



First Focus

On God's Dynamic Love

One of the great revolutionary ideas of the New Testament is the idea that **God is love**. As a modern Christian audience of scripture one can easily become so familiar with this idea that it becomes actually unfamiliar. When this happens, the vocabulary of "**God loves us**" loses true meaning to us and it becomes vastly abstract and ignored. God's love is a big idea to wrap our heads around and it is one of those wells that never run dry.

The New Testament treats this idea a bit differently. Love is a powerful and revolutionary idea to the gospel writer and disciple, John. He spends much effort to describe its power. From John 3:16 to even referring to himself as "*the one who Jesus loved*," John builds this powerful idea of God's love as the capstone of our understanding of God. We see his ultimate claim in 1 John 4:8,16 that God is love and the only way to know him is love. **We are called to trust that God is love even we don't understand what God is doing or how life is unfolding.**

Scripture has a wonderful picture that John uses to describe the life

and love that comes from God. God's love is described as a living water, like a river flowing that never runs dry. A modern word we have to describe this nature is the word "**dynamic**," meaning it has a nature of constant progress, activity or change. Living water is a powerful picture that can address the problem we may have if we have lost appreciation for the idea that God is love.

Just like a dynamic river flowing, God's dynamic love also has a similar nature that we should highlight.

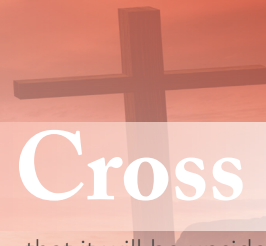
1. God's dynamic love is always bringing something new. Water brings new life to our world. It brings nutrition that is required for life. We must free ourselves of earning God's love which is much like swimming up a river. But instead receive God's love and the constant new blessings it brings.

2. God's dynamic love provides for the thirsty. This living water metaphor actually connects the dots of Christ's ministry to his form of love. Jesus said "*All who are thirsty, come to me and I will let them drink.*" Or maybe this is why

He ate with the thirsty tax collectors and healed the thirsty lepers.

3. God's dynamic love pushes us towards action. Letting go and receiving His love does not result in a static state. When you stop swimming upstream, the river will still be going. We will be in a **dynamic** state when we submit to God's love.

When God's love pushes us toward action, it will overcome all in its way. **A flowing river can carve up the largest mountain.** Just as the river does, Love overcomes by offering a different way. It winds, twists and turns. It is only through experiencing His **dynamic** love that we find deliverance from the horrors, slavery, and fears that we daily face due to sin. Much like the natural erosion of water, love overcomes fear by subverting fear. The biggest fear for any of us is death. But remember our faith is in God's love and that it is stronger than death because of His unlimited reserve of forgiveness and adoption.



On the Theology of the Cross

Did you know that 2017 marked the 500 year anniversary of the beginning of the **Reformation**? You probably have heard of Martin Luther nailing his **95 Theses** on the door of the Church in 1517. That began the chain of events that shaped our form of Christian expression. One interesting idea that Luther is also famous for, is his **"Theology of the Cross."** Luther's **"Theology of the Cross"** is a commitment to understand the cross as **the only source of knowledge concerning who God is and how God saves.** So how we understand God's love, His use of power, or even His will goes back to the cross.

While we as a corporate body are transitioning from an advent focus to a resurrection focus, it is important to focus our hearts in mediation to what Luke refers to as Jesus **"turning His eyes towards Jerusalem."** Our prayer is that we would be a church that thinks like Paul and **"to know nothing but Christ and Him crucified."** But what does it mean to you that the cross is the only source of knowledge concerning who God is and how God saves? **Seek a fresh look at the cross** into these 3 ways:

1) What are your expectations of how God will reveal Himself?

2) Where do you see God's hand at work?

3) Are you submitting to the type of humility and submission found in the cross?

What Luther does with His **Theology of the Cross** is this: he constantly reminds us to return to the gospel's **propensity for the unexpected.** We didn't expect Jesus to be born in a manger. We didn't expect him to be baptized by John. We didn't expect him to forgive the tax collectors and the prostitutes. We didn't expect non-violent response to conflict. We didn't expect him to be silent in the face of his accusers. We didn't expect Him to die. We didn't expect the shameful execution of the state by crucifixion. **But that is who God is and that is how He saves.** It is who we can trust God to be in 2018. This is how he will save us and bring ultimate peace and victory.

Think of your life. **Where is God going to show up?** The idea of the "theology of the Cross" lets us know

that it will be upside down in a sense. **When we least expect it, that is where God will be.** Where there are hurting and desperate people, that is where God will be. This gives us a wonderful question. **Where do we think that God will not show up?** This is not a type of theological reverse psychology. Make an effort to know the bias of your heart. Try to distinguish your desires for God and what are not His desires. Often when we think that He is not going to show up is exactly when He shows up. This is what was going through the disciples' minds as they watched the events of the cross unfold. **Would you have scattered? Quietly watched? Or walked back to Galilee with your head down?**

These questions must bring us to a place of submission for us to embrace the wonder of the resurrection. **What we as a people must submit to is that God is perfectly revealed in Jesus.** May our whole lives be revised in light of the cross!

On Cynicism

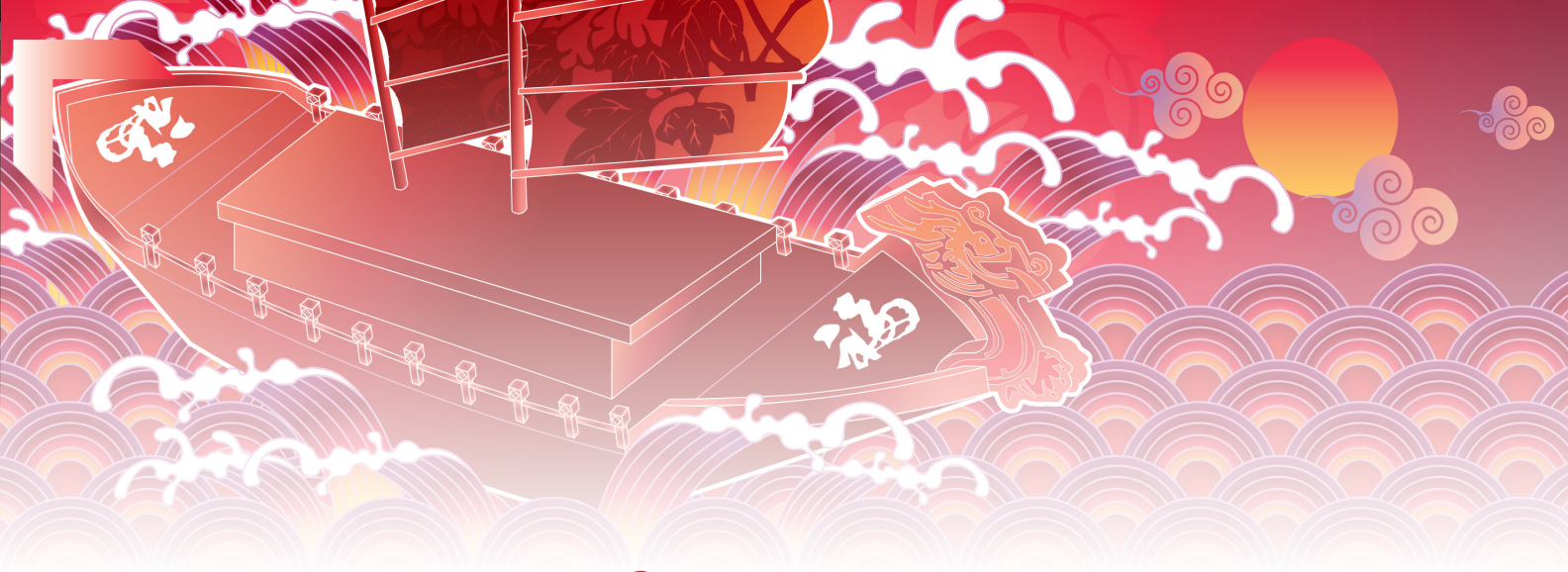
It is easy to have an inclination to believe that people are motivated purely by self-interest. However, we must be intentional and honest with ourselves because **cynical** thoughts can easily creep into our minds as we live in a difficult world. Our world works on a different set of values than the ones that Christ offers. We also have fellow Christians that disappoint us in various ways and on differing levels. But these are not reality "permission slips" for **cynicism.**

Cynicism is contrary to the gospel in multiple ways. Its stealthy nature can creep in no matter what our

spiritual maturity may be - and that's dangerous!

God is going to do more than we expect. ***"Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"*** Matthew 6:26 We often focus on these as words of comfort that God will provide, but also look to see the type of faith that Jesus desires. **This faith described in Matthew 6 is a beautiful, free faith yet it embraces humility.**

First, we remove the **cynicism**, then **we are free to imagine** what heaven looks like on earth. Seeking first the kingdom of God fully has no room for a pessimistic heart. The earth declares to us that there is **a power bigger than us**, but our faith requires our hearts to believe that God is active beyond us. Once our hearts are in this position of humility, **we can celebrate the abundance of God** - even when others see scarcity. This is the will of God and the display of His wisdom.



On a Process of Newness

Getting ready and prepared is not mainly about busy activity, entertaining, and fatigue. A great way to describe truly getting ready for something new is “**abrasive**.” Before Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, the local newspaper, The *Times-Picayune* often described the needed preparation for New Orleans as “**abrasive**.” The levees breaking were a major conversation for a few years as several groups called for an “**abrasively new**” preparation. The New Orleans’ paper did a wonderful job documenting this preparation process for a hurricane. The newspaper showed how the *Army Corp of Engineers* described the preparation needed as “**abrasive**.” The engineers knew the possible flooding consequences if a hurricane hit just right.

What they meant by saying something “**abrasively new**” is **taking time to deeply ask, think, ponder, and decide** in a way would be **abrasive** to New Orleans’ way of life. But if they didn’t, it would be just a matter of time until disaster would occur.

Imagine how many women decorate and rearrange a room. Everything is open for consideration and there is no flippant decision. Details need to be explored

thoroughly and all aspects must be brought to the forefront for examination. A lot of time and effort go in before the plan of action is finalized. The subtlety of thought and consideration brings a newness to the room that is easily noticeable and often **abrasive**.

This is the heart we should bring to our spiritual life. Find an **abrasive** newness through this process: **asking, thinking, pondering, and redeciding**.


Think of how Jesus baptized people with the Spirit and with fire. That should sound strange because dunking people in water normally puts out fires. We now house a Spirit of openness, generosity and energy. This should consume us in such a way as to carry us seemingly erratically like the wind to do obedient things that God’s heart wants to be done. These kingdom things are things we did not think we had in us, neighbor things from which we would have previously cringed. This is **abrasive** in many forms. But it is also new, clean, and pure.

Faith is the hope that God may act in us, through us, beyond us, more than we imagined, because **His newness is on its way**.

Jesus is this newness that abrasively rearranges every value that we hold to. He is **abrasive** enough to break through the tired patterns of fear in our lives. This may look like drastic turmoil, much like a ship in a stormy sea. But what results is strong enough to withstand the strongest Hurricane. The beautiful results reflect its Creator’s promise, love and power.

Our new year’s resolutions may have already have failed from our personal will power. Let’s not lose our desire for something new. But God’s process may be more **abrasive** to our way of life. Listen to God and deeply ask, think, ponder, and decide our way of life for Jesus.





“Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”
Matthew 28:20 NLT

On Growing Groups

Making disciples is the desired end result of our Bible studies.

But in scripture, making a lifetime learner is not simply an educational adventure, but it is one of faith, commitment, and pursuit.

Jesus never challenged the people's ignorance of the law, instead he challenged the way their hearts practiced the law. In many ways, **our Church's gather, grow, go vision is an all or nothing challenge.** If we are not gathering, are we growing in our commitment? If we are not going, are we growing in faith and the practical outworkings?

So how does a Bible study group ministry accomplish all three? Let me preface this by saying the key to this is not **formal** or **informal** efforts, but **intentional** efforts. We can do both informal and formal intentionally.

First, we must value crowd moments. These moments are perfect for guests to develop natural relationships. Crowd moments must guide people to a community moment. **We have some Sunday School classes**

that are great community moments. They are big enough to provide a diverse way to connect and can focus on additional parts of discipleship other than just an educational lesson. They can have fellowships that are inclusive, fresh, and consistently encourage new people. **This is evangelism.**

These groups also have enough people to take ownership of an individual ministry opportunity. **This is missions.** The corporative effort of a group is to bring the kingdom of God into reality.

The human tendency is often to place blame on others when things don't go the way we expect. This is especially true in the setting of the church. Whether it is staff that we think should be doing something different, people who attend less often, or even people who are uninterested.

Pastor Andy Stanley always communicates this important precept, **“Your strategy is perfectly designed to produce the results it is currently getting.”** So in other words, if we

are not creating what we want to create, then blame doesn't help. Understanding what is wrong with the design of our strategy and making the adjustments needed to remedy that problem is what helps us reach our goal.

During the state of the church address, we revisited our vision to be a church that is **gathering, growing and going.** You may have assumed that our Bible Studies neatly fit in the **“growing”** camp. Allow me to gently offer a different perspective than that assumption. One easy thing we slip into is believing that if we go to a bible study, listen, and enjoy it then we are truly growing. It just is not so simple.

“Growing” is **a heart result** from stretching beyond what we consider to be comfortable. If our own hearts are comfortable, then the likelihood of true growth is very low because **growth requires all types of stretching.**

“Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for **God is love.**”

1 John 4:7–8 NLT