# MAKE LOVE THE MEASURE OF MATURITY PT2
**20240414**

## INTRODUCTION

Today I pick up from where Pastor Ron left off last Sunday. True maturity is found in genuine love for God and others.

Everyone recovered yet from what Ron shared last Sunday? Lots of serious key issues to work through. He drew our attention to John 13:34-35:

**John 13:34-35 (NIV)** (**N**ew **I**nternational **V**ersion) or (**N**ecessary **I**n **V**ineyard)
> *34 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."*

Jesus left this command before he ascended to heaven, and the question we must ask ourselves is: am I known for my ministry? My gifts? My wealth? Or am I known because of **my love for my neighbour**?

This question is very important because the truth is:
> **God is more interested in your love for people than he is about your desire for spiritual gifts.**

Love is the pinnacle of spiritual maturity.

So I continue (pick up) from there with what I am sharing today.

## THE INCARNATION AS OUR MODEL FOR LOVING WELL

What it means to be **a disciple** can best be understood around the unfathomable mystery of the incarnation — that God took on human flesh. God knew there was no better way to convey his love to human beings than to fully enter our world.

Author and theologian Ronald Rolheiser illustrates why this was so important:
> There is a story told about a four-year-old child who awoke one night frightened, convinced that in the darkness around her there were all kinds of spooks and monsters. She ran to her parents' bedroom. Her mother calmed her down, and taking her by the hand, led her back to her own room, where she put on a light and reassured the child with these words: "You needn't be afraid, you are not alone here. God is in the room with you." The child replied: "I know that God is here, but I need someone in this room who has some skin!"

God knew we needed more than words or intellectual assurance that he is everywhere and that he loves us. He knew we needed a God who has some skin, and so he sent us Jesus.

**What is the meaning of incarnate?**

1. The prefix **in**- means "**in**" and **caro** means "**flesh**," so incarnate means "**in the flesh**." The word "incarnate" describes an unusual, possibly miraculous instance in which something that can't normally be seen or touched assumes a bodily form. Incarnation literally means **'to take on flesh**'.

2. Incarnation is the central Christian doctrine that God became flesh, that God assumed a human nature and became a man in the form of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the second person of the Trinity. For Christians, the incarnation shows that Jesus was fully God and fully human.

3. The incarnation is also the belief that **God in Christ** is active in the Church and in the world today.

Today, God still comes to us in physical form. How? He does this through his body, the church family, in whom he dwells. We are called to be "God with skin on" for the people around us. That is part of what it means to live out an incarnational faith.

**1 Corinthians 3:16 (NLT2)**

*[16] Don't you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that **the Spirit of God lives in you**?*

**1 Corinthians 6:19 (NLT2)**

*[19] Don't you realize that **your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit**, **who lives in you** and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself,*

Bishop Basil, the fourth-century bishop of Caesarea, once wrote:

**"*Annunciations* are frequent, and *incarnations* are rare."**

What was he saying? In other words, bold announcements of what God is doing are common. But people who actually practice being "God with skin on" are much more difficult to find. Why? Because living an incarnational faith requires a particular type of death to self.

Let me explain.

The life of Jesus teaches us three dynamics that characterize what it looks like to incarnate in order to love people well:

1. We must enter another's world.
2. Hold on to ourselves.
3. Live in the tension between two worlds.

NOTE: All three, while distinct, happen simultaneously. For true incarnation to take place — whether it is with a neighbour, co-worker, friend, fellow board

member with whom we disagree, a spouse, a parent, or a child — all three dynamics must be active.

So we take a brief look at these three dynamics.

# DYNAMIC 1: ENTER ANOTHER'S WORLD

Just as Jesus left his home in heaven to immerse himself in our world, we too must leave our **little personal world** and enter into the very different world of another person. **The best way we do this is through listening**.

Like most people I grew up with a kind of unhealthy type of listening. The general kind of listening I knew was listening for the purpose of defending, giving an opinion, or advising. I interrupted others and finished their sentences when the conversation was moving too slowly.

In unhealthy listening, there is a lack of recognition and respect for the other person as a separate human being with their own thoughts, feelings, fears, and values.

Jesus, on the other hand, spoke to people clearly and respectfully. The Gospels are filled with accounts of him being fully present with individuals — Matthew, Nathaniel, a prostitute, Nicodemus, a blind man, a Samaritan woman, and many others. When the rich young ruler approached him, Jesus "looked at him and loved him" (Mark 10:21). He took the time to listen. He honoured each person's separateness and uniqueness.

James confirms the importance of listening.

**James 1:19 (NIV)**

> [19] *My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be **quick to listen**, **slow to speak** and slow to become angry,*

Like many people, I had read many Scriptures and heard many sermons on the importance of listening and being slow to speak. But listening and speaking like Jesus did not come naturally for me, and I often still get it wrong from time to time. I guess not many of you have the same problem.

**Two essential key skills: speaking skilfully and incarnational listening.** As James says, "*Everyone should be **quick to listen**, **slow to speak**."*

**NOTE:** Speaking uses the **God-given power of words** to bring healing, growth, and the love of Jesus to people.

In ***Emotionally Healthy Discipleship***, we skilfully speak words **respectfully**, **honestly**, **clearly**, and in a **timely** fashion.

> **Respectfully**. Give thought to your words and don't simply blurt them out. Take the other person's feelings into consideration. Instead of, "How could you like that movie? It was terrible," you say, "That is interesting. Tell me what you liked about that movie."

**Honestly.** Say what you truly think and feel rather than soft-pedalling or distorting the truth. Instead of, "I can't volunteer because I have other plans," you say, "I prefer not to volunteer because I want to have some time alone at home." We call that, "Adult to adult communication."

**Clearly**. Communicate directly. Rather than being vague or dropping hints, be clear. Instead of, "Are you busy Tuesday night?" You ask clearly, "Would you be willing to attend the class I'm teaching on Tuesday night and give me feedback on how I can improve?"

> We often start a conversation with the words, "Will you do me a favour?" How can anyone really respond to that unless you actually tell them the favour first. So it is better to start off with perhaps, "Can you help me with such and such?" Or, "Have you got time to assist me with such and such?" When someone approaches me and says, "Can you do me a favour", I want to immediately say, "No!"

**In a timely fashion.** Consider the moment. You understand that some moments are better than others for certain conversations. You notice when the other person is tired, irritated, or short on time, and you choose to wait until they are more relaxed before talking about your concerns.

Few of us have had this modelled in our family. Most of us have a lifetime of habitually not speaking respectfully, honestly, clearly, and in a timely fashion.

So we need to consider practicing speaking respectfully, honestly, clearly, and in a timely fashion.

**NOTE:** Unfortunately, not every time we try to enter another person's life to help them become more than what they are at the moment will it be received with joy. So there will always be those times when things just go wrong, even when our intention may be good. Not everybody is willing to have you speak into their life and challenge their behaviour, etc.

# DYNAMIC 2: HOLD ON TO YOURSELF

The second dynamic — **holding on to yourself** — may be the most challenging. Why? Because once we enter into someone else's world, it takes great maturity and differentiation to hold on to our sense of self.

**Jesus models this for us.** In living faithfully to his true self, Jesus disappointed a lot of people. Almost everyone seemed to have expectations and pressures they imposed on his life. He disappointed his family, and at one point, they wondered if he was out of his mind (Mark 3:21). He disappointed the twelve disciples as they consistently projected on to him the kind of Messiah they wanted Jesus to be. Jesus remained true to himself, even as Judas betrayed him.

Jesus disappointed the crowds who wanted an earthly messiah to heal and feed them. And he disappointed the religious leaders who never understood him.

Jesus was secure in his Father's love, both in himself and in what he had been given to do. He held on to himself as he loved those around him. As a result, he was able to be a non-anxious, controlled presence in the midst of great stress.

Some of us, however, have not done the inner work to know ourselves, and as a result, we too easily become chameleons, and take on other people's opinions and expectations.

At times we empathize too much and lose ourselves in the process. We are most susceptible to this when we haven't done the inner work to explore our own preferences, values, feelings, opinions, hopes, and delights. We haven't considered how God is speaking through our life story and unique personality and temperament. As a result, we forget that we have a self to lose.

Remember, Jesus is our model. He knew who he was and where he came from. What I have to give to others — including the way I speak and listen — will always be directly proportional to my degree of self-knowledge. If I don't know myself, the only self I have to offer will be a false self. The degree to which you love and value yourself is the degree to which you will be able to love and value others.

## DYNAMIC 3: LIVE IN THE TENSION BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

When we choose to incarnate love by moving into the world of another person (Dynamic 1), we must still remain faithful to who we are by holding on to ourselves (Dynamic 2). This leads to the difficult work of living in the tension between our world and the world of another person (Dynamic 3).

Living in the tension between two worlds occurs when we listen deeply even though we may not fully agree with what the other person is saying — and doing so without reacting, growing impatient, or becoming defensive.

During his life on earth, Jesus lived in the tension between two worlds: heaven and earth. He left a perfect world to enter our world — a place where he would be misunderstood and persecuted. He experienced suffering on a cross, where he literally hung between heaven and earth.

You and I may not physically die on a cross as Jesus did, but we cannot love incarnationally without embracing our own cross — experiencing some form of death to self. At the very least, the choice to do so will cost us time and energy, and almost always cause a disruption to our world.

Whenever we make the incarnation our model for loving well, we will experience tension and pain. That tension may be with a spouse, friend, supervisor, child, sibling, coworker, neighbour, fellow Christian, or a person from a different race, culture, or social class.

As servants we are not above our master, and as students we are not above our teacher (Matthew 10:24). We too must follow the pattern of the crucified Jesus and die so others may live.

## REVOLUTIONIZE HOW YOU MEASURE MATURITY

Jesus refused to accept that people were growing in love for God in a way that did not translate into love for people. We must refuse to accept that as well. The religious leaders of his day knew their Bible, practiced spiritual disciplines, and worshiped faithfully, but they were defensive, judgmental, and unsafe to be around.

Jesus's integration of love for God and people was revolutionary in the first century, and it remains revolutionary today.

**John 13:35 (NLT2)**

> *35 Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.*

**We are to be the best lovers of people on the face of the earth.**
**1 John 4:20-21 (NLT2)**

> *20 If someone says, "I love God," but hates a Christian brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see? 21 And he has given us this command: Those who love God must also love their Christian brothers and sisters.*

For this reason, building **a countercultural community** that relates maturely to one another is truly one of the greatest gifts we can offer the world.

Discipling people in how to love others, especially those with whom we disagree or who drive us crazy, needs the same time and energy we give to equipping them to love God.

The two loves are, as Jesus said, inseparable – **love God** and **love people**.
**Matthew 22:37-39 (NLT2)**

> *37 Jesus replied, "'You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'*

As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, we all have the following people in our lives: **VIPs, VDPs, VOPs, VUPs and EGRPs**.

**VIP** = Very Impossible People
**VDP** = Very Difficult (Depressing, Depressed) People
**VOP** = Very Opinionated People
**VUP** = Very Unteachable People

**EGR** = Extra Grace Required People

Mature **Incarnational love** is the only way we can be a positive influence in their lives:

- A love that will enter another person's life
- A love that will hold onto yourself (not be manipulated or controlled)
- A love that will live in the tension between two worlds (ours and theirs).

Practicing Incarnational love is not easy, as like Jesus, you will have to face misunderstanding, rejection, and all the other aspects that come with people not understanding that you love them.

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# XTRA NOTES

## HOW TO PRACTICE INCARNATIONAL LISTENING

Along with speaking, entering another's world involves incarnational listening. We needed to get beyond facts and information to feelings. This skill, when exercised properly, enables us to hear more than just words. In incarnational listening, the listener also attends to non-verbal's such as facial expression, tone and intensity of voice, and posture. This type of holistic listening is what enables us to enter into another person's world so he or she "feels felt."

It is like the African greeting, "**I see you**", which is more than just a glancing "hello".

We use the following format for healthy communications.

- **Speak using "I" statements**. (Talk about your thoughts, feelings, and desires.)
- Keep your statements brief.
- Stop occasionally to let the other person paraphrase what you've said.
- Include feelings in your statements.
- Be respectful, honest, and clear.
- Step into the speaker's shoes and try to feel what they are feeling.
- Avoid judging.

**First**, Incarnational listening is not a matter of agreeing with what the person is saying. The purpose of incarnational listening is not finding the solution to a problem. (Although research does show that up to 70 percent of problems can be solved through listening.)

**Second**, be warned that speaking and listening in order to enter the world of another requires strong character and emotional maturity — especially when the other person is saying something with which we disagree or something negative about us. Our first reaction is often to defend ourselves. God invites us to drop our shields and become more open and approachable.