

LOVE, Like You Never Knew It

Chapter 1: An Atheist's Gospel!

A Vocational Misfit

When I was in my senior year of high school they gave me an aptitude test. These tests help you pick your future. After I was given one of those, I went in to see my counselor. She asked me, "What are you planning on being?" At the time I said, "Well, I'm think I'm going to be a pastor. I wish you could have seen the look on her face. Her face just went ashen. I asked, "What's the matter?" She said, "You know, your aptitude tests here, particularly the one about your sociological concerns, you scored in the bottom two percent of the nation!"

Now I know why they showed that. It was because the aptitude test said things like, "Would you rather go to an old folks home and talk to old people?" They didn't quite say it that way. But that's how I remember it. "Or go to an airplane factory and watch them build an airplane?" I chose the airplane. I have to tell you. And she looked at me. I'll never forget what she said. She said, "You can't be a pastor. You don't even like people!"

And I told her this, "I know that I don't like people. Is that important in order to be a pastor?" And at the time, I have to tell you, I didn't think it was. I thought you basically show up. You teach stuff. You run stuff. You do stuff.

People are optional. So to be where I am today talking about relationships, and I wrote the book on it, but I gotta tell you is almost unbelievable. People say that when you've written the book on the topic, you're considered the expert. I am not the expert. There is nothing I will share with you today that I am not also still growing in, as God is changing my life.

It's scary now. I actually like people and I don't know what to do with it. I cry at movies now. I never used to cry at movies. I cry at movies now. I care about stuff people are going through. It's disgusting! I'm just kidding. But it is a part of what God has been doing in my life. And it has come to culmination through a variety of circumstances. And I want tell you about a few of them.

An Atheist Preaching the Gospel

About a year and a half ago I boarded an airplane in Los Angeles for Chicago. When I checked in for my flight, I was handed a first class ticket for seat 4A. I knew they had made a mistake because I don't fly first class. I told the gate agent, "I think you've made a mistake." She said, "No if have not. We have a plane that is too full in the coach cabin. We have moved some of our frequent flyers to the first class cabin. Enjoy the ride!" I said, "I will!" But as I savored enjoying the ride in first class, I thought, "There's probably something going on in this move. God does things like that because He has people he wants us to be near and engage in conversation.

As I walked into the plane, I sat down and noticed that the guy sitting next to me was reading a magazine. As it turns out, he's a businessman, vice president of one of the largest electronic firms in the world. He was on his way to a conference in Orlando. We were both connecting out of Chicago. And as I sat down next to him, sitting in his lap was Newsweek magazine on the week that 'The Passion' movie had come out. The cover showed a picture of Jim Caviezel, the actor playing Jesus in the movie. The cover story was about 'The Passion of Jesus' movie. I also noticed that magazine was the airline copy.

So when I slid in next to him, I said, "You know what, I would like to read that article when

you're finished reading the magazine. Would that be all right?" He said, "Oh, absolutely okay. Why do you like this movie?" I answered, "I saw it yesterday. I'd say I have mixed emotions. There are some things about it I really, really liked. But there are some things that it really left out that I thought were important." Then he said, "Really!" He continued, "You know, I hate this movie. And I hate you Christians." I said, "Whoa, really?" He said, "Yeah. I'm an atheist."

Now the reason I'm telling you this story is because I heard from the mouth of this man about two minutes later, the best presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ I have ever heard anywhere in the world. And I have traveled all over the world. I've sat through countless seminars of all kinds of things. And I've heard people explain the gospel of Jesus Christ to me in a number of ways. But I have never heard it better than this man expressed it. He started talking about how much he hated Christians and how much he hated this movie. [If you remember when it was coming out, there was this big conflict about this being an anti-Semitic movie. And the Christians are saying, "Yeah. We're proving that we're still part of the culture. And everybody should buy a ticket the first week to prove to Hollywood that wholesome movies are still liked. You know, about all that battle. And that's what people are sick of. And that's what he's sick of.]

So I got him off that subject because I didn't want to wander too long about that subject with him. So, I asked to him, "What do you do for a living? What about your family?" We talked about some of that for a while. And he finally asked me, "Oh, by the way, what do you do for a living?" I replied, "I like to tell people I retired about 12 years ago. I really don't work for a living. So I've taken to telling people who ask me that question, "On any given day I can do a variety of things. I can be speaking to an audience like this. I can be writing. I can be mediating disputes in public education. Some of you were part of my time with Visalia Unified a few years ago, helping them through a particularly touchy issue here in the city. I'm doing that all over the states. Right now I'm working on a project out of Washington DC, with the First Amendment Center so I could be doing anything on a given day. So it's hard for me to sum up what I do for a living.

So I've taken to telling people on airplanes, well, I just sort of wander around the planet helping people sort out what Jesus really taught. That's my stock line now; And he looked at me and said, "Really?" And I said, "Yeah." And the reason I say that is because of what he said next. And they almost always say this next. He said, "Well, you know what I think Jesus really taught?" Here's a self-professed atheist daring to tell me what Jesus really taught. And I would love

to hear it. So I said to him, “No. What do you think he really taught?” And like I said, I’ve never heard it expressed better than this. He said, “I think Jesus taught us that we have a Father who loves us more than we know. And if we could sort that out, we would know how to treat each other.”

Wow. Does that sound close to something Jesus said? I would say, “Painfully close.” And my jaw dropped open. I looked at him and I said, “And you’re an atheist. Why?” He said, “Because I’ve never seen it. I’ve never seen it lived. I’ve never seen it done.” And I said, “Oh my goodness.” And we had two hours left in the flight during which I told him, “Let me tell you about some brothers and sisters I know outside of Melbourne, Australia. They have an incredible story. And I told it to him. And he asks, “Really? Do you have another story like this?” I said, “Yeah, let me tell you about some folks in Dublin, Ohio that I know.” And then I told him about some in Sacramento, California. And I continued, “I know so many believers living this life in ways that just blow your mind”. As I was telling him these stories, he goes, “My goodness, I had no idea that was going on.” He said, “Maybe I ought to rethink this.” I said, “Maybe you should.” And we left it there.

Unconditional Love

We have a father who loves us more than we know. And if we could sort that out, we'd know how to treat each other. In John 13 verses 34 through 35, Jesus gives us what I think is the mandate of the kingdom. John 13, if you remember, is the last night of Jesus' life on this earth before the crucifixion. The whole upper room discourse is the last things he's saying to his disciples before he's leaving them. People who say last things to people always say the most important things. And here's what he says to them in verses 34 and 35. This is a, this is a familiar scripture. I'm sure you've heard it dozens of times. It says this, "A new command I give to you. Love one another as I have loved you. you must also love one another. And by this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Now, that's a deal. That's exactly what this man said to me. We have a father who loves us more than we know. And if we could sort that out, we would know how to treat each other. Now there is nothing more certain than that, theologically, in our lives as Christians. God loves us. God is love. We're going to look at that verse again in a little bit. The lyrics of the Sunday school song read, "Jesus loves me. This I know. For the Bible tells me so." I know that when we talk about the love of God, there's nothing more theologically certain than that. But that's also

something we find great difficulty in living in
knowing that we're loved by the Father.

Actors, Posers or Genuine Lovers

When you woke up this morning, if you looked into the eyes of the Father (God), what would you expect to see in those eyes? Would it be disappointment because you're just not working hard enough? Or would this Father be absolutely delighted that His child is awakened to a new day with Him? What would it be? And I'm talking to you now. I think what Jesus is talking about here, I used to read this passage thinking that Jesus saying to James and John and Thomas and Peter and the others, I want you to love as I have loved you. And I thought the application of that verse for me meant I need to comb through these gospels. I need to find out how Jesus loved Peter, how Jesus loved John, how. And then you can go beyond that. You can go, how did Jesus love a woman at the well that was broken? How did he love a woman caught in adultery? How did he love Zaccheus, the worst crook in the village? How did Jesus love these people? And then I'm supposed to act that way.

I'm supposed to figure out how it is that Jesus loved and then I act loving towards people. And we can do that. But I've become convinced that what Jesus is talking about here is not raising a generation of actors and actresses who can act loving but, in fact, transform people by his love so that we live loving in the world. Loving is really how we're living when we're not thinking, it's not when I'm trying to do the right thing. It is

not when I'm trying to be loving towards you and I'm acting out in some way because I should or I need to. But in fact what he is saying to me is the application of this verse is not, how did Jesus love Peter? And I have to act like that. It's how is Jesus loving me today! How is Jesus loving me in the face of my failures? How is He loving me in the face of my struggles? How is He loving me in the face of my doubt? How is this love for Father real here? Then, when I know how He's loving me, it's easy to love you. It's not an act. It's not something I have to pretend. It's not a command.