

Choco DeJesús: Live the Lifestyle of Love God Wants You to Live

In the church and business worlds, people go to conferences and read books to discover strategies for growth. That's why I say that love isn't a strategy; it's a lifestyle. You can't uncover "five surefire steps to love people" just like that. Jesus didn't give us a checklist to follow. He gave us Himself. We fail to love when we see people as "the other," but Jesus became "the other," identifying with those who are infinitely below Him and loving us still. Moving forward, keep these points in mind:

We may not approve of the lifestyle of gay or lesbian individuals, but they are not "the other." They're created in the image of God, and God loves them as much as He loves you and me.

We may not agree with a person's political views, but we don't have to assume it's a character flaw to advocate for his or her positions.

We don't know everything, and in fact we've been wrong far too often, which should bring us at least a hint of humility.

We may be upset with the attitudes and behaviors of family members, but they need the grace and love of Jesus as much as we do.

Love breaks down the walls separating us from "the other." These people are more valuable to God than the stars in the sky. If we begin to see them the way God sees them, we'll start to love them the way He loves them. Many of us will need to admit that we have gone years professing Christ but have failed to love people. Let me tell you a few stories of people

learning to love.

Learning a Life of Love

A lady who joined our church came to my office one day, weeping. She told me, "Pastor Choco, I've wasted so much of my life! I didn't love, and I didn't know how to love. I'm finally realizing how much God loves me and how I can love others."

She had been a member of another church for 37 years, but during all that time, the church hadn't done much to care for people outside their walls. When she came to our church, she immediately got involved in feeding the poor and providing for the homeless. Her active service ignited her spiritual life. She experienced more love than she'd ever known before, and it poured out of her to people in need.

Matthew is a young man who was raised in a safe, white, affluent suburb of Chicago. His neighborhood was the polar opposite of Humboldt Park [the impoverished, inner-city neighborhood where I grew up]. When he enrolled in our church's Master's Commission, he instantly became a minority since he was the only white person in the program.

"Before I came, I never considered myself to be prejudiced," he told me, "but I was seldom around people who were very different from me. When I got here, I soon realized I had an unseen but very real sense of racial and cultural superiority. I had to face the fact that I really thought I was better than people with Black or brown skin. I used sarcasm to distance myself from the people around me and subtly put them down. I always did it with a smile, but they knew—and I knew—that I thought I was better than them."

After a second or two, he continued, "The sarcasm was a cover for my insecurity. I didn't feel comfortable out of my culture, and this was the only way I knew to cope."

Matthew ruffled a lot of feathers in his first several months at the Master's Commission, but he didn't realize how he had offended people until another student confronted him. "At that moment," he explains, "I stood face to face with the ugliest part of me. I had belittled people so I could feel superior." He made a conscious choice to repent: to change his agenda, change his perspective, change his words and change his relationships. He apologized to the people he had offended—which was just about everybody—and he made a concerted effort to speak words of affirmation instead of sarcastic condemnation.

"I still caught myself being sarcastic, but I was able to stop and apologize right away. People were very kind to encourage me as I trusted God to change me," Matthew said. He took a deep breath and added this final thought: "The transformation has been slower than I'd like, but it's happening. I'm grateful for that."

A Personal Experience of Learning to Love

Years ago, Promise Keepers held a conference at Soldier Field in Chicago for almost 70,000 men. A man in the audience listened carefully as one of the speakers talked passionately about racial reconciliation. He didn't think the message related to him because he was sure he wasn't prejudiced toward anyone. He was a Puerto Rican, but he had friends who were all colors and from different national origins. The speaker asked the audience to get up and make a physical demonstration of their unity by hugging people who looked different from them.

All over the stadium, men from different ethnic and racial backgrounds hugged each other. During this time, the Holy Spirit whispered to the man in the audience, "Sure, you get along with people who aren't like you, but you don't really love them." Instantly, he knew what the Spirit was saying was true.

His mind went back to instances in his past of running away from white kids who wanted to beat him up and being scared of gangs of Blacks. He had avoided them for years, and he had learned to tolerate them. But the Spirit was asking a different question. It wasn't "Do you despise them?" He could say no to that. But this was "Do you love them?" and he realized he didn't. He went to the altar to pray and confess his sin of not loving his neighbor, and then he got up and hugged every man within reach.

That man was me. God was moving in my heart to prepare me to be a minister of reconciliation in Humboldt Park and beyond, but first, He had to work a miracle of repentance in my heart. A lifestyle of loving people across racial barriers began that day.

Walking in God's Unending Love

Not long after Jesus rose from the tomb and ascended back to the Father, the disciples were busy telling everyone who would listen about Him and helping the new believers grow in their faith. One day as Peter and John were on their way to the temple to pray, they passed by a lame man who was being carried to the temple gate to beg. When he saw the two men, the lame man asked them for money. Peter told him, "Look at us!" The beggar expected Peter to hand him a coin, but the apostle had a different offer: "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (Acts 3:6, NIV).

Peter took the man by the hand. Immediately, his feet and hands were strengthened, and he jumped to his feet. Luke, the author of Acts, tells us:

"Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they

were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him" (Acts 3:8b-10).

Love propelled Peter to notice a man who had a chronic need and had given up on ever getting well. At that moment, Peter may have remembered that Jesus had reached out His hand to him when he stepped out of the boat to walk toward Him and began to sink (Matt. 14:31).

At the temple gate, the lame man received something he never expected. It was a shock to him and to everyone else there. We don't know how much money Peter and John had on them. They may have had a contribution to give at the temple that day, or their pockets may have been empty. But they gave something we can always give—love.

Too often today, the images of the church are of angry faces. Anger is rising up when love needs to rise up. Loving the people who threaten us or disagree with us is hard, but never forget that Jesus found a way. In the middle of His ministry, Jesus took His disciples to Caesarea Philippi, a pagan region in the northern part of the country, far from the temple in Jerusalem. They were in enemy territory. Jesus asked them, "'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' 'But what about you?' he asked. 'Who do you say I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it'" (Matthew 16:13b-18).

Jesus was saying that even where we're most threatened, He's the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. The place He took the disciples was named for Caesar, the Roman emperor, the most powerful ruler on earth, but Jesus was and is far more

powerful.

He spoke, and the stars were flung into space. Nothing matches His supreme authority and power. The pagans believed Caesarea Philippi contained an entrance to the underworld, a dangerous place, but Jesus rescues us from the greatest threat the world has ever known: sin, death and hell. The pagan beliefs ran against everything the Jews believed, from promiscuity to idol worship, but in this very place, Jesus was proclaimed as Lord of all.

When we look around at the degradation of our culture and the poisonous language in our online communication, in families and in politics, we can be deeply discouraged and furious, or we can remember that Jesus still rules and that Jesus still loves.

With this assurance, we can be agents of a love who surprise the people around us. Yes, we may disagree, but we love them anyway. Yes, we don't want to live like them, but we love them anyway. Yes, they've made tragic mistakes, but we love them anyway. This kind of love shouldn't be rare. It should be the norm for the family of God, among ourselves and as we relate to people outside the family.

What Difference Will It Make To Love Them Anyway?

A single individual becomes an agent of change and a source of light. After all, it took the love of only one person, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to turn the world upside down (in a good way).

A family who loves this way has a mission, a cause and a purpose to be salt to season and preserve their neighborhood. And this family will leave a legacy of love from generation to generation.

A small group can work together to make a difference in the community, to be present as Jesus' hands, feet and voice in

the lives of people who have lost hope. Each person in the group brings unique talents and gifts.

A church community can marshal its resources and work with other churches to provide ongoing services in their neighborhoods. They may start small, but if they catch God's heart, they'll find creative, bold ways to touch far more people than they could have imagined.

It takes only one church with this loving spirit to launch a tidal wave of compassion as other churches join in to care for people throughout the city. The church will be a beacon of hope in the community and a resource to equip other churches to get involved in loving people others ignore.

Don't set your gaze on what's wrong with the world. That leads only to pride that we aren't like "them" and discouragement that we're losing ground. Instead, rivet your heart on Jesus. Embrace your assignment, which is the commission God has given you to love people who are hard to love. You're already thinking about them. Don't wait. Love them today, and see how God uses you to change minds, hearts and lives. {eoa}

Wilfredo "Choco" De Jesús is the former senior pastor of New Life Covenant Church in Chicago, one of the largest U.S. congregations in the Assemblies of God denomination. He was recently elected general treasurer of the Assemblies of God. He is the founder of the nonprofit agency, the Chicago Dream Center. In 2013, De Jesús was named one of Time magazine's 100 most influential people in the world in recognition of his authentic Christian leadership in evangelical and Latino communities.

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