

Restless Love: The Heart of Disciplemaking

When a scribe came to Jesus to ask what the most important commandment was, Jesus answered *love* and *love again* (Mark 12:29-31). Loving God fully, we discover his love welling up inside us and overflowing into every relationship we have. So far, so good: most of us understand the Christian imperative to love well enough. And yet, if pressed, most of us would also blunder about for any good definition of what it means to love another. Love, in the English language, covers everything from my taste in music to my unconditional affection for my wife and children. To which love exactly are we called? Merely to feel a squishy fondness for others, say, as if the warm fuzzies and pat hellos exhaust our responsibility in Christ? Surely not.

“Love,” said C.S. Lewis, “is not affectionate feeling, but a steady wish for the loved person’s ultimate good as far as it may be obtained.”¹ Genuine Christian love has little, if anything, to do with bare emotion, and rather more to do with spending ourselves wholly, as Christ did, that those we love might live God’s best in every way.

Jesus is, of course, the fullest expression of God’s love for us. John famously describes Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection as springing from the unconscionable love of the Father (John 3:16). Indeed, we only know what love is because Christ laid down his life for us (1 John 3:16); and so “we love because he first loved us” (4:19, NIV). If we are to pin down a precise definition of love, it seems we must look to the life and ministry of Christ. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus came that we “may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). Yielding ourselves to God, we experience the abundant life promised us.

¹ “Answers to Questions on Christianity,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994): 49.



He is the desire of our hearts (Psalm 37:4), the pearl of great price for which we would sell all else (Matthew 13:46).

As ministers of the gospel (Ephesians 4:11-13), are we not all under-shepherds, leading those within our sphere of influence nearer still to him who is the Good Shepherd? Then our ministry is to see them living the fullness of life Christ offers. Our ministry is to stun them with the wonder of God's unfailing love that they might ultimately find delight in him and him alone.

For this we need *restless love*. Augustine famously said, "You have formed us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you." I wish to take this profound thought a step farther. For those of us called by the incomparable name of Christ, *our love should be restless until those we love find rest in him*.

We would fool ourselves to think that Christ expects nothing more of us than faithfulness. To faithfulness we are certainly called, but to a *loving* faithfulness. Faithful servants need only complete their tasks; but lovingly faithful servants complete their tasks—and then press on indefatigably until they have done all that is humanly possible to see the beloved living God's best. Will Christian charity permit us to view ministry as mere boxes to be checked? We may have taught our lesson, led our small group, attended our prayer group. But, supposing for a moment that even a single loved one is not living out the fullness of life Christ offers, can we really rest? Love compels us to persevere—to weep, to pray, to minister the gospel still (2 Corinthians 5:14).

Thus our Savior loved every broken sinner he encountered. By even briefly examining his ministry—the wondrous display of his grace—we could identify at least five key components of restless love (hardly an exhaustive list). Through prayer and discernment, an unfailing reliance on the guidance of his Holy Spirit, we will see what those we disciple need at every step of their long journey to the New Jerusalem.

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First, Jesus—despite the wearying demands of ministry—paused to offer sinners *individual attention*. He did not merely scatter his seed to the wind and crowds, but often stopped to invest concentrated time and energy on a single soul until he saw the desired fruit. For example, when Jesus came to Jericho, intending to pass through, he encountered a wealthy tax collector who had gone to great lengths to catch a glimpse of him. Looking up into the sycamore tree where Zacchaeus perched, he said, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5). Luke uses the term “must” to express divine necessity. The divine necessity in this case is the salvation of one of God’s children. That is, Jesus had to stay with this lost sheep because the Father’s love compelled him. He saw someone in need of grace and took the necessary steps to see it experienced. Will we likewise stop when love compels us to invest time and energy in someone’s life? When everyone else has given up on the broken sinner, as everyone had given up on Zacchaeus, will we sit down for a meal, longing for salvation to come to the house? “The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost” (19:10)—and we ought to be about our Savior’s business.

Of course, once we enter someone’s metaphorical house—or perhaps sit down to a literal meal together—what then? To encounter a sinner is the first step, but we must then press on to engage the sinner in *inquisitive dialogue*. Consider Jesus with the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-26). Though racial and religious boundaries should have kept Jesus from conversation, he probed and prodded to expose her deepest need, and then offered the only healing balm, that of Gilead. Of course, what took the omniscient Christ mere minutes may take us months of intentional conversation. We must learn the lesson of Proverbs 20:5 well: “The purposes of a man’s heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out.” We must take the time to ask penetrating questions of those we love and then listen lovingly to the response so we best know how to lead them to the Savior.



When we listen authentically to others, we will discover great spiritual need. None of us has arrived at perfection. If we want to see men and women living God’s best for their lives—if we truly love them restlessly—we will demonstrate *concern and correction*. The two must certainly go hand in hand: correction without real concern is authoritarianism, and concern without correction is no love at all. We must aspire to profound, transparent care for those we serve. When the rich young ruler approached Jesus, trapped in the deceitfulness of his outward conformity, “Jesus looked at him and loved him” (Mark 10:21). And *because* Jesus loved him, he called him to cast aside his idols and follow his Master unreservedly. Concern and correction. Remember, the Christ who confronted the religious establishment in Jerusalem wept over that same city, so deep was his love for his lost people (Luke 19:41). Let us walk the narrow path between two precarious pitfalls, neither haranguing and badgering without love, nor refusing to confront because it can be uncomfortable, failing to love sufficiently to do what is hard.

Fourth, restless love demands *self-sacrificial giving*. Restless love is necessarily self-crucifying love. We needn’t search the gospels much in order to see this. Jesus’ whole life, and especially his death, reflects his willingness to give of himself sacrificially so that his people might live God’s best. At the Last Supper, he broke bread and poured wine for his disciples, teaching them that likewise his body would be broken and his blood poured out for our sakes. John records that on that night Christ clothed himself as a slave, knelt down, and washed the feet of his disciples. Finishing, he said to them, “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (John 13:15). Spending ourselves on behalf of those we disciple is the expectation. We will have to give of ourselves sacrificially—of our time, our money, our energy, our very lives—depriving ourselves of very real comforts that they may look upon him in whom all comfort is found by faith.

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Sadly, even when we have done all this faithfully and lovingly, those we love will sometimes refuse God's best. Like the rich young ruler, their faces will fall when they hear God's claim on their lives, and they will walk away dejected. Here especially our love must become restless. Jesus' powerful parable of the lost son captures well the posture of *prayerful waiting*, the fifth component of restless love. When the young prodigal returns home after his days of sinful recklessness, even while still a long way off, "his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him" (Luke 15:20). One wonders how it was the father came to see his son so far away. I cannot think but he saw him from such a distance because he never stopped looking for him, lifting his eyes to the hills unceasingly in the hope that one day his beloved son would come back home. Some that we know and love will flee the sheepfold of God, embracing damnable foolishness and willful pride. Let us measure our response carefully then. Will we wait expectantly, knowing that the grace of God captivates even the most hardened sinner? And will we wait prayerfully, pleading with the Father to rescue one more son—and knowing that the Father pleads with those who refuse his grace (Luke 15:28)? I hope we have all had sleepless nights, agonizing in prayer and fasting, lifting up our hands for the lives of those we disciple, crucifying our comfort that they might have the comfort of the Crucified—else we have never loved restlessly. Lift your eyes to your Maker, where comes your help (Psalm 120:1); lift your eyes to the hills, waiting prayerfully to see the prodigal return.

Hours before his death, Christ prayed for all those who would follow him throughout history: "I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them" (John 17:26). Christ has revealed the Father to us, has come to dwell within us, that we might share his love, the love of Calvary, with all those he has given us. And what is this love but a steady wish and a steadfast work that those we love might live the abundant life Christ offers. Love restlessly that they might find their rest in him.

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