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Growing in Love
 John 13:34-35

Re'na Garcia is a 24-year-old wife and mother of two preschoolers and a full-time nanny for two other children. She leads a busy life, but her favorite part of the day is when she goes out to RAOK somebody's world—as in performing "Random Acts of Kindness."

She and her husband, Aaron, are part of a growing network of Christians who seek to anonymously bless other people in the name of Jesus. They have even started a website to help share ideas, www.raoked.com. Some of those ideas include:

- Leaving a roll of quarters at the laundromat
- Paying for the person behind you at a drive-thru
- Leaving grocery gift cards in mailboxes
- Paying rent for a family in need
- Handing out water or sports drinks on a biking trail.

Garcia also hands out a RAOK business card that explains her motivation, information about her church, and that there are no strings attached. "People were drawn to Christ not because he stood on a mountain and preached," she says, "but because he filled their needs." *John W. Kennedy, "Winning Them with Kindness," Today's Christian (Nov/Dec 2005), p. 10-11*

I usually encourage people to do PAOK—purposeful acts of kindness.

But you know, whether random or purposeful
 imagine how we would change our world if
 we loved not only strangers,
 but our own friends, family, church,
 all the people that we interact with every day!

Jesus said to his disciples, "*I give you a new commandment—
 that you love one another as I have loved you*".

These were some of Jesus last words on earth,
 shared with his friends on the night of his last supper. They
 were spoken the same night he washed their feet,

and served them bread and wine, saying this is my body broken for you,
this is my blood shed for you.

What did Jesus mean when he said this is a “**new**” **commandment**?

Isn't this just the second half of God's golden rule—
love God, and your neighbor as yourself?

Actually, this is different.

Here we are told to love *the way Jesus loves us*.

Jesus is the standard for our love.

He is the model, the example, the way we are to do it.

You could argue that this is the very **purpose** of our lives after Jesus' death and resurrection

—to love as Jesus loves us.

AND HOW DOES HE LOVE US?

Well, Colossians 3 says it well---Jesus has compassion, kindness, humility,
gentleness, patience, forgiveness,
and a love that binds it all together.

Jesus loved everyone as if they were the *only* one he loved.

But there's more—someone I read this week described it this way
Jesus loved **realistically, intimately, and intentionally**.

He loved **realistically**.

He was not everything to everyone.

His love had limits, he didn't heal everyone, touch everyone,
spend every waking moment for others.

His love included time just with his few disciples,
and time alone with God to fill up his heart.

He was realistic about the human capacity for love.

Are we **realistic** about the ways we can show love?

Jesus also loved people **intimately**.

He was totally vulnerable and real with people.

All too often we are afraid to get close, but Jesus let himself be vulnerable.

He didn't wear a mask, he was who he was,
and he loved people for who they were.

Do we allow ourselves to be real and vulnerable, to love *intimately*?

Jesus loved people *intentionally*.

He took time for love.

Sometimes we try to cram our love into a few minutes of conversation a day,
an occasional kiss or hug, a rare date with friends.

Jesus took time for love, he made time to spend with his disciples,
and he was always bringing those he loved
into ministry with him.

He wanted others to have the life he was living.

Do we love *intentionally*?

Are we trying to cram love into little bits and pieces of time and energy,
or do we make time for love?

Do we take the time to say and show ‘I love you’ to those we love,
and even those we’d rather not love?

Loving like Jesus loves us can sound impossible,

But Jesus wouldn’t ask us to do it if he didn’t plan on giving us the ability.

To love as Jesus loved is possible, for ordinary people who fail God,
people just like you and me.

He asked this of disciples who would betray, deny,
and abandon him.

He asks this of you and me.

You know how we get the ability to love like Jesus?

By knowing that we are loved.

I remember the first time that I really understood Jesus’ love for me.

I was in my college library studying for a religion assignment and I
had this vision of Jesus on the cross, for me—just for me.

It was an overwhelming thought, but a powerful one that I think we all need.

If you haven’t realized that Jesus died and was raised for YOU,
then I encourage you to keep praying and thinking about that until
it seeps down into your soul and becomes part of who you are.

You know, I think one way we realize God’s love for us is by ***imagining Jesus*** as
the one helping us out—

I mean, we know it’s God, but imagine that Jesus is literally the one
who helped you avoid the accident,
who helped you stop before you said something you’ll regret,

the one who kept your kids safe.

Another part of knowing that we are loved,

is realizing that God pours love into our hearts
through the Holy Spirit.

We don't have to muster up the strength and power to love on
our own—it is a power we receive from God.

If we will go to God, if we take the time like Jesus did—

For prayer, study, quiet time with God

And growing time with our Christians brothers and sisters

We actually get filled up with all the love we need to give out.

Remember the story of Corrie ten Boom, a Holocaust survivor who met one of her
harshest Nazi guards, years after the war?

How she could not imagine forgiving or loving him,

but somehow God gave her the power to extend her hand,
and feel God's love for him...

a love that she could have never felt on her own.

When we know we are loved,

and we accept the power God gives us to love,

The next step is to ***JUST DO IT.***

To practice loving, right now.

*In his book, Sources of Strength, President Jimmy Carter shares a lesson he
learned from Cuban Pastor Eloy Cruz. He asked him for the secret of his success.*

*He was modest and embarrassed, but he finally said, "Senor Jimmy, we only
need to have **two loves in our lives.***

***For God, and for the person who happens to be in front of us at
any time.***" *That simple yet profound theology has been a great help to me in
understanding the Scriptures. In essence, the whole Bible is an explanation of
those two loves.*

Loving God, and the person right in front of you.

Arthur Simon, founder of Bread for the World,

believes that all aspects of our lives need to be touched by Christ.

His father, who grew up on a farm in Wisconsin, taught him:

"Even the cows should know you are a Christian by the way you treat them." To which Arthur adds: "And if cows, how much more people!"

But Loving everyone in front of you, loving even the cows, ***certainly isn't easy***.

It's one thing to talk about love, to say you love, and quite another to actually demonstrate real love to another person.

Real love can hurt.

Jesus told his friends to love one another,
right after one left to betray him, and another
would soon deny him!

His love took him to death on a cross!

But love is about being real and vulnerable—
vulnerable enough to get hurt by the one you love.

C. S. Lewis put it this way, "To love at all is to be vulnerable.

Love anything, and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken.

If you want to be sure of keeping your heart intact—

you must give your heart to no one, ...Lock it up safely in the casket of selfishness.

And in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will not change, it will not be broken. It will become unbreakable, impenetrable and irredeemable. The only place outside of heaven where you can be perfectly safe from the dangers of love is hell." (The Four Loves)

Loving like Jesus loves means you will at ***some time get hurt***.

People hurt people. It happens, no matter who we are, or who we love.

But something good can come from the bumps and bruises of loving like Jesus.

We always have a ***CHOICE*** when hurt by love.

We can become bitter, and lock up our hearts into a living hell

Or we can walk with God through the pain,

And grow through the experience.

Mother Teresa describes it like this,

"I have found ... that if I love until it hurts,

then there is no more hurt, but only more love".

Sometimes love means making **sacrifices that hurt**.

In I Kings 3:16-18 two women are fighting over a baby.

During the night one woman's son had died, so she took another woman's baby and tried to pass it off as her own,
leaving the dead child with the other mother.

King Solomon was asked to determine the real mother of the living child.
and he did so by threatening to cut the baby in half...knowing that the real mother would rather give up her son than have him killed.

And that's exactly what happened.

Real love was the love willing to sacrifice her only son. Sound familiar?

How we love is how **we are identified**.

Loving like Jesus is the way the world knows we are Christians—
it is the sign and seal that we belong to Jesus Christ.
They will know us by our love.

As Christians, we have a **name to live up to**—we have to love like Jesus
It's not enough to just say we're Christians.

It's like the story I read about a man from Katy, Texas, who needed some same-day dry cleaning before he left on a trip. He remembered one store with a huge sign, "One-Hour Dry Cleaners," on the other side of town, so he drove out of his way to drop off a suit. After filling out the tag, he told the clerk, "I need this in an hour." She said, "I can't get this back to you until Thursday." "I thought you did dry cleaning in an hour?" "No," she replied, "That's just the name of the store."

Do we carry the name Christian, but fail to act like the one whose name we bear?
Can the world see that we are his disciples by our love?

Our love for one another is the **measuring stick** of our faith in Christ.

Our love for one another is how we show our love for God.
As one man put it, "*The height of our love for God
will never exceed the depth of our love for one another*".
(Patrick Morley)

Without love, our faith is **meaningless**.

Remember I Corinthians 13? "I can speak with the tongues of angels,
but if I have not love, I am nothing but a noisy gong or clanging cymbal".
I can even give up my possessions and surrender my body,

but without love, I gain nothing.

You may remember these words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, not long before his death:

If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. ...Every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize; that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards; that's not important...

I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to love somebody.

Jesus said “*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you*”. Loving one another is the sign and seal of our Christian faith.

And **Growing in this kind of love** is the second part of our new church mission statement.

Growing in love is a goal we have for everyone in this church—just as important as Seeking God in worship and our time alone, growing in love is vital to our Christian faith and life.

So how do we grow in love?

We need to get into a smaller group within the church.

It is almost impossible to grow in our love for one another in one hour of Sunday worship alone.

We need the fellowship and small group interaction of a bible study or choir, a class, a mission group, ministry team, a lunch bunch.

Jesus himself had a small group—his 12 disciples—and in that group

they learned to truly love one another.

They grew in love, so that when he was gone they could carry on his mission of love in the world.

Are we willing to step out and join a small group?

A group where we can give and receive Christ’s love?

Friends, hear the **good news** of the gospel:

We can love as Jesus loved us—

we can love realistically, intimately, and intentionally

And we can do it because we are loved—and God gives us love
We can love, even after we get hurt
We can love, even when it hurts
We can get to know one another
And grow in love for one another.

This is the way the world knows we are Christians
If we love like Christ loves us.