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Presentation Transcript
Applying God's Love
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This presentation is the third in a series on Godly love. And these three are part of a larger series on the eight qualities of healthy congregations. And our topic for today is applying God's love in our lives. In the first one we saw that Godly love is based on justice, truth and grace. And in the second, we used the Bible to define Godly love. Today we will think about how to *become* more loving – how to apply the things we've learned in our lives. The point of all this is to build up our families and our congregations so that our children will feel a part and want to *stay* because of the great value they see when they get older. Now there are other benefits, but because this ministry is dedicated to children, that's the point that we're going to make.

We all get caught up in our lives with what's going on all the time and how busy we are, and sometimes it's easy to forget about why God has called us into relationship with Him. We are no longer our own. We have our Father's work to do. So we're going to work on some strategies that we might use to strengthen the areas where we're weak. You'll remember that we talked about the barrel that has the low stave? And the water runs out over the low stave? So it's only as good as that lowest stave. Well we're trying to raise all the staves in our lives so we can hold more of the – I guess we could say – the Spirit, right? Because that's water.

So let's think about individual growth first of all. What are some of the things that a person needs to do to apply the love of God in their life? Well, I think the first thing – the most important thing – is to understand that God loves *us* – that *we're* loved by God. You can't give to somebody else what you don't have, can you? We're not talking about loving people with our own human love, but we're talking about expressing *God's* love to people. And if we don't know that we're loved by God, we *cannot* express that to others. So it's very important that we all know that God loves us – and not just that we *say* that we are, but that we can demonstrate that God loves us.

You know, I'm thinking about those people that were talked about in the attachment theory, that when you ask them how their family life was growing up, they say, "Oh, it was great. It's great. Everything's fine." And what they're really telling you is, "It was

terrible and I don't want to talk about it – and I've just dismissed the whole thing from my life.” We need to be able to tell a story about how God loves us and why.

I was working with a woman once, whose husband and sister both died of Alzheimer's in the same year, and her mother was currently sick with it as well. She was in her late sixties, maybe? She was sad and grieving her losses, and missing her husband, as you would think normal. But there was also a lot of depression there – very depressed. She had a hard time getting up in the morning, didn't want to do anything, really down, discouraged – very low. Well, she decided to go with some friends on a pilgrimage – it was sponsored by her church – to visit Germany and Poland. She asked me what I thought of it. I said, “I think it'd be really great to kind of get away for awhile and get a new perspective on things.” So they went to a number of churches over in Europe. They also went to Auschwitz and they did some touring. When she returned two weeks later, she walked into my office, and I could tell an immediate difference. She still missed her husband, but she was no longer depressed. I asked her to explain to me what had happened to her, and she said that during her trip she was uplifted by the beautiful scenery and the magnificent churches that she saw. She also thought the change of pace and location was really good for her. But she said that really wasn't what did it. While she was on her trip she realized that while she had suffered loss in her life, she was still very blessed. She realized that she went to Auschwitz and learned what had happened there, and she saw how people in Poland had to live and some of the things that were going on in the world. She realized that God had *not* forsaken her and He was still caring for her. She told me that the trip broadened her perspective and helped her see God's hand in her life beyond her immediate problems. That was better than any medication she could have taken! It totally took her out of herself and she saw the bigger picture of what God was doing for her.

Now, we can't all take a trip to get over the blahs, but we can thank God every day for loving us, can't we? And we can enumerate the things that He does for us, can't we? We can keep a journal and we can be mindful of all the ways that He demonstrates His love to us.

There was a little girl who was a client of mine and she suffered terrible, terrible mood swings for no obvious reason. You know, I know people that suffer mood swings all the time, but they usually have a good reason for it. But this little girl would just go from down to manic to down again. And there was nothing to stimulate that. Her brain had problems modulating her moods. At thirteen-years-old this girl was a pro at therapy, because she'd been in therapy since she was four because of all of this. She told me that she kept a journal of all the good things that came her way. When she was in the grips of a really angry mood, she would force herself to go read her journal. Now, if a teen can have that kind of character, so can we.

Besides getting discouraged about life's difficulties and forgetting that God loves us, we need to be aware that often difficulty in accepting God's love for us comes from problems in childhood – with our attachment with our parents. We've talked a lot about that. We're just going to move on for today. It's just something to be aware of. It's not just the losses we suffer in life, but it's also things that happened to us when we were

very young. It's just something to be aware of. One of the areas of growth – when it comes to God's love – is knowing that we *are* loved, because we can't pass on what we don't have. So that's the point of this one.

Let's move on now. What else do we need to know? The next most important thing after that is to love ourselves. If God loves, and we know that, we certainly ought to love ourselves as well, shouldn't we? We're supposed to love all God's children, and we're one of them, right? And this brings us right back to the series on *True Spirituality* and what it is, doesn't it? All these things just keep coming back.

So self-love is one of the building blocks of Godly love actually. And it comes from *knowing* that God loves us.

We talked about narcissism awhile ago. And those are people that think too much of themselves. But actually what's going on there is, down underneath all of that, there's a real poverty of self-image – of self-concept. So they constantly have to pump themselves up with the approval of other people. Somebody that really loves themselves...they don't need all the affirmation from other people, because they already know they're okay. They don't depend on what other people say about them.

So, if we have a strong identity in Jesus Christ, if we know that we're forgiven, if we *know* that we're a child of God, then it's easier to love ourselves. Let's go to Matthew 19, verse 17.

Mt. 19:17 – *“Why do you ask Me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There's only one who is good. If you want to enter into life, obey the commandments.” “Which one?” the man inquired. Jesus replied, “Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself.”* So how we love ourselves is sort of the *benchmark* for how we're to treat other people. If we don't know how to treat ourselves well – if we don't love ourselves – then we don't have any standard, or knowledge, of how to take care of and love other people. It all comes from knowing that we're loved by God, too. So that's the beginning of it.

We don't come into this life loving ourselves in a Godly way. It has to be learned. For many of us, we learn it when we're tiny – from our mothers, if we're fortunate. But then there are others of us who...well we didn't get it when it was easy to get when we were little, and so we have to get it as we get older.

Besides doing the things we talked about already to learn how much God loves us, what can we do to love ourselves the way *God* loves us? – with the idea that we can't give away what we don't have already.

Passover is a time when we're supposed to do self-examination, isn't it? And I think many of us focus on all the problems. And that's good, because you can't fix it if you don't focus on it. Right? If it needs to be fixed, then you think about it. That's how we solve problems. But it's also self-examination to look at all the *good* things that God has built into us, and helped us become, and helped us do.

The narcissist thinks, “I’m great because I’m whatever, or because I did this or that.” A Christian can say, “I’m this way because *God* made me like this, and I’m so thankful He did,” or “God helped me do this, and I’m so thankful He did.”

What are some of the things we can do if we’re going to examine ourselves this way? We can write down, “What do others like about you?” or “What are you good at?” or “What have you done recently or even in the distant past to help other people?” and “What have you repented of and is no longer an issue for you and God – no longer a stumblingblock – and how did God help you do that?” One of the things that I think is helpful is to go to God in prayer with these lists that we make – each time that we work on them – and read them out loud and thank God for them. Those are all ways that we can learn how to take care of and to love ourselves.

Another thing I’ve heard about – I’ve seen people do – with good effect is just to spend an hour alone with yourself. No reading. No music. No video. No computer. No food. Just be by yourself. And then afterwards, write down what you felt and ask yourself why you felt as you did. It will give you some awareness about what you think about yourself. Some people can’t be by themselves. They have to have some kind of distraction.

Okay, so love God, love self. What else can we do to apply the things that we’ve learned about already – you know, the fruits of the Spirit. How can we learn more to apply them?

Well, I’m reminded of a story of a man who was driving along a winding mountain road. And as he came around a sharp curve, he encountered another car. And as he passed the car, the woman driving the car yelled out of her window at him, “Pig!” And he yelled back, “Idiot!” And as he rounded the next corner, he ran over a pig.

Some people have a hard time *trusting* that others are prepared to take care of them and treat them well. Some people always expect the worst, or assume that there is an insult there. It’s a trust issue, isn’t it? (I’m not going to tell the one about big nose today – we’ve all heard that one.)

Learning to trust is easiest to learn in the first year of life. If Mom comes when we cry, if we’re taken care of, if we learn that we’re going to be taken care and that our environment is a safe place, then that gets generalized to the rest of our life. That becomes faith in God eventually. That trust is developed easily and naturally – first toward mother and father in the first year of life – and then, as we get older, it gets transferred to other people, and then eventually to God. Some people have a positive outlook on life, and others are always afraid that something bad is going to happen. Other people are afraid they’re going to be taken advantage of or hurt by other people. As we grow we get let down by people, either because they’re imperfect, or because we have the expectation of perfection of them. And that can make it hard to trust and it becomes easy to build a protective wall around us. These protective walls separate us from other people. You can’t love people if you have a wall between you.

I was listening to the song, *Hey Jude*, the other day. I saw a survey a few years ago that that was the most recognized song in Great Britain among the general population – that

everybody knows that song. It was written in the early '70s, I think. In the song, Jude is being exhorted to go after the girl he likes instead of withdrawing from her or withholding himself. And there's a line in the song that says, "Only a fool plays it cool by making his world a little colder." And that's what we do, isn't it? Every time we withdraw from a relationship, we're just making ourselves a little more lonely and making our world a little colder.

I was thinking about the idea of "sheep stealing" the other day – not that I want to do it – but thinking about the paranoia that some churches and some ministers have about that. And they have all these walls – or we see all these walls – around various churches to keep the sheep in and, I guess, the wolves out, right?

Not too long some people invited me to their area to speak on the eight qualities of church growth. Now the reason I went there was to make sure that their church *grew*, right? I mean that's the point of giving a lecture on church growth. You hope they get bigger. These people that invited me didn't go to any of the churches of God, but they knew all the people in the community that went to all the different ones. So they thought, "Well, we'll have this and maybe it will help pull people together." They asked one particular group if they could use their hall after services to host this seminar, and the people agreed after it was approved by the pastor, the regional pastor...you know how that goes. During the meeting I was there and here's...after church we had this seminar. People came from all the different groups, but most of them were from this one particular church that let us use their hall. They were already there so they didn't have to go anywhere to make the effort. So they came. And during this seminar there were these friendly, accepting, eager faces – just kind of soaking up all this very positive material. And there were two sour-looking guys sitting there. Get the picture? They were the ones who were "in charge" of the group. And you could just tell what was running through their minds because it was all over their faces. Of course, I'm thinking, "I don't have a group to take my stolen sheep to." We didn't have a congregation in that area that we could steal them – rustle them – so it wasn't possible for me, in that situation, to steal sheep. I only came so that their group could get larger.

It's just really hard for some people to trust. And if we can't trust, we can't love. That word that I've used – trust – is really just another word for faith. When we have faith, we trust *God*, right?

God tells us to go out there and to make disciples. If we're busy building walls and we're worried about what people are going to think and all of that, then none of that is ever going to happen for us.

I've told you about one of the interns at our clinic that has spiritual interests. There's also a therapist there who is religious, and we've talked quite a bit. Now that I've moved over to the other side of town, we don't get to talk very much anymore. So I happened to go over to the main office on a rare trip and I saw her there one day. She seemed to be genuinely pleased to see me and said, "We should get together some time just to catch up." So several months passed. I was busy. She was busy. Nothing happened. So, out of the blue, I just called her up and said, "We really ought to do lunch sometime and talk

about therapy and God and all that stuff that we like to talk about.” She seemed really happy to do that, so we set a time. We finally did get to go, and when I met at the restaurant, she told me in kind of serious tones that she really needed to talk to somebody about something. So we sat down. She was going through some difficult changes in her career – changing jobs – she has another job. So while we were eating she was kind of venting all of this, you know, and while she was talking I kept taking it back to what God wanted for her and try to find out what plans He had for her. I think when we parted we had a deeper spiritual connection than before. I was so glad that I made that effort to stay connected with her. And you know, I almost didn’t. I worried that she might not want to go, and that it would be awkward for her. Have you ever pulled back from some good thing you thought about doing because you were afraid how you would be received? In 1 John 4:18 it says, *“There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear.”*

If we’re going to have the love of God, we have to be willing to *trust* that everything’s going to work out okay, and the world will not stop rotating if somebody turns down our lunch invitation. Sounds funny when we say it that way, but we still have those apprehensions sometimes.

Think about how God is with us. He loves to help us. He hasn’t built any walls between us. He’s tried to break down all the walls. Learning to trust is another thing that goes really well in expressing the love of God. And if you’ll compare that with the behaviors in 1 Corinthians 13, you’ll see it right there.

Let’s move on to another one. Mark Twain is reported to have attended a party in Manhattan. When he arrived late, his hostess greeted him very enthusiastically and wanted to introduce him to people right away, and get him into the swing of the party. He said, “Please excuse my lack of punctuality. I had an old aunt I had to strangle and it took rather longer than I expected.” And she said, “I’m so glad you could come, nevertheless.” She didn’t listen to a thing he said! Let alone, listen empathically to him, which is our next point – to *listen with empathy* to others.

It’s so hard for us, it seems, to listen – especially in this fast-paced age, where our minds are racing and all that. Let’s look in Psalms 34:17. It says:

Psa. 34:17 – *The righteous cry out and the LORD hears them. He delivers them from all their troubles. The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*

One of the best things about God is His desire to listen to us. He wants us to pray to Him. He tells us we should do it. That’s like God inviting us to lunch, isn’t it? It is! He wants us to come talk to Him. And He loves it when we do. He loves to listen to us. It says that He saves our prayers in a bottle.

I know that some of us have minds that race. And some of us are always thinking about what we’re going to say back, so we won’t be embarrassed. So we’re doing that rather than listening. Or some of us get stuck on something somebody says in the conversation, and we’re still back there, and they’ve moved on. There’s all these problems humans

have with communication. But it's always better to try to communicate, even if we don't do it well.

So let's talk about some of the tools that we can use to listen with empathy to other people. By the way, what is empathy again? Well, besides being the cornerstone of civilization, it's the ability to understand the experience of other people. When we try to be empathic and listen, what should we do?

Well, the first thing to remember is to *watch* as well as to listen. What is this person telling me by the way they're sitting? I mean, there's Jesse, sitting there, leaning slightly forward. He's focused right on me. I can tell that he's listening to what I'm saying and interested (or feigning interest – no, I'm just kidding). His body language is saying, "I'm wanting to hear what you have to say." They say ninety percent of our communication is communicated without words – the look on our face, the position – like that. And I've told lots of stories in the past about people and kids and how you can tell what's going on just by watching them.

The second thing is to watch your own non-verbals. If you're always watching the clock while somebody's talking to you, or staring out the window, then that's communicating something to them, too. People sit with crossed arms. We need to keep a good level of eye contact going. These things are important.

Another thing is to listen, knowing that you're going to repeat back to them what they just said. That makes you listen *really* well. If you know that there's a test coming when they stop talking, and you're going to have to say back to them what they said to you. So why would you do that? Well, because you really do *need* to repeat back to them what they said. Have you ever gone and ordered fast food at a restaurant? "I'll have a hamburger, a large fries and a coke." "Okay, thank you for your order. You said you wanted a hamburger, and large fries and a coke. Is that right?" "Yes, that's right." You know how it goes? They do that because they want to make sure they understood what you said. And no wonder – with the sound systems they have at those drive-thrus, right? That's the point of what we're talking about. If you know you're going to repeat back to people what they just said, your chances of listening better are very, very much improved. So think about that.

Also, it's good to make comments to show you understood what they were saying after you've repeated it back to them, or to ask questions. "Let's see if I understood you correctly? You're thinking...dah, dah, dah, dah." It's okay to do that with people. And one good thing about that is most of the time we *don't* understand people correctly, and it gives them the chance to correct so that we *can* understand them correctly.

Then, the last point I wanted to mention is that we not only want to communicate that we understood what they *said*, but we also want to communicate what we understood them to *feel*. When they feel like somebody understood how they *felt*, then they really feel people have understood them and have been listening to them. So when you're repeating back what people say, you add in what you think the feelings might be.

I was talking to a little girl who had requested a male therapist, which is...you know, when you're in the third grade, it's really unusual for a little girl to do that. Her own father died when she was four months old, so that's a big red flag for us about why she might want that. So I asked her why she wanted a male therapist, and she said, "Well, they listen better." I said, "It would feel incredibly helpful to you if you could talk to an older man who would listen to you and understand you." She just looked at me and nodded her head, and smiled and said, "Yes." He got it. So that would be an example of how we might do that.

Okay, one more thing here. *Using humor* – humor – to express love. Did you know that in the Natural Church Development million person survey they found out that love and humor were very, very closely related – associated in the mind of people? I once talked to a young man who grew up in our Church of God experience, and he told me that the words *fun* and *church* did not fit together very well in his mind. He came from a world of doctrinal giants and crabby deacons. What he saw was, the more important people thought they were, the more seriously they took themselves and their roles. And there were a lot of stuffy people just taking themselves way too seriously and puckered up in *every* way. That was his experience at church. That's too bad. That's why fun and church didn't go together. He never saw anybody having any fun at church. And *he* never had any. So what are we going to do about that? We can talk more about that later.

There's a young woman therapist that I sometimes work with, and she has an incredible sense of humor. She just draws kids as though she were a pot of honey and they were flies. I mean, they're just all over her. We all flock to her, too, because she's so hilarious. We had a party some months ago at our clinic at our supervisor's house, and everybody was supposed to bring a gag gift – something that you didn't want any more because it was broken or that kind of thing. I brought an ancient space heater that was all rusty and dusty, and every time you plugged it in, the meter would just spin like that – one of those old, old things. I wrapped it all up, you know. This woman brought a framed picture of herself and her husband. Think about it! That's what you'd bring as a gift for somebody else. So I asked her last week how she was going to beat that next year, and she said, "Oh, I've been lying awake at night worrying about it!" She's just really funny.

So, okay. Learn that God loves us. Learn to love ourselves. Learn to trust. Empathic listening. And humor. Is there anybody here that couldn't add another dozen to that? Of course you could. In fact, that would be a great exercise, wouldn't it? To get your group together and think of more ways that we could all grow in the love of God? I would do it right now, but we do have a time limit.

So what else can we do? Well, let's pretend right now that we've all grown in our personal ability to love God's way almost to perfection. And all of us are way more balanced in justice, truth and grace than we were just a few minutes ago, and that the fruits of the Spirit are now strong in us. How would we put those fruits to work in a congregation?

Okay, let's start with church and fun. Okay, church and fun don't go together. How would we put them together at church?

I was talking to a young client of mine sometime back, and he told me that after his session he was going to go hang out with friends. And I said, “What are you going to do?” He said, “Just hang out.” I said, “Nothing planned?” He said, “No, just go to my friend’s house and do whatever.” “Talk?” “Yeah, talk.” “What about?” “Oh, everything. Talk about us – what we’re doing – catch up with each other. Talk about our problems, all the good stuff, our adventures. We’re going to laugh a lot. We’re just going to have a good time. We’re going to hang out!”

You know, at church we always have to have a reason to have a meeting. We don’t just hang out – ever! Why couldn’t we do something just for the fun of it? I heard about this church – they were an urban church – so every year in the spring they would buy flowers. And they would walk through the neighborhood – there was a residential neighborhood where their church was – so they’d walk through the neighborhood and knock on doors on Sunday morning and give people flowers. People would ask them, “Why are you doing this?” They were all forbidden from saying, “Because God loves you and we’re doing this evangelistic thing.” They were instructed to say, “Just for the fun of it. We like it. Hope you do, too. Here.” Wouldn’t that be a cool thing to do? It’d be *fun*, wouldn’t it? Fun and church in the same sentence. Wow! How about that?

So why not do some things that are just for fun? You know, some sightseeing things – like that lady that went on the pilgrimage with her friends to Europe? I’m not saying you’d have to go that far, but go visit another congregation together. Work on projects where we help each other. Kelly’s moving. Maybe we can help him. Work projects where we help each other’s socials. Just engaging the community for the fun of it. Eating meals together. One of things we could do is to do something like that, and then get back together again to talk about what happened and how it made us feel – kind of debrief the situation a little bit. Okay, that would be one thing, if we were all close to perfection and the love of God, that we’d be inclined to do, or inspired to do, or would sound good to us to do.

What else? Well, I think about the extended family principle. One of the most loving acts a person can perform is that of leading somebody to Jesus Christ, isn’t it? So what do churches do? Well, they go to great lengths to run ads in the paper. They have evangelistic campaigns. They spend money on electronic media. They do outreach projects to reach new people – a lot of money spent on it. Wouldn’t it just make more sense to focus on the people we already know? Rather than on people we don’t. It costs a lot of money to get to meet new people, it seems like.

We know people at work. There are people that we have fun with. I think about my two four-wheeling buddies, Heath and Keith. Boy, do we give them a bad time about that! Recreation people that you do things with. We have families – including our children – relatives, neighbors. There are people that we know at church that may not have known Christ yet – or just getting started. How could we take advantage of that?

Well, everybody could get a piece of paper and they could write down these lists – work, leisure, family, neighbors, church. And then they could make a list of all the people they know in each of those areas of their lives, couldn’t they? Then the group could start

talking. And each person in the group could tell the others about each person on their list. How long would that take? A group this size – we might know a hundred people – maybe more. Then, as the weeks go by, we could all pray for everybody on our lists and for some of the people on the lists of other people that caught our attention. What we could do in the group is to ask two questions.

What does this person need from me? You know, some people might need direct encouragement – like I told you about the one intern at our clinic asked me, “Can you help me figure out my attachment to God and how that connects to my attachment to my mother?” So that’s some direct talking about God. Some people might only need to see our example – to see our values lived out every day. Maybe that would be all they’re ready for or all they would actually need to be inspired to grow closer to God themselves. So we could ask those questions, couldn’t we, and think about what other people might need from us.

And the other question we might ask is what would these people need from us if they came here to our group? What would they need? That’s something to think about, isn’t it? What would they find here? And what would they need if they came? The extended family principle and extending the love of God to people to meet their needs and take care of them. In his book on *Spiritual Growth*, Christian Schwartz talked about how he really loved fishing and he really loved Mexican food. So the idea was to take a tortilla with some refried beans and put it on the hook – because he really liked Mexican food – and cast it out. I mean...that’s what we do, isn’t it? We think because *we* like it, everybody else is going to. If you’re going to catch fish, you have to provide what the fish *like*. So what would our friends need if they came here? I mean, we like to do what *we* do, but what would *they* like?

Okay, let’s move on. Two missionaries went to Mahatma Ghandi and asked him what they needed to do to help the Indians understand Jesus. He said, “Well, everybody loves roses and they don’t do anything. They just smell good. So why don’t you just give off your scent?” Often, just our empathy, our attention, our values lived out in public is enough to get the attention of other people. Isn’t that true? I mean, I think I’ve seen that happen in my life and I’m sure you have, too.

I think one of the things that we can do to give off our scent, also, is to reach out to people who *think* differently than we do. I had someone do this with me this week. She was telling me that at her church they have women ministers, and they take a very open approach to Christianity and the Bible. She wanted to know, then, about my beliefs. I said, after listening to her talk about what she believed, that my church seems much more Bible oriented than yours, and that we take it a lot more literally. So we’d be very much more, I think, traditional than yours – not as open. And here’s what she said to me. She said, “And yet, knowing you as I do, I think that we would find that we’re much more alike than we are different.” So I know that if I went to her church with my Sabbatarian, holy day keeping, law of God ways, I would probably still receive a warm welcome. You know, the one thing that really turns people away is judgment and condemnation. If we’re going to give off a good scent, we’ve got to get that out of the mix, don’t we?

A good exercise would be to invite somebody to our group that doesn't do religion like we do, with the idea of engaging them in a serious argument about...no, I'm...to ask them to explain what they believe to us, and then focus on understanding them and then finding similarities rather than arguing with them. Wouldn't that help other people feel more accepted and focus on the things that we have in common? I mean, that's not our tradition, is it? We like to make ourselves different from other people and argue about it. Somehow it makes us feel more powerful, but it *doesn't* make us more loving.

Well, we could go on and on, and I'm sure that you all could think of many more things, and it would probably be good if you could, but we're going to stop here. We're going to continue on with this series as the weeks – and probably months – continue.