

## WORLD FAMOUS

Colossians 1:8

It was the most successful film of 2013. It won 2 Academy Awards and grossed \$1.3 billion worldwide. It was the 5<sup>th</sup> highest grossing movie of all time. It made more money than any other animated film in history. It was called *Frozen* and it is generally agreed it was the best movie Disney has made since the Disney renaissance of the 1990's. The story centers around 2 royal sisters, Elsa and Anna. Unfortunately Elsa has cryokinetic powers she cannot control. To make a long story short Elsa inadvertently injures her sister who subsequently ends up with a frozen heart from which she is in danger of dying. The only thing that can save her, she is told, is an act of love. Of course all think this means something like a kiss of love. But in the end when Elsa is attacked by the devious Prince Hans Anna throws herself between them in an attempt to block the attack and protect her sister. She is killed in the attack. It is her willingness to sacrifice herself to save her sister that is, in fact, the act of love that saves Anna herself, who then comes back to life.

In a central pivot point in the story Elsa sings "Let It Go," the song that won an Oscar. She expresses that she's done with trying to please other people, she's going to let it go and be herself. It's no wonder that the song is so popular, for it perfectly captures the spirit of our age. It is seen as having a message of empowerment. Elsa sings, "no right, no wrong, no rules for me." The message of our culture is depicted right there. Nobody can tell you what is right or wrong, there are no rules because there is no truth.

People have a number of different interpretations of the movie's message. It seems to me that the overall story contradicts the message of the song "Let It Go." In the end Elsa finds that just letting go and being a law unto yourself is not enough. She learned that what life is about is not living however you want with no rules and no restrictions, but that it is found in relationships and in family. And most of all we see that what saved the day was an act of sacrificial love. That is what always has, and always will, save the day. We will see that as we consider the message of one verse today. Let's look at Colossians 1:8.

### WE HAVE ISSUES WITH LOVE

When we looked at verses 3-8 we saw that when the Colossians put their faith in the truth of the gospel it gave them hope. That hope, in turn, produced a remarkable love for "all the saints." This love was so distinct and so obvious that Paul thanked God that he had worked to bring it about in them. This love was so characteristic of them that it was what they were known for. Now here at the end of verse 8, that love shows up again. Paul says that Epaphras, their friend, had told Paul of their "love in the Spirit." The obvious point of application that we take away from this is that we, too, should love so powerfully that we will be known for it, just as was true of the Colossians. We learned when we looked at verses 3-8 that having the hope of the gospel should produce this in us.

That sounds good to all of us. No one will ever be criticized or opposed for saying that we should love people. Everyone is in favor of love. For many years popular songs have been telling us this is what we need. What the world needs now is love. All you need is love. Even the Spice Girls sang “Let Love Lead The Way.” The who? No, not The Who, that was a group back in in the 1960’s, the Spice Girls of the 1990’s. Yes, those are old, but just 2 years ago Gabrielle Aplin rose to the top of the music charts when she sang about “The Power of Love.” Who doesn’t think love is a good idea? Who doesn’t think we all need more love?

So I’ll never get in trouble saying we ought to love people. Run the love flag up the pole and everyone will salute. But this raises a question. Clearly since the world is full of people who all believe totally in the need for love and are absolutely in favor of it, it is a very loving place, right? The world must be completely filled with love, must it not?

There are a lot of nice people in this world. And there surely are countless acts of love performed daily. But do we really think that if the world were full of love it would be exactly as it is now? Several years ago Laurie and I were at the airport waiting for a flight. I went to the restroom. About 20 minutes later I heard my name being paged over the airport public address system. My immediate reaction was that whatever this meant it wasn’t going to be good. We were already checked in for our flight so if they were calling me it must be because there was a problem. I was pretty sure they were not paging me to inform me they’d upgraded us to first class. I went to the counter that the announcement had directed me to and gave the lady behind the counter my name. She said, “Does this belong to you?” as she handed me my wallet. I was stunned. How did she get my wallet? She said someone had found it in the restroom and turned it in. Obviously somehow it had fallen out of my pocket in the restroom. I checked through it and my driver’s license, credit cards and all the cash I had were still there. Some honest soul had found it, fortunately. My reaction was massive relief as I recognized how close I had come to creating an enormous mess for myself. Then it began to include amazement. What are the odds that if you lose your wallet someone will return it with everything intact? The odds aren’t good. In a world that is full of love you would never worry if you lost track of something valuable. You would know that it would be returned to you, because that’s what love would do. This is not that world.

If the world were full of love there would be no need for locks on our doors, there would surely be no need for lawyers, we wouldn’t need police, we wouldn’t need good passwords. Wow would that be nice. We have passwords for Google, for Apple, for our bank, for Social Security, for our cable tv company, for our health insurance company and the list goes on. You’re not supposed to have the same password for everything so we now have no chance of keeping them all straight. Wouldn’t it be nice if this were a world full of love where passwords would never be necessary? In that world of love we wouldn’t need antivirus software, we wouldn’t need jails or courts, there would be no divorce, nor any home owners associations. There certainly would be no war, no racism and no prejudice. Essentially if the world were full of love there would be very little to fear.

It's weird that in fact there is so much hurt and danger in this world since everybody tries to love. Who among us thinks he or she doesn't love? We all want to think of ourselves as loving people, and yet somehow all those negative things exist. Somehow there are problems in our relationships to one degree or another. The fact that there is so much dissonance between what love should produce, and what we actually see in the world, should warn us that something is wrong.

Mahatma Gandhi is renowned as a great soul. He was a big proponent of love. He even said, "Where there is love there is life." And yet he treated his own wife cruelly. He physically abused her and was totally domineering, insensitive and unloving toward her. He was also harsh with his own kids. How is it possible for someone to talk about love, to recommend it to the world, be regarded as a great man and not be able to see his own lack of love toward those who loved him?

Barbara de Angelis is a relationship consultant and author who has had several books on the *New York Times* best seller list. She has lectured throughout the country on relationships and appeared on CNN for 2 years as their relationship expert. She said, "Love is a more formidable force than any other. It is invisible. It cannot be seen or measured yet it is powerful enough to transform you in a moment." Sounds great. Here's the problem. She's been married 5 times. Her husbands could make up a basketball team. She's like the woman Jesus encountered at the well in Samaria in John 5. She also had 5 husbands and the man she had at that time wasn't her husband. Um, excuse me Barbara, but where's the love?

We all intend to love. We think it's a good idea and are totally in favor of it, yet all too often our actions don't match up with either our intentions or our image of ourselves. Comedian Louis CK says he has noticed that people in the military always fly coach. "I've never seen a soldier in first class in my life...Every time I see a soldier on a plane I always think, 'You know what? I should give him my seat. It would be the right thing to do...' I never have, let me make that clear. I've never done it once...Here's the worst part: I was actually proud of myself for having thought of this. I am such a sweet man. That is so nice of me, to think of doing that and then totally never do it."

Do I need to mention that every church in the world believes with all their heart in love, are committed to loving each other with God's unconditional love, yet so often are full of conflict, division, tension and simply cannot seem to get along? Does that look like love to you? Do I need to mention that every couple that gets married promises on their wedding day to love each other through better and worse until death parts them, yet divorce is not exactly a rare thing?

What is the problem here? There are a couple of them, actually.

***People can be hard to love***

When we were visiting Michael and Carissa last summer we spent the last couple of days there in New Orleans. The hotel we stayed in had a little sundries shop. We needed a plastic knife to cut up some fruit we had. We knew they had some in the sundries shop that they gave away so we went into the shop to get one. But the lady minding the store wasn't there. We waited for the woman to return for quite a while, but she seemed otherwise occupied. Finally Laurie just walked around the counter and took a knife from the basket full of them. Of course as she was doing so the woman returned. She went ballistic. "What are you doing back there? You can't be back there!" She went on about this, and her emotional outburst was total overreaction. And I do mean total. Talk about making a mountain out of an anthill. It was ridiculous. Honestly, people like that can be hard to love.

A couple of years ago we had another of those things happen when we were at LAX. We were trying to follow the directions of the TSA agents but we went into the wrong line. A woman agent went all anabolic on us, behaving as though our names were Achmed and Fatima or something. Why does a little bit of power seem to go to some people's heads?

We've had neighbors who were crotchety, ill-tempered and full of themselves. We have good ones too, but we've seen problems crop up between neighbors who can't get along. We've seen several marriages on our street blow up. We see repeated evidence that people can be difficult. I can give you an example a lot closer to home. Poor Laurie had had to deal with a husband who is often clueless and can be insensitive. He's not always easy to love. And that is true for all of us.

In Philippians 1:15-17 Paul wrote, "It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains." Paul is being persecuted, he is imprisoned for Jesus, and some people are trying to compete with him and cause trouble for him in the name of Jesus. How was he supposed to love those people? Here's bad news, their descendants are still with us. How do we love them?

### ***We are absorbed in ourselves***

A second factor that keeps us from loving others is our commitment to self. An issue last July (7/16/2013) of *Scientific American* contained an article titled "The Neuroscience of Everybody's Favorite Topic." It reported on a study done at Harvard University. The researchers asked 195 participants to talk about themselves or about other people. As they talked the researchers scanned their brains. They found out that when their subjects talked about themselves the parts of their brains associated with reward lit up, the same parts of the brain that activate when eating comfort food or using cocaine. The conclusion is that human beings find talking about themselves to be inherently pleasurable, more so than talking about anything else. We're addicted to it.

This is what we care about. Another study showed that we spend 60% of our conversations talking about ourselves. As far as I know no one has yet been able to gauge how much of the time our thoughts revolve around ourselves, but my guess is that's going to be way north of 60% of the time.

When we are focusing on ourselves we are not loving someone else, it's as simple as that. The fact that we are literally addicted to self means that truly loving other people is actually an unnatural act. We only "love" others when we perceive it to be of some benefit to ourselves.

This is bad news. An issue of *GQ* last December (12/13/2013) had two articles that had wildly different messages. One was about *GQ*'s Man of the Year, actor Matthew McConaughey. In it he said, "I'm a fan of the word selfish...Selfish has gotten a bad rap. You should do for you." Apparently for him doing for himself means buying a Lincoln vehicle. The other article in the same issue was about author George Saunders, whom they named "Life Coach of the Year." In the article Saunders is quoted saying, "The big kahuna of all moral questions, as far as I'm concerned, is ego. How do you correct the fundamental misperception that we are all born with—I am central? All of the nasty stuff in this life comes out of that misunderstanding."

McConaughey says take care of yourself, Saunders says the root problem of the human race is obsession with self. Surprise, a Hollywood star is woefully off base. Who would have thought? Saunders is absolutely right. He has a very biblical perspective. All of the nasty stuff in life, all of it, comes from making self the center of life. It started in the Garden of Eden and continues to this day. We put self first, and there is no end of havoc we cause. Part of that havoc is that we are so occupied with ourselves we cannot love others, and to make it worse we can't even see that we are failing to do so.

## WE ARE CALLED TO LOVE IN THE SPIRIT

The Colossians were known for their "love in the Spirit." The Spirit of Jesus was involved in enabling them to love the way they did. In Galatians 5:16 Paul commanded believers in Jesus to live by the Spirit. A few verses later he described the results of living by the Spirit as the fruit of the Spirit. In verse 22 he said, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love..." We are commanded to live by the Spirit, and if we do we will love.

Love in the Spirit, the kind of love displayed by the Colossians, is different from what we normally label love in two ways. It is different in both its *character* and in its *source*.

As to its *character*, this love is neither natural nor normal human love. Because we are addicted to self our natural inclination is to see love as a transaction. We will "love" people by giving to them, but somewhere down the line there will always be some expected return on investment. There is inevitably a "what do I get out of it" element to our love. This is what makes it hard for us to love each other. Since all of us are preoccupied with self the

people we choose to love are apt to be thinking about themselves, too. The result of this is that we might easily conclude we're not getting enough out of the deal. It appears that when we love we often don't get the return on investment that we expected. At that point we typically stop "loving."

Laurie and I recently had one of those little encounters that occasionally happen in married life. We were in bed at the end of the day. Laurie was tired and had to get out very early the next morning, so she was intent on going to sleep. However, just as she was settling down and about to drift off to sleep I received a text on my phone from Toby. The initial "ding" announcing its arrival would have been all right, but then I answered him. Now had I been a little more tech savvy I would have remembered that I could put the phone on silent mode and it would not have bothered Laurie. Unfortunately I forgot this obvious option. You know how it is when it's quiet and you want to fall asleep but then there is a repeated noise? You focus in on that noise and it begins to irritate you as it occupies your total attention. That happened for Laurie. She began to get increasingly annoyed by my texting. When I realized I was creating a problem I finally stopped. Too late. By that time Laurie was thoroughly awake and couldn't get to sleep. It was quite a while before she could finally go to sleep. She let me know that this was my fault and she was not happy about it. The next morning she reiterated that perhaps I might have been more sensitive to her the night before. She went out that morning and I had time to establish in my own mind how she was making entirely too much of such a small thing.

Those little moments have enormous potential for injecting poison into a relationship. Even a few of them, if not defused, can kill any and all affection. Unfortunately our tendency is any time someone is upset with us we get upset with them just for being upset with us. They are attacking the sacred cow, meaning our sense of self. Life has millions of these little moments, and every one of them holds lethal potential for crushing the peace, unity and intimacy we long for. What is required in such situations is not natural, normal human reaction, because that reaction is to prove there is nothing wrong with me, it is to love myself. What is needed is divine love, love by the Spirit.

Listen to how the Bible instructs us to love: Romans 12:9 says "love must be sincere." Ephesians 4:29 says, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." Colossians 3:12-13 says, "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another." Philippians 2:4 calls on us to not look out for our own interests, but for the interests of others. So in this conflict I'm having with this person, my goal is to look out for the other person's interest. In other words, my goal is to serve the other person!

Kindness, compassion, patience, humility, serving and forgiveness are only needed if one is trying to love a person who is not always perfectly wonderful. That's the love that we need, the love God has for us. That's a different kind of love. I eventually loved Laurie by the

Spirit. It required only a simple, though devilishly difficult act. I had to say, “I’m sorry. You are right, I should have been more sensitive to you.”

This kind of love is what God calls us to have for each other. In Galatians 5:6 Paul said, “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” In 1 Corinthians 13:1 Paul wrote, “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.” The Corinthians were arguing, competing, trying to prove they were more spiritual than each other, particularly by speaking in tongues. Paul said in that chapter it doesn’t matter what amazing, even miraculous thing you do to prove something, if you do it to prove something about yourself rather than simply to love people. You are nothing. Paul says you are a “resounding gong.” We were at the airport last year at Christmas waiting for a flight when someone went through an emergency door. A truly offensive alarm went off. It was impossible to ignore. It was extremely loud and unpleasant and it went on and on. Everyone just wanted it to stop. Please, someone turn it off. In Paul’s day they didn’t have those alarms. The closest annoying sound he could think of is a resounding gong. The point is, if you don’t act out of real love, you’re that airport alarm. You put everyone on edge and they are all thinking, “please, someone, make it stop.” If you don’t love with the Spirit’s love, whatever great thing you might do, you are that annoying. And in God’s eyes, all you are doing is rebelling against him!

A person who supposedly is great, but doesn’t love people first, foremost and always, doesn’t relate to the people closest to him with patience, kindness, gentleness, compassion, forgiveness, constantly giving to them with no thought of return, is not great at all. He is merely a puffed up windbag, an irritating car alarm that won’t stop beeping.

I don’t want to get too pointed toward a brother who is down, but a recent high profile well known pastor had to step down amid a storm of controversy because he is harsh, arrogant and domineering toward people. Do you see any problem there? Sadly that is common in the church. When will we start following leaders who actually love in the Spirit rather than those who are dynamic airport alarms?

What God wants for you is that you love with the Spirit’s love, that patient, kind, compassionate, giving, forgiving unselfish love. He wants it today. He wants it tomorrow, and the day after that, and all week. He wants it for the next month, the next year and for the rest of your life. He wants you to love in the Spirit when you wake up in the morning, when your kids are whining in the morning, when you talk to that irritating person on the phone who would have to double his or her intelligence to become as smart as a cactus. He wants it when your husband is more dense than a neutron star that is so dense a spoonful of it would weigh a ton. He wants you to love with his love when you are exhausted at the end of the day and no one seems to care about you. He wants you to love when it is the last thing in the world you feel like doing.

The movie *Frozen* has some things wrong, but it has one thing right. The only thing that can heal wounded hearts is love. This is the only thing that can heal marriages and family. It is the only thing that can heal the hearts of the wounded people that are all around us. To our amazement we discover that *loving others in the Spirit of Jesus is the only thing that can heal our own souls.*

This brings me to the second identifying aspect of love in the Spirit, and that has to do with its *source*. There's a critical point to be carefully noted in this passage. The Colossians only were able to have that love after they had put their faith in the truth of the gospel of Christ. Only then did the Spirit of Jesus set them free from enslavement to self that masquerades as love but in the end only manipulates and uses. That is crucial to see, because it points us to how we can have the kind of famous love they had.

In his book, *The Hope of Glory*, Sam Storms wrote, "The love that the Colossians have for Paul and for all the saints is not a love that is natural to the human heart. We are by nature selfish and guarded and absorbed with our own concerns. If we are to love as the Colossians loved, it must happen 'in the Spirit.'" This love is a God-given love that cannot be produced by human determination.

Laurie and I put up our Christmas tree this week. We got all the lights on it. I had it all set up on a timer. Then I plugged the lights in, anxious to see the glory of them glowing on the tree. Nothing happened. I was so frustrated. What was wrong? I checked all the connections. Everything seemed fine. I couldn't figure out what the problem was. Then Laurie said, "Rick, I think that outlet might be dead." I unplugged the cord and plugged it back into another outlet. The glory of the Christmas tree lights shone around about us! When those lights were not connected to the power source they could not glow. If we are not connected to and drawing from the source of love, which is God himself, then there will be no real love in us. There will only be selfishness masquerading as love.

## APPLICATION

The obvious question this passage begs is how do we love in the Spirit?

### ASK YOURSELF WHAT YOU WANT

This is a question we need to give some serious thought to. What is it you want in life? We all want a lot of things. We want to be safe. We want to not hurt. We want to be loved and cared for. We want to be noticed and considered valuable. We want to be liked. We want to be respected and treated with dignity. We want approval. We want money and success. The list could go on infinitely.

What is the common theme in all of that? It is something we want for ourselves. As long as that is what we pursue we cannot love in the Spirit. In fact we cannot love at all. As long as our eyes on what we want for ourselves we are serving self. We may even do things that look



selfless, but in the end they will be aimed at getting something for ourselves. That is not love.

When you are driving and some nimrod comes roaring up from behind you at absurd speed weaving through traffic and just as you anticipate, he cuts you off, what do you want? Do you want to show him he can't mess with you? Do you want to vent anger at him? Or do you want to bring honor to the name of Christ by loving in the Spirit? In every situation we will face in life, this is a fundamental question that has vast implications for us. As you get up tomorrow to start your week, what do you want to happen in your life? What do you hope to do this week? Is it to bring glory to God by loving everyone you know in the Spirit? If we answer it that what we want is to love by the Spirit half the battle is already won.

Every now and then I encounter establishments that claim to serve some food that is "world famous." A couple of examples are "Famous Dave's" and Tommy's "world famous" hamburgers in Los Angeles. The Colossians were world famous for their love. Paul, in prison, a long way from Colossae, heard about it, and now we have heard about it though thousands of miles and two millennia removed from them. This passage challenges us to make it our goal to become world famous. We are to be known all over the globe for the incredible way we love others, beginning with those closest to us.

I will warn you though, that goal will be tested. As soon as you decide that what you want more than anything in life is to love in the Spirit something is going to happen that will have the potential for derailing you. We have an enemy who doesn't want us really loving people in the Spirit. When you choose that as your goal it's like waving a red cape at a bull. You can bet your last dollar that he's going to come at you. Someone you should love is going to be absurdly difficult to love. Some precious image of yourself will be threatened by someone or you will not get something you desperately desire in a relationship. That is precisely the moment you most need the love of the Spirit of Christ.

### ASK THE SPIRIT TO WORK

It is helpful to remember that the kind of selfless love God wants us to have is the fruit of the Spirit. About a year ago we bought a peach tree and planted it in our back yard. I love peaches. I envisioned how good this was going to be. I hate it in the summer when you go to the store, you see all these glorious looking peaches and you buy a bunch of them, salivating at how good those sweet, juicy peaches are going to be. Then you eat one and it's kind of flavorless and not the least bit juicy. I hate that. I imagined this past summer that I would pick the fruit off our own tree only when it was perfectly ripe. I'd bite into that peach and instant ecstasy as the sweet flavor burst into my mouth. It was going to be amazing. We had that chance. We picked peaches off our tree. They were fresh, ripe, and kind of flavorless.

I was so frustrated. I said, "That's it. I want great peaches. I'm going to have great peaches. If the dumb trees won't produce great peaches for me then I'm going to produce them myself." Then I set about creating the sweetest, juiciest peaches the world has ever seen.

How do you think went? Not very well. I have exactly zero capability for producing the fruit of a peach tree. It is impossible. Similarly I have exactly zero capability for producing the fruit of the Spirit. I cannot do it.

Paul prayed in Ephesians 3:16 that the Ephesians would be strengthened inside by the Spirit of Jesus. We should pray exactly the same thing. We should pray every day that the Spirit will enable us to love with his love. Do you think he wants that? Is that a prayer he's apt to answer? All we need to do is ask. Ask when you start your day. Ask when your love is tested. Ask when you don't feel well. Ask when you're tired. Ask when you are in your best moments, at the high point of your year. Ask the Spirit to pour out his love in you and let it flow through you to others, and the more undeserving of their love the more you need to ask the Spirit to use you to love them.

### LIVE IN THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL

What transformed the Colossians was the gospel of grace. It was knowing that because of what Jesus Christ has done in his death and resurrection they were loved by God, they were forgiven forever and they had eternal hope. As they rested in God's love and grace they were able to quit focusing on themselves and follow the model of love Jesus had given them.

I have simple tastes. For instance one of the things I love to eat in the Myatt holiday tradition is the rolls we have at Thanksgiving. They are so good. Near the end of our feast this year my mom asked me what else I wanted to eat. I'd already had 2 rolls, but I asked for another. After I ate that and a little more of the delicious dressing I was stuffed. Now imagine there were a couple of rolls left and someone else wanted some. What do you suppose my reaction would have been? Please, help yourself. As much as I love those rolls the thought of another bite of anything, even one of those rolls, is appalling. To eat any more would be painful. So have all the rolls you want.

Let's let God's grace and the love of the Spirit be represented by those rolls. If you've been filled up to the max with God's love then you are not going to be demanding that other people give you more love. You are filled up and have what you need, so you can think about giving to others. We need to feed on the grace of the Gospel so we are full of God's love. When we are full of his love we do not need to demand love from other people.

That is how we can love in the Spirit as well. As we remember our hope, as we revel in God's love and forgiveness, as we remember the unfathomable grace he has given us, we too will be set free by the Spirit of Jesus to love in that same way that he loved us.