

Love Always Protects

Love Always

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Well, here we are friends two weeks into another new year and I wonder how many of us are kind of feeling like, you know, “I think I've been here before, I've seen this episode already, right?” I can remember back to the beginning of last year, January, 2021, where probably so many of us had the feeling that there was no way that 2021 could be in any way somehow as complicated or challenging, or just plain as hard as 2020. And yet we all know what we have lived through and what we are living through here and now. But for here's the good news. As Jeff Lockyer preached last Sunday, when we really kicked off the start of this year is that, regardless of our circumstances or regardless of how new or not new this year feels so far, is the fact is that Jesus still wants to do something new in us.

We firmly believe that. For the rest of the month of January, for today, and for the next three weeks, the new thing that we want to talk about (that I think Jesus wants to do deeply in us) is about who we are in our relationships and how we relate to others. Cause I'm going to guess that, for some of us, over the last couple of years, we've maybe had a relationship or two that's gotten a little bit wobbly, right? I know relationships have been strained and pushed to the test. And in some cases, some have fallen apart altogether. And here's the thing. I think Jesus wants to, and is capable of doing, something in us that wouldn't just sort of tweak or tinker with, or kind of slightly improve our relationships this year, but make them a little better than they were last year or have a few more of them survive the pandemic.

Now I think what Jesus could do has the power to transform who we are in relationships, not just in our relationships, not just to make us a little bit better for 2022, but to transform our relationships for 20 years from now. And that's by looking at what it could mean for us to learn to love always in our relationships. That's what we're talking about this month. What does it mean to be people who love always? The entire series is going to be anchored in one line from one passage in the New Testament. It's written by the apostle Paul to the Corinthian church in the first century and it comes out of a passage that's probably rather

familiar to lots of us. You've maybe heard part of it recited at weddings or in poetry or in movies. Defining what love really is, it starts by saying "love is patient and love is kind, it does not envy." And then it has this beautiful vision and description. But what we want to focus on is right where it ends, that I wonder might not be as familiar to us, and certainly I don't think is fully grasped in defining what love always is and what love always does. And that's where it says in 1 Corinthians 13: 7, that

Love always protects love, always trusts, love, always hopes and love always perseveres.

That is what we were talking about this month and inviting Jesus to transform who we are and how we love in all our relationships.

Now, a couple of qualifiers to this: this love always idea that sort of applies as a banner to the whole series. First thing is when it comes to what love is and how we think about love. Because I think when we hear a vision for love, like the one in 1 Corinthians 13, our first instinct is generally to sort of want to experience this love for ourselves. And it's not a bad instinct because I think God created us to encounter this kind of love. I think God wants to lavish this kind of love onto us. I think God wants our relationships to reciprocally and mutually express this love in them. And yet when you look at the context that the apostle Paul writes this vision of love and what love always is and does to this church in the first century, what he is actually trying to do is correct some behaviors and ways of relating that started to become self-motivated and self-oriented, more interested in what they could get than what they could give and they became void of love.

So, the kind of love we're talking about, we have to understand is a love that equals a radical reorientation to the other. That this first prioritizes what love I can give rather than what I can get. How I can extend it, rather than simply embrace it for myself. That's the definition of this love that we're looking at together. And secondly, we want to want to learn to live this love always, at all times, in all circumstances, in all relationships. And we're going to talk about what that looks like, how do we do that? And yet there are times where that can be a bit complicated and need some discernment, because what we don't mean is perpetuating relationships and situations that are toxic or unhealthy. What

“always” does not equal is enablement or codependency or abuse, and we need wisdom and counsel to discern what love looks like in those situations. But if we can start to grasp these things, this love always together, I think if more of us can live at more of the time then, and so all of the time we can all experience it together.

So, to start, for a few more minutes today, what I want to talk about is what I think it means for love to always protect, what love always protecting looks like. And in some ways I think protecting someone else is kind of a somewhat obvious idea of what it might mean to love them well. Think about it this way, that anytime you've experienced safety in relationship, you felt safe, I think you're experiencing a version of love. Anytime you have felt unsafe or threatened in a relationship, you're experiencing something other than love. So how do we be the kind of people that contribute to relationships where that's what we're creating, always exuding a love that always protects? And I think there's three dimensions that I want to talk about today and that's that love always protects physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

1. Love always protects physically.

So, I want to start by talking about what does it mean for love to always protect physically first and foremost, this is number one? Again, I think protecting someone else's physical wellbeing hopefully has sort of a common sense, even common courtesy, common love kind of mindset to it. You know, when we love someone, we don't want to see them physically hurt or wounded. Think of a parent with a child, teaching them to ride a bike, how they run alongside watching over, holding the seat, not wanting them to fall and scrape themselves unnecessarily. Or, an elderly grandparent or neighbor or someone with a disability that we want to support and help, you know, getting up a staircase, because we don't want to see them fall or get hurt. Someone on the side of the road, we want to stop and help see if they're okay or at least steer out of the way to make sure other people aren't getting hurt. It's kind of a basic idea of love. And yet when I think about when this sort of radical reorientation to the other gets pushed to the test, I think about how, what we've lived through in the COVID pandemic this past couple of years has put the protection of someone else's physical wellbeing ahead of our own sort of front and center.

I know there's different feelings and nuance and choices and convictions in all of this, but you think about some of this, the basic sort of health measures we've been invited into to seek to protect others - mask wearing and maintaining distance, you know, subjecting ourselves to either regular testing or vaccination, even participating here in online services for certain stints and seasons. Friends, if I'm honest, these are things I don't prefer, I don't really like having to do. And if this was all about me, I'm not sure if I would do any of them, but in what we're living through, when it comes to love, always protecting physically, we've been confronted with an opportunity to continually radically reorient ourselves to others by the degree to which we can choose with every decision to prioritize someone else's physical safety over our own.

I think this love always protecting physically goes a step further. When you think about, again in the current situations of our essential workers or frontline responders, people in healthcare, when someone will actually put themselves in harm's way for the sake of someone else's physical wellbeing, it is a great act of love. And when Paul says that love always protects what he means is that there are few acts that will show you more what love really is than when someone sets aside either their own preferences or even their own physical wellbeing to a degree for the sake of someone else.

I can remember, when I was playing travel hockey as a teenager and when I entered into the body contact years, I was kind of one of the smaller guys. I often felt like my own physical wellbeing was at risk. But over time, I kind of ended up having this unspoken arrangement with one of my buddies who played on my line named Trevor, who was a little taller than I was, and frankly was a better hockey player than I was. And the agreement that we never talked about, but kind of emerged, was that I would go into the corners and fight for the puck and try to dig it out of the corner to get it to him in front of the net, where he scored many goals. But here's the thing. If the battle in the corner ever became more than I could handle, that Trevor would kind of come to my rescue. And I can remember this one specific time, kind of can picture it as clear as day, when I was in the corner working for the puck and a guy who was bigger than me came in and kind of hit me and knocked me down and started almost trying to pick a fight with me. And before I could even be afraid of the fight that I didn't want to get into,

Trevor came in with a body check of his own, knock this guy down and basically stood over him and said, "If you mess with him, you're going to mess with me."

And as someone seeking to grow in the peacemaking way of Jesus, I am not looking to necessarily condone or encourage physical force or violence, even in sports. But here's the thing. There is something powerful about the people in our lives who say, "If it's going to be a mess for you, then it's going to be a mess for me because I am here to protect you." So, who in your world is at risk physically that you can learn to love more by protecting? Who's getting beat up in the corners of life that you can come in to help guard and protect them? And are we willing to consistently set aside our own preferences, even at times, putting ourselves in harm's way, in order to only ever always offer a love that always protects the physical wellbeing of someone else? I think that's what it means for love to always protect physically.

2. Love always protects emotionally.

Now, number two, love always protects emotionally. I think, physical wellbeing and physical protection again, is hopefully sort of common sense at some level and obvious, even in the midst of a global pandemic. I think at times our thoughts, our words, and our actions towards others have created a greater risk for someone's emotional wellbeing, especially in times of conflict and something that, you know, is relevant and prevalent these days and may sometimes too often more damaging. I think how we behave when someone else's emotions are vulnerable and at stake, maybe especially in conflict, is a critical measure of how well we are extending a love that always protects emotionally. Proverbs 4: 23 says this. It says

Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.

The wisdom writer is basically saying, to get by in the world you need to look after and guard and protect your heart, above all. It's the place that all of life affects and is affected by all of life. And so you need to tend to it, care for it well. And if that's the sort of personal wisdom of the Proverbs, when I think about understanding and applying the apostle Paul's radical reorientation to the other,

of a love that always protects, I think it means that we're called to also, above all else, protect and guard someone else's heart like it's our own. That loving always means relentlessly defending the emotions and feelings of another person, just like they're yours, guarding someone else's heart.

I can think of a sort of a playground conflict when I was either in grade six or seven, that kind of brought some of this to light for me. There was a new kid that had just come to our school. His name was Justin, and it was his first week at the school. And he was kind of trying to find his way and struggling a little bit to fit in and figure out, you know, who he could connect and be friends with. And at recess time he was trying to sort of interact with our friendship circle. And I wasn't really at the center of this but I had overheard that one of my buddies had brought some paintballs for a paintball gun to school in a Ziploc bag. Now, if you're unfamiliar with paintballs, if you're just looking at them, they could easily be mistaken for something like marbles or maybe even a gumball. And I caught wind that someone was thinking of offering one of these paintballs, suggesting they were gumballs, to Justin to see what would happen.

A crowd formed, the offer was made, and Justin reached in and he grabbed one of the paintballs. He was being told it was a gumball. And then to my surprise, as I was just kind of standing nearby, he suddenly looked at me and he said, "Is there anything wrong with them?" And that moment kind of froze for me because I realized I had a choice as to whose heart I was going to guard and protect. Either first and foremost my own, protecting my reputation and loyalty to my friends and their practical joking. Or by lovingly intervening and protecting this new kid from an awful taste and even worse embarrassment. Before I gave it any more thought, I suddenly heard myself say, "I don't know." And Justin ate the paintball and ran off in tears. Friends, in that moment, I knew I had done something other than love.

Above all else, guard someone else's heart.

So, what about in your relationships? Whose emotional wellbeing is at stake right now? What about the conflicts you're experiencing, whether in family or with

friends, in your marriage, with your kids in the church community, and are you only ever always seeking to guard the other person's heart like your own? If you're involved in a conflict, are you seeking to go to the other person, graciously and sensitively humbly wanting to talk together to seek to resolve it? Or are you going to others to talk about, you know, venting to them, gossiping, weaving stories in your head that alter your/their reputation in your mind and the minds of others. Are you seeing people being treated unfairly that put their emotions at risk, but you're kind of choosing to ignore, to avoid, to rationalize in order to not put your own feelings and experience at risk?

Friends, how about how we engage on social media? And I think this is a huge one when it comes to the emotional wellbeing of others. I think if the church could do a “love always protects” audit on its behavior on social media, it could be world changing. So when it comes to your posts and your likes, are you exclusively and unmistakably only trying to build others up to offer encouragement and emotional strength or does the way you post and even how you “like” tend to just prop up your own opinions, maybe creating dividing walls or tearing others down, if not directly then with not so subtle hints about how you feel about them and their policies and their decisions. Friends, are we striving to be constantly attentive to how our thoughts and our words and our deeds affect the hearts of others, even when it means putting ourself, maybe our own heart, at risk, or at least setting aside things we'd rather think, say, or do. I think if we want to experience love always, that will transform our relationships, one of the commitments we need to make is to relentlessly guard the hearts of others like they are our own, so we can always protect the emotional wellbeing of someone else. Because I think love always protects physically, love always protects emotionally.

3. Love always protects spiritually.

Finally, love always protects spiritually. That love always looks out for and protects the spiritual wellbeing of someone else. And I think this one has a lot of layers to it and, frankly, these are all woven together. But I think that someone's spiritual wellbeing and faith is often most at risk in times of crisis. Not hard for us to imagine these days, because, think about it, when bad or scary or painful things happen in our lives, faith often becomes fragile. And a love that always protects, I

believe, actually has the power and potential to help people experience the loving presence of God, the protecting love of God, at times, when for them God may seem hardest to find. In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, to the same church, he starts it this way. He says,

Praise be to the God...of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

2 Corinthians 1: 3-4

Friends, a love that always protects when someone else is going through a crisis is a love that always shows up. It's a love that always leans in rather than distances. It's a love that drops off a meal, goes to the visitation, visits in the hospital, sends an encouraging word, all offers a prayer. It's a love that listens. It's a love that seeks to give space when necessary, a love that avoids judgment or offering pat answers. It's a love that comforts in crisis in a way that actually extends the comforting and protecting love of God.

And this is true, not just in the external crises of our world, things that happen to us, but in the internal crises that can come from deep within. I find myself sitting down with quite a few people recently who would describe feeling some sort of internal faith crisis that they're experiencing, often feeling like they don't have safe, vulnerable places to share that. And I'm learning against my own self-oriented impulses that would be to sort of give answers or to tell them how I see things and therefore sort of how they should see things or to try to fix their problems quickly and heroically. Because that's something that would make me feel more spiritual and feel better in my spiritual wellbeing. I'm learning that often love requires a listening more than talking, asking more than telling, waiting more than rushing, and praying more than pressuring.

I had a friend recently come to me with, essentially an internal spiritual crisis that they were feeling and facing. It was wrestling with how to respond to their child, who it had recently sort of come out with some questions about their identity and sexuality. And they were asking me kind of what I thought the right thing to do spiritually was. And all I could say, as a starting point, was for them to let their

child know that they and God loved them, period. And then that they would journey and walk and figure out the rest together. And you see what happens in a situation like that, when someone's faith or spiritual life is in a delicate place, that a love that always protects spiritually absorbs the risk of the other person, absorbs the risk that they're facing. In this case, absorbing the risk of any question of acceptance, absorbing the risk of the unknown and any feelings of confusion, absorbing the risk of the faith journey that would follow, absorbing the risk of other people's perspectives and opinions and competing values and timelines. Because I think I love that always protects spiritually, absorbs the risk and participates in the journey, especially in the delicate faith journeys of others in times of external or internal crisis.

So, where in your life is there somebody who needs you to lovingly protect them by participating in and absorbing the risk they're feeling in their faith? You know, who's getting beat up spiritually in the corners of their faith, whose heart and faith needs you to guard it like it's your own, not by controlling or manipulating or even sheltering, but by coming alongside tenderly, nurturing and walking with patience with grace and humility. Friends, I think loving always physically, emotionally and spiritually. I think this could not just tweak or tinker with, or sort of slightly make new or improve our relationships for 2022. But I think if we could live in this to a greater degree, it could transform who we are in our relationships 20 years from now. And the good news that kind of makes this all possible is that this love is the love that God has only ever always shown to us, by physically coming into the world in the person of Jesus and physically absorbing the risk of the cross for our sake. By emotionally healing us by reconciling our relationship with God, our relationship with ourselves and our relationship with others and by protecting us spiritually, by giving us his Holy Spirit, nurturing us, comforting us, advocating for us, and leading us into God's truth.

One more word from the apostle Paul in that second letter to the Corinthian church. In 2 Corinthians 5, it says

Christ's love has moved me to such extremes. His love has the first and last word in everything we do... All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and him, and then called us to settle our relationships with each other.

Christ's love has moved me to such extremes that it's God's love through Christ that is causing me to say all this, do all this, want to live all this, to see this worked out in community, because God's love has the first and last word in everything we do. All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and him. And then he has called us to settle our relationships with each other.

Where do you have some relationships that need settling or resettling these days? Because whether, two weeks in, this year feels new or not that new, I firmly believe this is a new opportunity, a new chance for Jesus to do a new thing in us, by settling and resettling our relationships on love, settling our relationships on learning to love always, settling our relationships on a love that always protects the same way that God has always loved and protected us. That is my prayer for you. That is my prayer for your relationships. That is my prayer for our community.

And throughout this series, we want to catch some glimpses of some examples, some illustrations, some stories of how real people in our community are seeking to live out this kind of love together. In this case, learning what it means to live out a love that always protects, being people that love always in the same way God has always loved us. So in that spirit, I invite you to check out Elaine and Linda and Diane's story of friendship. Check it out.