

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Do you love me?” “Do I love you?” For those of you who aren’t musical enthusiasts, those are some of the lyrics from Fiddler on the Roof, a song where the husband asks his wife if she really loves him. And after listing off everything she’s done for him, cooking, cleaning, washing his clothes, raising his children, she finally responds, “I suppose I love.”

“Do you love me?” These same words were used by my dad, also a pastor, a little over three years ago to start a wonderful sermon on these same verses, meant in particular for two people, my wife and myself, as we were starting our marriage together as husband and wife. A journey, a relationship, which could only succeed if it were based on love.

Those same verses from Ephesians, before you and me today, just as important, not just in a marriage, but in every relationship we have. Is there love there, and even more importantly, is it a love like God’s? Well, God’s gift of grace does enable us to be just like him, or rather, to act just like him. God’s gift of grace enables us to love.

God enabling you and me to love, what a wonderful way to talk about our lives of sanctification. You know what I mean by that, don’t you? Our sanctification has to do with our lives of faith, how you and I respond to the great and amazing love of our God. Our response comes from the Holy Spirit, from God, who’s working in every single one of you.

If you look at your Bibles, you can see our verses fall under same section, under the same heading as our sermon text did last week, Living as Children of Light. Our verses continue Paul’s instructions and his encouragements on how to live as children of God, as children of the light. This section deals with our behavior, how we act as believers.

Now, living as children of the light, that affects our entire life, our entire self, our whole being. Which includes everything we think...everything we do...even everything we say.

Paul actually starts talking about speech in the verse preceding our section today when he says, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths.” That would make sense. Unwholesome talk is anything said which isn’t for the benefit of others, which isn’t intended to build someone else up. That kind of talk really isn’t befitting of a believer, should have no place in our lives.

Unwholesome talk does not have any place in our lives, right? And you know, unwholesome talk goes much further than just the occasional, or maybe not so occasional, curse word to come out of your mouth.

But look at what Paul specifies in our verses here. He tells us to get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, every kind of malice. All of those sins, deal with the words which come from our mouths. Can you think of examples of all sins, maybe how you’ve shown each of those traits in your life.

Let’s see...bitterness...your friends just bought a new car, the second one in as many years, and you’re having troubles paying off just your one car, which always seems to be breaking down. And you

complain, "It's not fair. They seem to be doing fine. God seems to be pouring out blessings on them. Where are mine?" Being bitter, that's not being content.

Or...rage, anger, brawling. Those three seem to fit together. Someone rubs you the wrong way, maybe cut you off while you were driving, or who tells you off, or whose kids are running wild and they won't control them. And I'm guessing the words to come out of your mouth, maybe even spoken under your breath, so one can hear you. But God hears you, and those kinds of words aren't pleasing to him.

How easy it is for you and I to become frustrated, then angry, which can so quickly turn to rage, which almost always gives way to brawling. Maybe not throwing punches, but fighting with words. Arguing, throwing piercing daggers at each other with hurtful words.

And then slander. Are any of you guilty here? I am. How often we find ourselves, maybe it was even harmless, unintentional at first, but how often we find ourselves talking behind backs instead of talking to people. Gossip, rumors, even if they are true, but all they do is slander someone else, hurt their reputation, drag their name through the mud.

All of that, just malice. Evil talk. Mean, nasty, hateful words. Words which show what's really going on in every one of our hearts.

Do you know why Paul tells us to get rid of all of this, of all this unwholesome talk? Do you know what that does? Well of course, it hurts someone else. It causes discord in our relationships with people in our lives.

But even worse, it grieves the Holy Spirit. Did you hear that? Our unwholesome talk, our malice, grieves the Holy Spirit. God is actually saddened when we speak hateful words. God is saddened whenever we sin.

Are you surprised? After all he's done for us, creating us, choosing us to be his own children despite knowing we are sinful, sending his Son to live, die, and rise for us, to take away our sins, his Holy Spirit, creating faith in Jesus in our hearts, the seal of our redemption. And our way of saying thank you to God for all that, blessing upon blessing, is to spit in his face, run the other way, and sin.

It's like a parent, who when you've put in the years of teaching and training your children what's right and wrong, and then they go off and do something stupid, screw up majorly. And it makes you sad because that's now who you raised them to be. They should know better.

Exactly what it's like between every one of us and God. He's taught us right, and we often do what's wrong, what's unloving. We sin. And we should be punished, punished severely.

And when we sin, when we don't show love to God and to others, do you know what he does? He shows nothing but love back to us. Every time. An underserved love, but God's gift to us. His grace.

God's gift of grace centers on Jesus, his and only Son. You hear every week how Jesus saved you from your sins. A precious message which never gets old. Jesus, who did everything we're supposed to do,

but can't. He lived the perfect life, died an innocent death, taking our sins on himself, and then rose, all that to take our sins away, to forgive them all.

The apostle Paul, in our verses this morning, puts a little different spin on what Jesus did for us. Because he loved us, Jesus gave himself up. He offered himself to God on our behalf as a fragrant offering and sacrifice.

What kind of picture do those words create in your mind? I hope your thoughts go to the Old Testament, and to the Israelites' extensive sacrificial system. All the sacrifices the Israelites offered in the Old Testament, in one way or another pointed ahead to Jesus and the ultimate sacrifice he would make for all people of all time on the cross, his own life.

And a fragrant offering at that. In the Old Testament, the offering of an Israelite sacrifice pleased God so much it was described as a "pleasing aroma." How sweet, how fragrant, how pleasing the smell of Jesus' death on the cross must be to God, then, because that offering has paid for every sin ever committed or which will be committed.

That work of Jesus, could only result from an unmatched love, a love only God could have for those who are so undeserving of it, from a gracious God. That love has made us dearly loved children of God, members of his heavenly household.

And that love is the kind of love we get to imitate in our lives of faith. That's really what it comes down to. God's gift of grace saved us. That same gift of grace enables us to love others in our lives. And how can we show that love? Paul tell us. "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

Almost word for word with what Paul wrote to the Colossian church as well, when he said, "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful."

Paul encourages us to be kind and compassionate and forgiving with everyone in our lives. I won't lie, that's not easy to do. Why do you think my wife and I had this for our wedding sermon text. It's a potential problem, not just in marriages, but in every relationship. It's easy to speak from a sinful heart, full of malice, and hurt the other person in a relationship.

But again, God enables us to love. As often as we don't want to, God gives us the ability to love, to show it by the words we speak, God-pleasing words which are going to build people up instead of tearing them down. God gives us the ability to show love by the actions we take.

And one of the most basic ways we can show love? By forgiving. Isn't that how we can be imitators of God, as Paul's calling for us here to be? Imitators of our Father in heaven. Much like a young boy, who

looks up to his Father, wants to be just like him. So he'll dress up like his dad, or if Dad's out working on the deck, there's his son, right behind him, pounding all those imaginary nails in with his little plastic hammer.

Not letting another person's sins affect you, but being quick to forgive because Jesus has already forgiven them, and really forgiving, which includes forgetting, not holding onto that sin any longer. That's being kind and compassionate. That's being loving. That's imitating God.

That is what is befitting of a child of the light. And that's what you and I will do. We won't merely go through the motions but will forgive sincerely – from our hearts. We can do so because we are now living lives of love, in imitation of their heavenly Father. “We love because he first loved us.”

You and I have the perfect model of love. In regards to that age old question, or at least, the question portrayed in the number from Fiddler on the Roof, yes, God loves us. So much he gave his only Son to be a fragrant offering for us, the sacrifice to pay for our sins.

That is the motivation, that is the example of love we imitate in our lives. We do because God's gift of grace enables us to love. It enables us to forgive. It enables us to be kind and compassionate, in thoughts, in words, in deeds. Those are the acts which make God proud to have you and me as his sons and daughters, as children of the light. Those are the acts which make God happy. And by his grace, we do it, in love. Amen.