

March 20, 2005 by Steve Brandon



# Because He First Loved Us

## 1 John 4:19

This past Wednesday evening, I returned from a trip to Nepal. Steve Belonger and I went with a goal to understand the opportunities that we might have as a church of ministering to the people of Nepal. I was exposed to many things and learned many things. Perhaps the greatest thing that I learned was the preciousness of the message of the love of God. In 1 John 4:19 we read, "We love, because He first loved us."

This verse is illustrated in the life of one of the many people that we met in Nepal. I want to tell you the story of a man named Jeevan. He is a pastor of a church in Kathmandu. Before he became a Christian, he was a Hindu, which is quite common in Nepal, the only Hindu kingdom in the world.

The Hindu religion believes that when you die, you will come back to earth into another life form. When you return, you either come back as better or worse than you were before. You may come back as a fly, a frog, a pig, a person, or a cow. Within the Hindu religion, each life form is either better or worse than each other life form. It is better to be a frog than a fly. It is better to be a pig than a frog. It is better to be a person than a pig. Believe it or not, it is better to be a cow than a person.

Even within the ranks of humans, some are better than others. There are some who are of a low caste. There are others who are of a high caste. Those of the high caste won't associate at all with those of a lower caste. To talk with them, to touch them, or to look at them is to make yourself unclean. Perhaps you remember the story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). Jesus told of a man who was robbed on his way down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He was stripped, beaten, and left half dead along side of the road. Along the same road came a priest and a Levite. When they saw the man, they "passed by on the other side" (Luke 10:32) because of the great prejudice that the Jews had against the Samaritans. They wouldn't associate them at all. This is how those of the highest caste in Hinduism behave toward those of the lower castes. This is how Jeevan used to act.

Jeevan told me that he was born into the Brahman caste, which is the highest of castes. He said that he wouldn't even touch those of a lower caste. At times, he wouldn't turn his face away from even looking at them. Jeevan was a very prejudiced man, whose religion supported him in his prejudice. But, a man came into Jeevan's life who changed his life forever.

Jeevan was in the travel business. He operated a hotel. As such, he met with many people from the west. One man in particular was a Christian man, named Dave Marshall, who used to lead groups of people over to Nepal in order to minister to the Nepali people. He had met Jeevan, look at the hotel he managed, and brought a group of people to stay at his hotel. On one occasion when he was on his way out of the country, Dave gave Jeevan a Bible and told him to read it. About six months later, he returned to Nepal with a group of people and stayed at the hotel where Jeevan worked. Again, Dave asked Jeevan if he had read the Bible. Jeevan told him that he hadn't read it yet. Once more, Dave told Jeevan to read it. About six months later, Dave returned once again to Nepal and asked Jeevan if he had read the book that he had given him. Again, Jeevan said that he hadn't. I believe that this same conversation took place another time or two.

On one occasion, Dave returned to the hotel with a sick little girl, who needed to see a doctor. But, he was leaving Nepal on the next day, and so gave the little girl into the arms of Jeevan to care for her. Like the good Samaritan, he promised that he would pay all of the medical expenses when he returned to Nepal again. The problem for Jeevan was that this little girl was of the lowest caste. To touch this little girl in his arms was to make himself unclean. But Jeevan told me that when he held this little girl in his arms, his heart melted. So, he took this little girl to a doctor, and she was cured with the appropriate medication.

Through this event, it caused Jeevan to ask some questions to himself about Dave Marshall. He wanted to know how it was that this westerner could love a sick little girl from the lowest of castes. He wanted to know why Dave Marshall would love the unlovable. And so, he finally read the Bible. And when he read the Bible, he found out why Dave Marshall would love a sick, little, unlovable girl. The Scripture we are contemplating this morning has the answer: "We love, **because** He first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Soon, Jeevan became a follower of Jesus Christ. Today, he is a pastor of a church in Kathmandu, doing a wonderful work. What changed Jeevan was an act of love. And notice that it wasn't even an act of love directed toward himself. Jeevan saw Dave Marshall loving the unlovable and sought an answer as to why such a man would do this. The answer is that God first loved Dave Marshall, who wasn't lovable. This gives him reason, then, to love others, regardless of who they were.

The Bible is clear that we were unlovely. Romans 5:6-8 points this out very clearly, "For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrated His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." It was a demonstration of the love of God to sacrifice His Son for helpless sinners, who hated God and wanted nothing to do with Him. This is the truth that ought to entirely change your perspective on life: that God would love you, when you were unlovable. You ought to be amazed that God would sacrifice Himself for you, though you hated him.

The words are familiar, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!" Sadly, there are those in Christian churches who don't believe this fundamental doctrine that we are wretches. I have heard of those who sing, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,

that saved a **one** like me!" They change the words to what John Newton wrote, because they can't believe that they were a wretch. But, the Bible clearly describes us as wretches.

The difference between you and God is far greater than any perceived difference between a Brahman man and a low-caste, sickly girl. It's not that God is prejudiced, like the Hindu society. The Bible is clear that "God is not a respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34). It's that God is so holy, that unclean things can't appear before Him. When Isaiah encountered the holiness of God, he cried, "Woes is me, for I am ruined!" (Isaiah 6:4). The distance between a sinful man and a holy God was too great for Isaiah, one we would consider to be quite holy. When God looked upon us, he saw those who were, "foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our lives in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another" (Titus 3:3). When God looks upon mankind, He sees that "every intent of the thoughts of his heart [are] only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). When God looks upon the sons of men, He sees that "every one of them has turned aside; together they have become corrupt; There is no one who does good, not even one" (Ps. 53:3).

And the glorious news of the gospel, is that "**He first loved us**," even when we were in this condition.. He loved us and sent His Son to be a propitiation for our sins. The most famous verse in all of the Bible tells us this. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). When Jesus came to save, He didn't come to save lovable, high-caste people. He came to save the lowly and despised and the poor and the humble.

When we come to grasp the extent of God's love toward us, we will respond in love toward others. "**We love**, because He first loved us." God's love was shown to us. We ought to share that love with others. "Be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God, as a fragrant aroma" (Eph. 5:1-2).

During my time in Nepal, I saw that. The man who took us around Nepal is named Bob Clinton. I saw him extend his arms of love to many. He is a very gracious man, who opened his arms wide to help and encourage many Nepali people. In fact, I remember on one occasion, he went into a home for older people, started by the Sisters of Charity, which is the organization that Sister Theresa started. The home is strictly humanitarian. There is no gospel light in this place (as far as I could tell). They simply care for the old people whose families had left them. There surrounding us were many old Nepali men and women, who were old and dying. Bob simply went around and greeted the people who were there and touched them and talked with them and smiled at them. The old, dying people in the home weren't Christians. They were Hindus, entrenched in their false religion, and on their way to hell. Many of them had lost their reasoning faculties, as many do when they grow older. For many of them, there was no hope that they would understand the gospel. And yet, he was extending an arm of grace and compassion and kindness and love to them. Bob later told me that these old people are lonely and love to be touched and to be talked to. Why would Bob extend such kindness and love? "We love, because He first loved us."

And you never know how the Lord will use such displays of love. Think about Jeevan. What transformed Jeevan was an act of love that he witnessed in another Christian. It wasn't love expressed toward Jeevan that changed him. It was love demonstrated. Perhaps this sort of kindness will provoke another to ask him, "Why do you love these people like you do?" Bob can reply, "I love, because God first loved me."

This is how God works. It is often the selfless acts of Christians that God will use to spread the fame of His name. Jesus said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another." By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). There is a correlation between God's love for us and our love for others. "Even as I have loved you, that you also love one another." The example of God's love to us ought to be imitated by us. Such love will have an effect. This love will have an evangelistic effect. People will see our love and will come to understand the love of God (John 13:34). "We love, because He first loved us."

As I watched Bob act, I was drawn to my own actions. I realized that I am often selfish in my love. I don't share love to all whom I meet, as I ought to do. I'm not kind and gracious with my words. Even this week with my family, I have been confronted by my own lack of love toward them. I believe that the correction to this comes in understanding more fully the love of God in my own life, that I might share it and tell it to others.

The message of the love of God is a huge evangelistic opportunity for the Hindu culture. For us in America, we sort of assume the love of God. We have been so influenced by Christianity as a nation that God's love is a given. I remember speaking with a non Christian here in America, who had never been to church before in his life. He said to me, "Of course God loves me! It's His job to love me." Now, there is something dreadfully wrong about this. Though God is love, God isn't only love. Dave Newton's sermon here at Rock Valley Bible Church was a good reminder of God's wrath and anger towards sin. God's love must be seen in the context of God's wrath.

Just as our culture has swung to far toward the love of God, so also has the Hindu culture in Nepal swung to far toward the anger of God. As we spent our time in Nepal, we quickly discovered that idols were everywhere. On the streets, there were shrines. On the backs of cars, there were idols. We place fish symbols on the back of cars. They place idols. At the entrance to many buildings, there were idols. In several of the hotels in which we stayed, there were idols. In the temples, there were idols for sale everywhere.

Here's the way an idol works. You pray to it. You give it food. You plead. You ask. You serve. You do, do, do. When you have done all of this work, you hope to gain the idol's approval. You hope that the idol is no longer angry with you, so that it will help you. But, this is the opposite to how God works. We don't work for God, hoping that afterwards God will work for us. It's the other way around. God has first worked for us in the cross, accomplishing our redemption. "We love, because He **first** loved us." We don't work for our God. Our God works for us. His love is initiating love. Our love is a responding love.

There is great fear in idol worship. You look at the demeanor of these idols, and you will notice that many of them are scary looking figures that instill fear. The fear is that you don't do enough for your idol, and he will come after you and get you! The fear is that you don't work hard enough to get the idol to work for you, he will harm you instead. As such, these idols are very selfish. They must first be served before they will act. If you do enough, ... perhaps the idol will feel obliged to help. But, the opposite is true of God. It's not fear that drives us to work for God. It's God's love toward us, that gives us reason to love in return.

We asked Jeevan about how he witnesses to Hindus. He asks the simple question, "Do your gods love you?" Then, he boldly tells them, "Our God loves us." He explains the cross, how Jesus was the Omnipotent God, who came into the flesh to die for His people. He explains how all who repent from their sins will know the forgiveness that He offers. This is such a different God than their gods that they can hardly fathom the thought. Idols don't love! Idols are selfish, looking out for their own good! So, when they think of a God who loves, it shorts all of their circuits. And yet, this is our God. Here it again, as if for the first time: our God loves us and died for us.

He first loved us.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on March 20, 2005 by Steve Brandon.  
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