

So, we just had another baby... that means for the next two weeks (until Gideon turns 5) we will have four kids four years and under... pretty bold family planning by just about anyone's standards. I can't tell you how many people have marveled at our family – and if you come from a big family or you have a big family (and with six ours officially is “big” by American standards), you know some of the well-meaning, joking comments that come from friends, family, and strangers at the grocery store.

Big families are kind of like water beds. A few decades ago they were all over the place, now most people just think they are weird.

Easily one of the most common comments I've heard goes something like this: “How do you do it? I have one kid and I don't feel like I can handle it, how do you do four?”

Kids are incredible blessings partly because they are incredible teaching tools, teaching some important life lessons from God.

First of all, whether you have one kid or eight, no parent can actually “handle it.” Kids are one more potent proof of how much we need God - that we are not as in control of our lives as we like to think. No parent can actually “handle it” – we just do the best we can and ask God to bless our children through us and, at times, in spite of us.

Second, and more germane to today's sermon, there is another lesson kids teach (whether you have one or four). They teach us that **real love requires sacrifice**.

I'll never forget what one of my classmates said to me after we had our first, he said: We don't know how selfish we are until we get married. And we REALLY don't know how selfish we are until we have kids.

You see, from the moment you are born until you get married a large part of your little world revolves around you – when you are young your parents feed you, clothe you, take care of your every need and a lot of your wants. As you get older you gradually start to do some of those things for yourself, but still mostly *only* for yourself. You feed yourself, you clothe yourself, you take care of your own needs, and many of your own wants.

And then you get married and suddenly life isn't only about you and your wants and needs. Suddenly you can't just do whatever you want whenever you want to. When you get married you have to become less selfish – your world stops revolving around only you – and that is a lesson our naturally selfish hearts don't like learning. And so the first year of marriage is often one of the most difficult because you are forced to be less selfish.

And then you throw a kid into the mix and it feels like you will never get your way again. You want to sleep? “Jokes on you,” says that little squawking baby. You want to eat one meal with both of your hands? “Yeah, right!” says that little bundle of joy with a set of lungs. You want to go to the bathroom just once without being interrupted? “Ha! That's a funny joke,” says that little toddler. You want to be out of the house on time for anything? “Not so fast!” says the kid who always seems to fill his pants right before you walk out the door.

You become a parent and suddenly a huge percentage of your day no longer revolves around what you want and need but around what that child wants and needs. And that naturally selfish heart we all have is none too pleased with that drastic life-change.

And yet we still do it... even though our selfish hearts scream against it, we still get married, we still have kids. Why? Why would we do that to ourselves? Is it really all worth it?

Well, it really boils down to that one big thing that spouses and kids give us in a uniquely awesome way: Love.

And I'm not talking about love in the way so many people today talk about it. For a lot of people when they say “love” they really mean “like.” “I love the Tigers. I love donuts.” That really means “like”, because even though I'd be sad if you told me I could never have another donut or watch another Tiger's game, it wouldn't be even close to what I would feel if you told me I could never see my wife again.

No, the unique love that spouses and children teach is love like Bible describes it. And in the Bible **true love *always* requires sacrifice**. Let me say that again, **true love always requires sacrifice**. The love of the Bible always requires doing the opposite of what your naturally selfish heart wants to do. If you don't sacrifice for it, you don't love it, and the more you are willing to sacrifice for it, the more you love it.

And sacrificial love is a beautiful thing – it's incredibly fulfilling to perform and amazingly satisfying to receive. We recognize that. That's why we get married. That's why we have kids. Even though our selfishness makes it hard, once you get a true taste of what sacrificial love is like, you can't help but want more. I genuinely love being a father to four little kids.

Well, Jesus wants to make clear to us today that if it is true that love requires sacrifice in our human relationships, it is even more true when it comes to our relationship to our God. **True love requires sacrifice**.

Luke tells us large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and who could blame them - feeding thousands, healing every disease in the book, bringing dead

people back to life, who wouldn't want to follow Jesus! But then Jesus turns to this crowd and says, "Look if you are going to follow me, if you are going to be my disciples, if we are going to have a relationship, this is the kind of love I demand."

**"If anyone comes to me and does not *hate* father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."**

When you walk with Jesus, sometimes you hear surprising things, right? Hate my own family? If that sounds downright *un*christian to you, you are not alone.

There is an important cultural and linguistic difference between modern American English and Middle-Eastern/Jewish Hebrew. When we hear the word "hate" we think literal hate – despising, loathing, dislike. But in the Hebrew mind it was more common to use the word "hate" comparatively. Take, for instance, Jacob and his wives. Jacob, whose life is recorded in Genesis, married two sisters, Leah and Rachel (having multiple wives was fairly common back then, but never condoned by God). Maybe you remember the story. Jacob wanted to marry Rachel, but Rachel's father tricked him into marrying both. The Bible says that Jacob "hated" Leah, while Rachel he loved. But Jacob obviously didn't literally hate Leah – he cared for her, provided for her, had a bunch of kids with her. In fact the Bible also describes their relationship this way: **"His love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah."** His love for Leah was down here, his love for Rachel up here, and so comparatively, within this spectrum of love, he hated Leah.

This is exactly what Jesus is saying to us today – it would go against other clear passages in the Bible to interpret Jesus here as saying we should despise our fathers, mothers, wives, children, brothers and sisters. What he is saying is that on this spectrum of things we love, family ought to be down here, and Jesus should be up here. Jesus says, "If you are going to follow me, have a relationship with me, I demand that you love me more than anything in your life, including your life."

What does that mean practically? Well, it means the love that Jesus demands from us isn't like my love for pizza where if I get a slice of Jesus for an hour a weekend, that is all I need.

No, Jesus holds up some of the most treasured relationships we have – that spouse who is your rock, your mom who nurtured you from the day you were born, that child who lights up your face when they come running into your arms

after a long day of work – and says, "I want you to love me more than you love them."

Jesus demands to be the supreme love of your life.

Loving Jesus above all else means when your brother comes to you and says, "I know you don't approve of the way I 'm living my life, but if we are gonna keep close you have to stop bringing it up all the time," the thought of not sharing Jesus' word with him makes you nauseous.

Loving Jesus above all else means when your spouse says to you, "Honey, I appreciate that your faith means a lot to you, but I don't appreciate all that time and money and energy you have to put in at church," you say in no uncertain terms, "I love you too, and I will never leave you, but if you force me to choose between you and Jesus, you are not going to like the outcome."

Loving Jesus above all else means that when your kid begs you to play baseball, but the league plays on Sunday mornings (and Monday nights are already full), the thought sitting in the bleachers of that baseball diamond instead of sitting at the feet of your Savior in regular, weekly worship turns your stomach.

Jesus demands to be the love of your life, and remember, **real love *always* requires sacrifice.**

That means when you hear Jesus talk about his OT people giving 10% of their income you remember that they were, for the most part, subsistence farmers, with razor thin margins, which means 10% was a real and true sacrifice for them. So, for the average middle-class American 10% might be a starting point, but it might not actually be that much of a sacrifice. And if that weren't enough, Jesus makes clear today that he isn't asking for 10% of our time, money, and energy. He wants it all.

**"Those of you who do not give up *everything* you have cannot be my disciples."** In short, the cost of discipleship is this: either you love Jesus with everything you have and everything you are, or you are not a disciple of Jesus – every breath you take, every penny you spend, the number one motivator is: "how can I glorify Jesus with this breath, this penny", or Jesus says you are not a disciple.

If that sounds like a lot. It is.

If that sounds impossible to you. It is.

True love requires sacrifice, and we may sacrifice a little for Jesus, but he doesn't mince words today – a little isn't good enough.

So why would we do it? What Jesus is demanding from us today is infinitely more demanding than the sacrifice of parenthood. I mean, is it worth it?

Knowing what he requires of disciples, knowing the sacrifice that will be required of you if you are to call yourself a Christian, is it worth it?

The people of Jesus' day, many of those people in the crowds following Jesus thought, "Nope." John records this heartbreaking sentence from right around this same time when Jesus started talking about what would be expected of his followers: **"From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him."** They didn't think it was worth it.

What about you? Is he worth it?

Before you answer that, consider the theme for this sermon again: **True love requires sacrifice**, but from a different perspective. Up to this point we've been talking about how our love for Jesus means we ought to sacrifice for him. But what about his love for us?

**True love requires sacrifice...**

**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life.**

**This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.**

**This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.**

Friends, if you can find someone who loves you as much and as completely as Jesus does but asks less of you, let me know... but I don't think you will.

If you are going to consider if it is worth following Jesus you need to focus not on what he is asking you to sacrifice, but what he was willing to sacrifice for you.

He sacrificed the comfort of the throne of heaven to come into our broken and difficult world, to suffer alongside us. He sacrificed the glory and power he had from eternity to be born on earth as a weak human being. He sacrificed the autonomy he had as the Son of God, above the law, and instead he puts himself under the same rules and regulations we are expected to obey, and he obeys them all perfectly not to show us how to obey, but in our place... because we can't... so that by your faith you can claim his obedience as your own. He sacrifices his life, dying on a cross, abandoned by his Father. He made that sacrifice because that is how much he loves you.

Why? So that you can go through life not thinking that your salvation is tied to your discipleship. Let me say that again: Jesus gave his life as a sacrifice of love for you so that you can go through life not thinking that your salvation is tied to your discipleship.

Salvation and discipleship are two different things. Your right to claim comfort and peace in this world because of an eternity in heaven after this world has absolutely *nothing* to do with your ability to love Jesus, it has nothing to do with your track record of sacrifices for him.

Why do Laura and I have four kids? Why do I love the sacrifices demanded of me as a father? Well, it helps me understand this incredibly important concept: I will do nice things for people I like. I will do nice things for people I don't like. But for me to sacrifice, I will have to love you. I appreciate the sacrifices of having kids because it helps me understand **that true love requires sacrifice**, so that when I look at the sacrifice Jesus made for me I understand how incredibly much and perfectly and well he loves me. And although that doesn't make the sacrifice that Jesus asks of us go away it drastically changes the conversation because it is not tyrant demanding this of you, it is your Savior pleading with you, "Come follow me.

"Yes, **true love requires sacrifice**, but come follow me," he beckons with holes in his hands, feet, and side – holes that prove just how much he sacrificed in his love for you.

God grant us willing hearts to love as he has loved us.

Amen.