell you, that there's never been a greater time, and a greater need in our culture for more compassion, more empathy, more vulnerability, more gentleness, greater patience than there has been today.

And we are a world, I believe, that is suffocating, not for most of us here in Southern California, in particular, not because we don't have material resources, or not because we don't have help, but because we don't have empathy, bonding, deep friendships, deep relationships. And the greater technology sort of invades our world with entertainment, and with the ability to fly and drive and live wherever we want, and the ability to stay up all night with bright lights, at the same time comes the temptation to become isolated in our life. Where we have friends, we have family, we have our kids, but we're not truly bonded with them.

And so today I want to finish by basically summing the whole series, and that is very simply that the greatest human need is to bond with others. At the heart of it, we can't bond with others if we don't believe we're bondable. In a bit, we're going to talk about love your

neighbor as yourself, but how can you love your neighbor if you hate yourself. How can you love your neighbor as yourself in a positive way if you don't believe you're worthy of love and belonging.

And so the greatest human need, greater than anything else, is to bond deeply with others. When we bond deeply with our children, with our spouse, with our friends, with our colleagues at work, everything has more joy and more excitement. If you're good friends with the people you work with and you love seeing them, and you're deeply bonded to them, your job, you're probably going to love it.

When we bond deeply with others, we're full of joy. When we bond deeply with others, we feel closer to God. When we're bonded deeply with others, we're smarter. We're more relaxed, we sleep better. In fact a recent study has shown that bonding with others is healthier for you than diet and exercise. John Ortberg says that it's better to eat Twinkies with a friend than eat broccoli alone. I think that's a great, great insight. That there really is this need for us to bond with others, and people need that from you.

So when we talk about loving others, it is an action, it is caring for the poor, it is feeding, it is nurturing people that aren't grateful for it, but it's also.. the greatest thing you can do for your neighbor is to bond with them; to show them that they're worthy of love and belonging; to show them that when they're with you, they're safe. And yes, you might tell them like it is, you might be honest, you might shoot straight with them,

but at the same time, they're going to know when they're with you, they're going to experience something they don't get from anybody else, and that is a friend; someone who's present, someone who's gentle, someone who's honest, someone who's caring, and that's exactly who you are and I'm so proud of you.

When we bond with others, we have so much joy. When we're babies, this is when it begins. When a baby is born, it bonds with his mother or her mother. The mother holds the baby, and for the first time, it comes out of the warm liquidy, squishy place, the womb. It comes out into freezing, cold, naked, screaming, slimy, but very soon, into that chaotic, scary, traumatic experience, the baby sees its mother's eyes for the first time, and she smiles at him and he smiles back at her, and she feeds him and comforts him.

And gosh, that stage, those first five months of a humans life is so foundational to the health of the soul. The bonding happens, that the baby is actually internalizing the love of the mother, so that even when the mother is gone, or even someday when the mother dies, the mother's love is still internalized, its present inside that now child or even adult man. So that bonding that happened when he was a baby, he can't even remember, it's still there in his heart and it allows him to be a loving empathetic person.

And this carries on through life. We never get to a point where we don't need to internalize love any longer. If we're not regularly

internalizing the love of your father, of your spouse, of your kids, of your neighbors, you're not receiving bonding, empathy, compassion, vulnerability then you start to become exhausted. You become maybe numb. This is where depression, anxiety is rooted, and this is where cutting and pinching oneself comes from. This is where sort of a numbness or a deadness to life comes from. It comes from emotional isolation where you might feel you've got lots of friends, you've got a family who loves you, you've got lots of people in your life, but for some reason, you still feel dead. You feel like you don't have any vision. You wonder where you're going. You wonder what your purpose is. And at the heart of all of that is the need to bond with others. It's the emotional isolation.

And we can see that in people. We can see that when people reject themselves and don't think they're worthy of love and belonging, they'll have people around them but they won't truly bond with them. They won't really show all of their messiness. But when we do that, when we show our skeletons, our addictions, our flaws, our sins, our doubts, our illnesses, whatever, with others, and our fears, and they just put their arms around us and love us, then the secret us is loved, and the secret bit of us, that hidden part of our life comes back to life.

So we need to become the kinds of people who can be that loving person to vulnerable people, but we can't do that until we ourselves are vulnerable, and we ourselves internalize that love so that it just starts to

spillover, that the compassion spills out of us into the people around us. That's the kind of person you are. I'm so proud of you. As you internalize the love of those around you people can experience Christ' love as it sort of spills out of your life. You can see it when people don't do this. When people are living from a place of isolation, a place of saying I'm not truly worthy of love and belonging. My sins are worse than everybody else'. That kind of thing.

There's a guy in LA who was a magnificent Bible teacher, brilliant man, and he is mean as the day is long. He is the meanest old preacher I've ever heard in my life. Every time this guy gets up there, he is telling people they're going to hell, and they're horrible, and God hates them, and they're hanging by a string, and all this stuff. And I remember talking to one of his colleagues once, and I said what is the deal with that guy? And his colleague said to me, you know Bobby, when he was a boy, his dad was really strict. In fact one night he was so upset at him, he took him outside and chained him to a tree, and put a sign around his neck that said "worthless," and left him there overnight to punish him.

What I realized is when that preacher, that old preacher gets up and he starts telling people they're worthless, they're horrible, they're going to hell, that God hates them, he's saying that a thousand times more to himself. He says that every time he looks in the mirror. And friend, I want you to know that that is a lie from the enemy. God loves that old preacher. He loves him.

I remember when I.. we talk about bonding, I remember when our daughter, Haven, was born, and I remember like getting up at five in the morning, and I wasn't used to this. I was a new dad. I was 27. Wanted to stay up late. Didn't like getting up early. And I woke up and this little four-week-old, little peanut, I remember just rocking her back to sleep and she looked at me in my eyes and smiled, and I looked at her and smiled back, and I remember looking at her and just thinking I would do anything for you. And right there, we experienced it, didn't we. She experienced bonding with her father, but I experienced it, too. I bonded with my daughter, this little soul. And I remember thinking, I would do anything for her, not because of what she did, not because she's so smart or because she's accomplished something, or because of this or that, it was just because I love her.

You know God looks at you the same way. He loves you so much. And very often, when we feel far from God and we can't receive that love from Him, it's time that we draw nearer to other believers and allow them to love us, the deepest part of us when we can't love ourselves or we can't receive God's love.

This is why I believe very, very truly that Satan's first attack, and Satan will attack you, his first attack is always on our relationships. And he always does it through deceit either by saying you're not a good wife, you're not a good husband, you're a horrible father, you're not worthy of love and belonging. Or he'll say that to your neighbor. He'll create

through gossip and betrayal and different things like this. The enemy loves to deceive and to break up our friendships, our marriages. And this is because when we go through suffering, when we have people who love us that we're deeply bonded to, it doesn't make it easy, but it gives us the strength we need to endure.

Life is hard, and your life has been hard. And you shouldn't have to go it alone. You need people in your life who love you. And friend, I want you to know they do love you. People love you more than you think. And God loves you more than you know. And I want you to know that if you're honest about the stuff in your life, or the stuff about yourself that you hate, or all your doubts and fears, if you are honest with those things, with a handful of people you trust, you're going to find out very quickly how loveable you are and that will nurture the deepest part of your life. That's why reconciliation, relationships, kindness and compassion is so important. That's why at the heart of it of bonding is empathy. That we need people to understand what we're going through. To put their arm around us and to suffer with us, in a way, so that we can heal together.

This is the greatest commandment in scripture is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. It's so important. On multiple occasions, Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment is, and this is usually His answer.

On another occasion, the scripture reading from today, Luke chapter 10, Jesus is asked this question and it's an expert on the law. And he says, he stood up and he was there to test Jesus, and when he asked them what must I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus asked him a question back. What is written in the law, he replied. How do you read it? He answered: love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.

This is a part of the Torah; it's the most famous passage for Jews in the Bible. It comes right after what's called the Shammah. Little kids have this Bible verse memorized. And yet so many of the Jews in Jesus' day didn't follow this commandment. Later on, it's not in the scripture reading today, but Jesus will go on to tell the story of the Good Samaritan. And this is a story of a Levite and a priest who walk by a fellow Jew who has been beaten, but a Samaritan stops and cares for him.

This Samaritan is a big deal in Jesus' day. The Samaritan.. it's a nice thing in our mind, but for Jews, they were outsiders, they were sinners, they were heretics, they were evil, they were viewed as being violent. They had all sorts of stereotypes about them. To be frank with you, it'd be like if some Christian pastor asked Jesus, Lord, how do I become a Christian, and Jesus said love your neighbor. And then I said well who's my neighbor? And he tells this story about a pastor, a famous

pastor that everybody loves, and this pastor walks by a fellow Christian who has been beaten and left on the side of the road. And then an evangelist, or a missionary is on his way to a missions meeting and walks by this man who's been beaten. But then, a Muslim stops and cares for the man. You see that? I know some of you. That religion for many people invokes ideas of violence, of heresy, of this kind of thing.

And what Jesus is trying to show those Jewish people is that it doesn't matter how good your theology is and how good your doctrine is. If you haven't learned to love your neighbor as yourself, you haven't learned what it means to be a good Jew. And that's true for us. If we don't love our neighbor as our self, we haven't learned what it means to truly be like Jesus because love is at the heart of the gospel. It's a gospel of mercy, it's a gospel.

Look at the definition for Jesus. A lot of these words: forgiveness, comforter, reconciliation, love of enemies. And look at the things that Satan, some of these biblical words that describe Satan: the accuser, deception, fear, shame, division, punishment. Any church that is supposed to be Christ-like should look like that top line: forgiving, comforting, reconciling, loving their enemies. Any church that's working on the side of the enemy has those bottom ones: judgment, judgmentalism, deception, fear, shame. How many churches do we go in, it's just shame, shame, shame all day long. Judgment, punishment.

Friend, I want you to know that the greatest need that our neighbors have today is to receive love, compassion, empathy, bonding with you.

I noticed this when we used to do like care for the poor. We worked at Isaiah House for a long time, and I remember, we would have people from church come and work with the homeless at Isaiah House and there'd be all these homeless men and women and children who were living on the street. And we'd have these church folks come, and they always wanted to cook and serve food, because that's why they came. I came to make pancakes!

And I remember how hard it was, it was like guys, you realize this working with the homeless enough: the real need here is that these people are exhausted. They're afraid. They feel isolated. They feel rejected. They feel like they don't have any dignity. You need to go to them and hug them, pray for them, do more listening than talking, be present with them even when they're off or they're annoying in some way. Just be there and let them know that they're worthy of your love and belonging.

It doesn't matter how poor or how broke and how rich, how successful you are, at the heart of all of our sadness, depression, nihilism, all this stuff, at the heart of it is a lack of bonding. And we're supposed to draw closer to our neighbor, to love and to be loved.

In order to truly love the way Jesus loved, we have to internalize God's love first. And we have to internalize the love of our neighbor. And this is where many believers lose it in our modern day, is that their faith, that's what's called existential. It's just a one way, it's just me and God, and nobody else. But that is not Christian orthodoxy.

So this is called the doctrine of incarnation. So we asked most Christians, what does incarnational theology mean? It means that the word that is God became flesh and dwelt among us and ascended, and after the cross and resurrection, ascended into heaven, and that was sort of it. But the real answer is that that was just the beginning. That the incarnation continues in the church so that in Acts chapter two, the Holy Spirit entered the body of every single believer. That means when you look at another believer, another Christian, someone who claims Jesus Christ as their Lord, you're not just looking at Sue, you're also looking at Christ within Sue. You're not just talking to Joe, but you're talking to Christ within Joe.

And so what happens is that even though people sin, and make mistakes, and are flawed, when we bond with other believers, we're also bonding with God. You ever had a time in your life when you're praying, you're having quiet times, you're reading Christian books, but you just feel far from God? You go on retreat, you go on a long windy walk, but still, where is God? And friend, I want you to know that there's another

way, and the other way is to bond with God through a person. In fact, sometimes this is the best way.

So the difference between the theist, and a Christian, I think I have a slide for this. So the theist is the person where.. a theist means they believe in God, and that is that God is experienced individually and personally. It's me and God. But the Christian, it's that, God is experienced individually, but also through other believers. So the theist believes in God, right? Here's a little stick man. And it's just him and the Lord, right? And doesn't matter.. and it's just, right? But the Christian triangulates where you have another friend over here, and so that this is happening, so that your relationship with God is always somehow in community.

In marriage counseling, for Christians, a lot of times they'll teach people this. When the husband and the wife move towards God, they also move closer to each other. Isn't that nice? So that as we draw closer in our relationship to God, we'll become closer to one another.

But what they fail to teach is that the opposite happens, as well. Imagine this is like a track, right? And these two bond with one another. As this tightened, both draw closer to God. Does that make sense? Let's say they're not drawing closer to God through Bible study and this kind of thing, but they're bonding with one another deeply as friends, or as spouses or parent and child, that as that happens, there is for sure a deep experience of God's love through the individual. And that's why, for

the Christian, we experience God yes, in solitude and silence, yes, in our private prayer times, but we also experience the Lord through our children, through our best friends, through our next door neighbor, and you could even experience it through reconciliation and love for an enemy. You can sense and experience the power of God work in that like triangle of life.

And this is an orthodox part of what it means to be a believer, that you can't truly be a Christian without other believers. You need those people in your life. You need people, and can I just tell you, you not only need it, you want it. And can I tell you, you don't have to live life alone. You are so much more awesome than you think. You are so much more lovable than you think. You are so less guilty than you think. Every single person has imperfections. Every single person has lack, fear, disappointment with life, and until we share those things with one another and bond with each other, we're going to struggle to truly experience the power and awesomeness of God. But the invert is true, as well. And you start bonding with your friends and loved ones, especially if they know the Lord and you're going to just start to experience God in fresh, new, amazing ways.

So, what does it mean to share your love with the world? Quite clearly, it means to be an empathetic, vulnerable person. It means to bond deeply with the people in your life. They need you! They need you!

Even though you're a little nuts or crazy or you're on something or whatever. They need you! Believe me, people need you.

And so I'm going to tell you in three minutes or so, three things you can do that if you do these three things, you will become one of the most loving, amazing people anyone knows, and you're going to have more life and joy within you.

First, number one, and of the three this is the most important. Get this right. Be vulnerable. Be vulnerable. You don't be vulnerable with everybody, but be vulnerable with people you trust. Find one or two people in your life that you trust to be vulnerable. You're not asking for advice, you're not asking to fix you, you're just asking them to see you, to see the real you. And then see what happens when you show the skeleton in your closet or the way you've messed up or your doubts and your fears, and when they're just a quiet loving presence, or they just say me too, that's even better, and you'll find that in being vulnerable, you're going to internalize God's love.

The other great thing about being vulnerable is vulnerability itself is a gift. When people are vulnerable with others, it frees everybody up to not be so dang perfect. Oh, they're messed up too! That's good to know. I guess we can be friends. This is why AA gets this right, and the church usually gets this wrong. In the church if an alcoholic comes in and says 'hi, my name's Bob. I'm an alcoholic.' We go 'all right, let's get you on a program, we're going to get you fixed. Here's the thing. This class is

tomorrow, and we're going to get you reading this book,' and instantly goes into fix mode.

But if an alcoholic goes to alcoholics anonymous, and says 'hi, I'm Bob, I'm an alcoholic,' what does everybody say? 'Hi, Bob.' Right? They don't try and fix him, they don't try and repair him, they are just bonding with Bob. They're getting to know him. They're receiving him as he is – an alcoholic, and that's okay. Welcome to AA. We're glad you're here.

And this is what Jesus did in ministry. Jesus always ascribed dignity to people before fixing them. He would sit down with sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, and just eat and hang out with them way before He ever tried to start fixing them. Isn't that great? And so that's something we can learn, as a church. To learn what it means to love people and ascribe dignity to them, and learn to trust them and trust each other, and care for them before trying to make them something or fix something about them. To love people with their imperfections. You're an imperfect person and you are loveable and I'm so glad you're here. So your vulnerability is a gift to your neighbor when you can be honest about your shortcomings.

Number two: be aware. Look for pain. And when you see people in pain, just be present with it. Don't feel like you have to fix pain; don't feel like you have to repair things. To truly be loving is to just empathize with that pain. To listen to the person, maybe give that person a hug if it's appropriate, or to pray with that person, but to let that person know

they're not alone. That was Mother Teresa's ministry. She wasn't really able to do much for those children who were dying. She was just present with them as they died, and it was one of the most loving things she could do to know that no child and no person in India was isolated in their suffering. In fact, that's the meaning of the word compassion. The word compassion literally means to suffer with.

Number three: be gentle. Why have we gotten so harsh with each other? In politics and in religion in particular, everyone has become so violent in their rhetoric, in their language. When we get in an argument with our kids or with our spouse or our friends or our enemies, or the guy that cut us off in traffic, why so harsh, why so violent, why so mean spirited? That's not helping us. And what we realize is that people that are hurting the most, who often themselves will come across as violent, are the most of the fragile souls. The toughest men you see marching around with their big chests and all, you're looking at some of the most isolated, lonely, fragile souls out there. They need someone to gently care for them and to love them just as they are, and not as they should be.

Be gentle. Be gentle in your debates. Tell the truth, always. The enemy works through deception and the Lord works through truth, but He works through truth gently. There is an allure to gentleness. If you want to convince people of your ideas, convince them gently and in process. Don't force it down their throat.

That's why Phillip Yancey said, "no one ever came to Jesus by losing an argument." Isn't that the truth? You hear these people debating whether God exists or not or something, you're just not going to convince someone to have a new heart by winning an argument over them. Every relationship, in fact most relationships are with wounded people. I'm a wounded person. Many of you are wounded.

And so when we're in relationship with people, Henri Nouwen says it's like holding a bird with broken wings. So you hold that bird gently in your hand, but if you hold too tightly, you'll crush it. We do that sometimes, don't we? We get scared, we think a person's going to leave us, or we think they're going to betray us or turn us, so we hold too tight and we crush them. But also, you don't want to hold too light or the bird will fall and die. So that happens, too. We get scared that something's awry, or we get too frustrated with them and we just stonewall, or walk away. And that will kill the relationship, too. So every relationship that's worth having is like holding a wounded bird. Not too tight, not too loosely. And watch, as you if you do that long enough, that bird will heal.

Friends, I want to convince you that to be a good Christian means to have other people in your life that see you with all your flaws and imperfections, and love you and prove to you that you are worthy of love and belonging. Not because of how you look or what you've achieved or anything like that, that just as you are, you are loveable and that you matter, and that will change everything.

Lord, we love you, and we thank you that you love us, not because of what we do, or what we have, or what people say about us. And Lord, show us that we need to go deeper in our friendships. That we need at least two or three people in our life who really see us as we are, and accept us and love us. And so Lord, we're going to stop beating ourselves up, shaming ourselves, and saying we're not good enough, and comparing ourselves to others, and instead, we're going to be free and let you look upon us as I looked up my baby daughter, that you just see us and adore us and love us and care for us. Father, I pray that you continue to build worth and value in the heart of every person under my voice so that they'll be so full of your love and compassion it will literally just spill over. That their cup will overflow, as Psalm 23 says, into the world around them. We love you, in Jesus' name we pray, amen.