

“The Most Excellent Way”

“Love, Acceptance & Forgiveness”

by Pastor Jerry Cook

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In 1986, when “The Most Excellent Way” was experiencing its beginnings as a ministry to the chemically dependent, we providentially read “LOVE, ACCEPTANCE & FORGIVENESS” by Pastor Jerry Cook. Implementing the principles of love, acceptance and forgiveness produced much fruit in our personal lives, and in the ministry.

“The Most Excellent Way” is not just another Christianized secular recovery program. Our calling is to live, demonstrate and teach Biblical principles with eternal consequences. We pray that these excerpts from Pastor Cook's book will encourage those of you who labor in ministering to the chemically dependent.

~ Glenn Wright, Director



“When love, acceptance and forgiveness prevail, the Church of Jesus Christ becomes what Jesus was in the world: a center of love designed for the healing of broken people and a force for God.”

~ Pastor Jerry Cook



“LOVE ONE ANOTHER”

*“We know that we have passed from death to life,
because we love our brothers.*

Anyone who does not love remains in death.”

I John 3:14 NIV

According to this Scripture, the evidence that we're children of God is love for other believers. If love is lacking we *remain in death* — we are not the sons and daughters of God, no matter what experience we claim in the past. Now that is both frightening and liberating. I know that I have passed from death unto life. How do I know it? I know I'm a child of God because I love.

That's not some theological or philosophical statement. I actually do love the brethren, and that is evidence of God's Spirit living in me. You see, in the natural [man] I don't love anybody. My personal history is one of exploitation and manipulation of other people. But now I love them. Therefore, I know I am a child of God; my daily experience verifies it.

Today the church of Jesus Christ needs to make a bold commitment to love people and then dedicate itself to fulfilling that commitment. Our whole life-style should tell people, "If you come around here, we're going to love you. No matter who you are or what you've done or how you look, smell or behave, we're going to love you."

We must remember that the word for love here is AGAPE. AGAPE love first exists, then it affects the emotions. For God so loved the world that He sat in heaven and had warm feelings? No, that's nonsense. God so loved the world that He *gave*. That's it!

AGAPE is a volitional [free will] commitment to another that motivates us to act on his [or her] behalf. Every time you find a corresponding action to the concept of AGAPE, it is a giving action.

Furthermore, AGAPE involves the kind of giving that cannot be compensated. That concept of love is quite foreign to our culture. The mentality of this world leads us to love and give only when there is reason to assume that our love will be reciprocated. This reciprocity is tested carefully during a "getting acquainted" time. If things look promising, if our approach meets with acceptance and response, we risk a bit further and a friendship is established.

*"If you come around here, we're going to love you.
No matter who you are or what you've done or how you look,
smell or behave, we're going to love you."*

In the Kingdom of God we first love, then we move into acquaintance. In this world we first get acquainted, then we move into love sometimes. As a result, most people have many acquaintances and a few friends but they are dying from lack of love.

Love is commitment and operates independently of what we feel or do not feel. We need to extend this love to everyone who comes into our church [and The Most Excellent Way meeting]:

"Brother, I want you to know that I'm committed to you. You'll never knowingly suffer at my hands. I'll never say or do anything, knowingly, to hurt you. I'll always in every circumstance seek to help you and support you. If you're down and I can lift you up, I'll do that. Anything I have that you need, I'll share with you; and if need be I'll give it to you. No matter what I find out about you and no matter what happens in the future, either good or bad, my commitment to you will never change. And there's nothing you can do about it. You don't have to respond. I love you, and that's what it means."

A church [and ministry] that can make that commitment to every person is a church that's learning to love and a church that will be a force for God.

One of these people came to me and reminded me of the commitment I had made to him. In fact, he repeated it to me almost word for word. "I've been up all night in anticipation of talking to you." he continued. "I have to tell you that I've blown it." He then proceeded to describe the chaos in his life, his marriage and his ministry. As his shocking story unfolded, I found myself becoming angry and disgusted with him for blighting the name of Jesus and forfeiting his ministry so foolishly.

"Dear God," I thought, "what have I gotten myself into? Can I really keep my commitment to this man? When he's all done pouring himself out to me, can I totally accept him and not think any less of him?"

I was not at all sure I could. But while he was speaking, a strange thing happened.

God gave me compassion for the man. When he was through, I said, "What you have told me is probably the most disgusting, despicable thing I can think of. I don't know of anything more you could have done to make me reject you. You've left no stone unturned. But you need to know that the Holy Spirit is giving me the capacity to love [AGAPEO] you. And because I love you, and that love has been placed in my heart by the Holy Spirit, God loves you and offers you complete forgiveness."

It was just like turning on a faucet the way the man began to weep. Then he prayed. On the basis of my love he asked God to forgive him. The outworking of all that over a period of time brought about the restoration of his home and his ministry, and now he is serving Christ.

He had to tell someone. And because I had made that commitment to him, he felt he could come to me. You see, he was at a point emotionally where he could not risk rejection but neither could he keep silent. Like many other hurting people, he desperately needed someone to love him and had almost nowhere to turn. No wonder a church [man or woman] that knows how to love becomes a force for God.



"ACCEPTANCE: LOVE IN ACTION"

A woman came to me one day and said she'd have to stop having Bible studies in her home. "That's too bad," I said. "Why?" "People are coming and smoking in our house," she replied. "So?" I asked, puzzled. "It's stinking up our new drapes," she said. I was beginning to get the picture. "Do you want sterile drapes," I asked, "or do you want to expose hurting people to the love of Jesus?"

*"Isn't that fantastic?
Jesus spent His time with dirty,
filthy, stinking, bent sinners."*

Love means accepting people the way they are for Jesus' sake. Jesus hung around with sinners and if we're too holy to allow people to blow smoke in our faces, then we're holier than Jesus was. He didn't isolate Himself in the synagogue. In fact, He mixed with sinners so much that the self-righteous got upset about it. "He's friendly with some very questionable people," they said.

And Jesus replied, *"Yes, because I didn't come to minister to you religious leaders. I came to call sinners to repentance."*

Isn't that fantastic? Jesus spent His time with dirty, filthy, stinking, bent sinners. And when those kind of people find someone who will love and accept them, you won't be able to keep them away.

Why do people go to the bar? They're looking for someone who will listen to them. So they get drunk and blow all their problems out on the bartender. He cries along with them and laughs along with them.

What are they looking for? They're looking for love and acceptance. But they can't come to the church because the church doesn't like drunks.

A young man phoned me early one morning and said, "I'm going to commit suicide." I said, "Why are you talking to me?" He said, "Because I don't want to do it, but I don't know what else to do. I'm a heroin addict, and last night I nearly killed a man." He told me the circumstances, how he'd been stopped from killing this man. He said, "I'm afraid to go home. I'm afraid to do anything. I'm totally out of control and the only thing I know to do is end my life."

I asked him if we could get together. "No way," he said. "I called a pastor a few months ago and he told me to come by his office. When I got there, he had the sheriff waiting to pick me up. I spent the next six months in jail. I made up my mind then I wasn't about to go to another creep preacher."

*"Unreserved acceptance of people
should be a habit with us."*

My heart broke. What could I do? I said, "Look, I'll go to my office right now. Give me 15 minutes. Then you drive by the church until you're satisfied that no one else is around. I'll stay there for three hours. If at any time during those three hours you want to risk coming in, I'll be the only one there."

I waited at the church two and a half hours. Finally I heard the front door open, then a knock on my office door. I let him in. He gave his life to Christ right there. It was a powerful, beautiful kind of thing. The heart-breaking question is, why hadn't he found love and acceptance before in the one place on earth that's supposed to know how to love?

I know churches that have split because "long hairs" have come in. Pastors and elders who are afraid of long hair and bare feet are in the wrong business.

Does it really matter? The church should state, "We're going to love and accept people, and if you don't want to love people, you're in the wrong place. Because this church is going to love people."

*"We're going to love and accept people,
and if you don't want to love people,
you're in the wrong place."*

Unreserved acceptance of people should be a habit with us. There's no other way to get close enough to people to help them at the level of their deepest needs. When we cultivate the habit of accepting people, they open up to us, they like us, they trust us instinctively.

I was at the county courthouse . . . one day when I spotted a young couple I recognized from our church — they were getting a marriage license. "Well, Pastor," the young man said, "we've been shacking up for about four years now, and we figured we might as well do it right. Say, . . . would you mind being a witness for us?"

I felt that every eye in the place was on me, a pastor who had just been identified as knowing young couples who were shacking up together. What was I to do? Say to the fellow, "Shh-shh, don't let anybody hear them?" If people can't be healed in our congregation, where should we send them? Someone has to be the end of the line for messed-up humanity. We are not in a popularity contest.

I accepted that brother. The point is, though, I had accepted him long before this encounter and my acceptance was so solid that he wasn't ready to tell me the truth.

Because we are accepted IN the Beloved, we must be accepting OF the beloved. I can't give up on you till God does, and He won't! We're safe with God, and we've got to be safe with one another. I've got to be safe with my brothers and sisters. I've got to be able to know that I can blow it and still be loved.

I'm only human, and you have no idea how human I am. You little realize the weakness and the frailty of the man who lives in this frame. But I know; I contend with it every day. I'm just mud, as you are. I've got to be able to fail and still be loved and accepted—by my wife, by my children, by my parishioners, by my parents. I simply cannot live with rejection. And that's not because I'm on an ego trip but because I'm a person.



“ACCEPTANCE IS NOT LICENSE”

Earlier, I told about a fallen pastor who was restored to fellowship because he found love, acceptance and forgiveness at [our church]. A barrage of phone calls began coming to us at that time from irate pastors and people. They were terribly upset that our accepting him would be interpreted as license for what he had done. I suppose that is possible.

“Someone has to be the end of the line for messed-up humanity.”

Perhaps some people would be so blind. But they would be wrong to make that assumption. We were neither countenancing his sin nor trying to be noble and heroic in bucking the tide of sentiment against him. We were simply and plainly loving him.

A leading church official called . . . [and] asked, “Do you know what you've done?” I assured him that I most likely did not. “Well,” he said, “you’ve opened you doors to every broken-down pastor with ethical problems.” My answer to that is, “Praise the Lord.”

If they can't come here, where can they go? Where do we refer them? If people can't be healed in our congregation, where should we send them? Someone has to be the end of the line for messed-up humanity. We are not in a popularity contest. Jesus was crucified at the end of His ministry, and it was the equivalent of the local ministerial association that put Him on the cross. The religious community may put you on the cross too. If so, pray that God will forgive them, for they know not what they do.

The very brothers who would crucify you may also fall some day, and when they do, they should be able to come to you and find love, acceptance and forgiveness. They should find a welcome and hear a voice saying, “Brother, I know you are hurting. In Jesus' name, come in.”

Never labor under the misconception that such acceptance breeds license. To the contrary, your very acceptance of a brother will make him strong. It will never confuse him in questions of right and wrong if your teaching and personal life-style establish clear standards.

Example: A person who uses profanity is not going to imagine you approve of such language — just that you accept him personally. As he hears your reverent speech and learns God's Word and, most important, comes to love God, he will understand clearly that profanity is wrong. But if you

communicate personal rejection to such a person, he will never be around long enough to be touched by God through you.

The same principle applies in all our relationships with other people. Jesus accepts us though we have much in our lives that offends His holiness. His acceptance of us does not imply approval of our unworthy behavior. If, then, we are acceptable to Jesus, who do we think we are to reject others?



“FORGIVENESS: TO STOP PLAYING GOD”

*“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other,
just as in Christ God forgave you.”
Ephesians 4:32 NIV*

I like Catherine Marshall's concept of forgiveness as she develops it in her book SOMETHING MORE. She suggests that forgiveness is releasing another from your own personal judgment. Taking your personal judgment off a person doesn't mean you agree with what he has said or done. It simply means you will not act as his judge. You will not pronounce a guilty verdict on him.

“But he was wrong,” you say.

“OK, but he's not standing under my judgment. I release him. To keep another under your personal judgment is to play God with him. The Word says *“It is mine to avenge, I will repay,” says the Lord*” **Romans 12:19 NIV**. And because He's going to repay, I don't have to.

“But he was wrong!” you say.

“Of course,” [the Lord may say].

“Well, are *You* going to do anything about it?” you ask.

“What do you think?”

“Are *You* going to strike him dead?” you ask.

“Do you want to play God? If so, remember this: The moment you step in to bring judgment onto that man [or woman], you will come under *My* judgment.”

*“. . . forgiveness is releasing another
from your own personal judgment.”*

Forgive, and you'll be forgiven. **Jesus said: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged.” Luke 6:37 NIV.**

Release people from your personal judgment! For unless I can be assured of your forgiveness, I cannot really open myself to you. You see, I know that sooner or later I will disappoint you and fail. Not by design or desire, but I am imperfect; I'm still under construction. I must know that you will not condemn me when my weaknesses and flaws and sins begin to show. I need the assurance of your forgiveness — a forgiveness with no bitter aftertaste.

Remember, you are not the Lord. None of us is to function as Lord in anybody's life, ever, under any circumstances. There's only one Lord, and that's Jesus Christ. A pastor [and ministry leader] must never relate to his people as a lord. [We] are not obligated to get people to heaven. That's the work of

Jesus. [Our] obligation to people is first to love and accept and forgive them, and second, to bring them to ministry readiness by teaching them to do the same.

This reduces things to such simplicity. Pastors [and ministry leaders] are free to love their people. They don't have to be guardians. They are not wardens of the flock but shepherds of the flock. There's a big difference, and it's the difference between loving and judging.

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ever, under any circumstances.”*

When love, acceptance and forgiveness characterize our lives and our churches [and our ministry], the Lord will send us people who need to be made whole.

A pastor friend called me one day very upset at our church — He was irritated because some of his people had started coming to our church “You're nothing but a bunch of garbage collectors.” As I thought about it, I realized he was telling the truth. That's exactly what we are, garbage collectors. What were we before Jesus found us? Weren't we all just garbage? Jesus finds us and recycles us.

I've seen human garbage become beautiful . . . I've seen the stench of sin turned into the fragrance of heaven. That's our business. We can't worry about what critics think or say. Where is God going to send the “garbage” for recycling if He can't put it on our doorstep? He'll find a place. If we're not open for business, someone else will be. But we want to be used of God.

When *love, acceptance and forgiveness* prevail, the church of Jesus Christ becomes what Jesus was in the world: a center of love designed for the healing of broken people, and a force for God.



*“And because I love you, and that love
has been placed in my heart by the Holy Spirit,
God loves you and offers you complete forgiveness.”*

Pastor Jerry Cook



*May the Lord richly bless you as you
love, accept and forgive others
in Jesus' Name, just as He has
loved, accepted and forgiven you!*