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## #101 Sacrificial Love - NT Wright at London Bible Week

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom Wright speaks on 'Sacrificial Love' at London Bible Week in 2017.

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## Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Hello and welcome back to the show that brings you a weekly dose of thinking Christianity from New Testament scholar and senior research fellow at Wycliffe Hall Oxford NT Wright. I'm Justin Briely and as usual the show is brought to you in partnership with NT Wright Online, SBCK who were Tom's UK publisher and the ministry I Head Up Premier Unbelievable and we'll be revealing a new look website from Premier Unbelievable very soon where you can explore faith with Tom and many others in all kinds of different ways in 2022. For now on today's show we continue to bring you the final talk that Tom gave at Premier's London Bible Week a few years ago titled 'Sacrificial Love' Just a thank you to the listener who wrote this review of the podcast I find Tom's insights and scholarship stimulating and challenging his deliberate thought structure and processing flows easily during the podcast and his skillfully guided through multiple areas by Justin.

Thank you for putting in the time and effort to make this contribution to the kingdom. Well thank you very much for leaving that and if you rate and review the podcast it helps others to discover the show as well. Right now let's get into this final session from Tom at London Bible Week.

So what does it mean to love like Jesus? At one level that's my topic that I was assigned for this session. At one level it's pretty blindingly obvious. Greater love has no one than this than that you lay down your life for your friends.

Happily most of us are not asked to do that on a daily basis not literally but I guess we all are asked to do it in principle because that's what Jesus says love is all about. And so our task today is to think a bit about the love we see in Jesus and the way in which that works out within our love for one another in the Christian community and within our showing of God's love to the world around. Both of those are difficult.

For some people they're incredibly difficult. I remember the great theologian, Miraslav Volf, who teaches now at Yale University. When he was a young man he was from Croatia and his father was a Baptist pastor and had experienced persecution under communism and then as though that wasn't enough there was the horrible civil war and all the terrible things that were going on in the Balkans.

And when Miraslav Volf went to study in Tübingen under Jürgen Moltzmann, Moltzmann asked him in a seminar how can you as a Croatian Christian love your Serbian neighbor? And Miraslav said he knew in that instant that if he couldn't address that question he had no right to call himself a Christian theologian. And it was out of his wrestling with that question that one of the great theological books of the 1990s was born, *Exclusion and Embrace*. Miraslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* is not an easy read but it's an incredibly powerful poignant book about how we wrestle against the easy assumption that because we're supposed to love we should just let things go by and not worry about bad things that have happened.

He says absolutely not that's not love. When bad things happen love means saying no love means naming and shaming that's the exclusion bit but the naming and shaming should always be done with a view to eventual embrace. The best example of that in the 1990s on the global stage was of course Desmond Tutu with the extraordinary events in South Africa ending up with a commission for truth and reconciliation which Tutu himself as a black African archbishop chaired in which white thugs and black thugs came and confessed their crimes in order to seek reconciliation and healing and forgiveness.

That was an extraordinary event globally. My goodness we need it in other parts of the world but it is of course incredibly difficult has to be led from the front led by somebody who believes in prayer and love as Tutu did and does. So what does it mean to love like Jesus? How does that actually work? The place to start biblically has to be John chapters 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17 not going to read right through all of those just going to do some spot checks.

This is what we sometimes call the farewell discourses. When Jesus having arrived in Jerusalem for the last time takes his followers off to the upper room, John doesn't describe the last supper as such. He takes it for granted and talks about the foot washing where Jesus puts a towel round his waist and kneels down and washes the disciples' feet to their horror.

This is not something they expected or wanted him to do and then he puts his clothes on

again and tells them about love and says, "You've seen what I've done to you. This is what you ought to do for one another. You ought to take the role of the servant of the slave, to look out for the places of need which you can meet even if it means doing things which in the world's eyes lower your status, bring you down to floor level as it were." And so throughout these chapters 13, 14, 15 and 16 leading up to the great prayer of 17 where Jesus prays to the Father for his followers who he is going to send out into the world.

We find again and again and again the note of love. After Judas goes out in chapter 13 verses 31 and following, we get to verse 34 and 35, "I give you a new commandment that you love one another just as I have loved you. You also should love one another.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another." We have quoted this endlessly in the church. I've taken part in a great many ecumenical events and projects and conferences over the years, especially when I was Bishop of Durham. I did a great deal with many ecumenical partners, both the Catholics and some of the Orthodox and the newer free churches as well as the traditional partners like the Methodists and the Baptists and so on.

And again and again we were faced with verses like this. By this all people will know that you are my disciples. If you have love for one another, yeah we all agree to that and then we go off back to our separate churches and do our little things here and there and people planting new churches as though the existing ones don't exist.

And how does that work? How does that say to the watching world, "We are the disciples of Jesus." Now I do think that God is planting all sorts of new plants in our generation. I'm not saying anything about different projects that spring up all over the place. It's wonderful.

I see spiritual energy and dynamism in so many places. But in the New Testament, spiritual energy and dynamism is given in order to strengthen the whole body of Christ. Think of Ephesians 4, where Ephesians 4 verses 1 to 16.

Paul talks about the many, many gifts that God gives to the church. And the danger with those many gifts is that the church then goes off with different people doing their own things in different directions. And Paul says, "No, the point of these is God gives these many gifts in order to build up the body of Christ, to strengthen it, to be a single, multifarious, multi-skilled, multi-talented body.

Working together takes humility. Philippians 2 verses 1 to 5. An extraordinary agenda. It's just complete my joy by having the same mind, having the same soul, having the same love.

If there's any affection and sympathy, just get it together, please." And I sometimes read

those verses out and I just think, even within a denomination, it's hard to do that. But the trouble is we've forgotten that it's even the imperative. We've forgotten that that is what we ought to be doing.

And so we just kind of take it for granted. We hear those noises and they go on and then we go back to doing things how we always do it. But what does Jesus mean when He says, "Love one another just as I have loved you?" That is left hanging there at the end of chapter 13, although there's the hint there that I mentioned yesterday when Peter says, "I'm going to lay down my life for you." And Jesus said, "You're going to lay down your life for me.

Is that really how it's going to be?" Peter, you're going to be in deep trouble before the night is out. But there's the hint. That's what love means, going the whole way.

And then in chapter 14, Jesus complexifies it. It always happens in John. You get a simple statement and then you come round the back and you see it's got all sorts of other things going on.

John 14 verses 15 and then 21. 15, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." And the commandment of course is that you love one another and verse 21. Those who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me and those who love me will be loved by my father and I will love them and reveal myself to them.

And we find ourselves drawn into what it turns out is a trinitarian theology of love. The father's love for the son and through the son, the son's love for the father and for those that the father has given him. And then throughout this passage as well, the Holy Spirit given to bind Jesus' people into this fellowship of love, to constitute the church Jesus followers as the trinitarian people, the people shaped by the father's love, by the son's self giving love, by the love of the Spirit.

And this is a mystery. It always has been, it always will be, but it is the mystery into which we are baptized, the mystery into which we are invited to come day by day. And of course we can't ultimately understand it.

If you could understand it, pretty certainly it wouldn't actually be God we were talking about. God is of course greater than us. His thoughts are not our thoughts as the Prophet says.

But that's what John 13 to 17 is all about, the trinitarian mystery of love. So it isn't just Jesus does this and that and the other and we have to copy him. That's a good place to start.

Although you find it pretty difficult actually because most of what Jesus does is so extraordinary as we were hearing before. He does say greater things than these will you do. But you know and I know that that takes prayer, it takes fasting, it takes obedience,

it takes fellowship, it takes spiritual warfare and there are many, many difficulties in the way.

And so in chapter 15 verses 12 to 17 he repeats what he said in chapter 13. This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you and here you've got it verse 13. No one has greater love than this to lay down one's life for one's friends and then he says you are my friends if you do what I command you.

I'm not calling you servants any longer, I'm calling you friends. He is inviting them into the circle of love. In other words they are to think of themselves and take some mental effort to do this actually.

They are to think of themselves as the people specially loved by Jesus. It's so easy even if we've just sung a great hymn like we did, even if we actually know that God so loved the world that he gave his only son to walk out of a place like this, to go back to ordinary life, to get on a bus, to go into a shop and to stop instinctively thinking of ourselves as people who have been drawn into the inner circle of Jesus love. But it's only when you know that you are loved like that, that you are able to love others in return.

Because if you don't know that you're loved like that you're always nervous about giving yourself away because there may be none of yourself left. But if you know that God loves that self then you can love that self as God loves it and in that security you are enabled to love others as you have been loved. And that's of course as we were saying yesterday what so much of John's gospel is about God so loved the world, John 3 16 and John 13, that amazing introduction to the second half of the gospel.

They're not evenly balanced halves but the first half goes up to chapter 12 and then John's great introduction, the grand doorway into the final story, John 13 1. Jesus knew that the hour had come and so having loved his own who were in the world he loved them to the end. The Greek word for to the end is *Eis Telos* that means to the uttermost there was nothing that love could do for them that love did not do for them. And John wants you to hold that as the lens through which you look at the entire story that then follows as Jesus goes all the way to the cross to reveal the Father's glory in action, in saving action.

And so from chapter 15 we move to chapter 16 and again the theme of love comes through in verses 26 and 27. It says on that day you will ask in my name and I don't say that I will ask the Father on your behalf for the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. In other words Jesus is recognizing they are already constituted as the family whose nature and name is love, the love of the Father.

And then that takes us into chapter 17 which ends with that same note. Righteous Father the world does not know you but I know you, these know that you have sent me. I have

made your name known to them and I will make it known so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them.

The love with which you Father have loved me Jesus may be in them and I in them. That is extraordinary. Perhaps the best way of thinking about this and something that Vaughn was talking about this morning and I was talking about a bit yesterday is to think in terms of the temple.

The temple is the place where the living God comes to dwell. The original temple was the heaven and earth creation of Genesis 1 and 2. The combined united by focal creation, the twin complementary halves of heaven and earth. That is where God wanted to dwell and to dwell with his image bearing human creatures.

The tabernacle in the wilderness as I said was a small working model of new creation and granted that the first one was threatened with falling apart because of human idolatry and rebellion. Then the temple in Jerusalem where the glory of God came to dwell in that temple so that the priests couldn't stand to minister because the Shaqina, the splendid glory of the living God was there. Then the promise and again we heard it this morning from Ezekiel that there will be a new temple and that God himself will come back to dwell in it.

Again and again the New Testament says when you look at Jesus and when you look at the Spirit that's what you're seeing. The beginning of Acts makes that clear with the ascension and Pentecost. This is what it looks like when heaven and earth are joined together and the breath, the fiery breath of heaven comes to dwell in the house where they're meeting for prayer and dwells upon them and enables them to do extraordinary things.

This is new temple which is by the way, I'm saying to somebody in the break over lunch. This is why the book of Acts focuses again and again on controversies to do with temples like Stephen's speech in Acts 7, like the Paul's speech on the Ariopagus which is all about the uselessness of pagan temples and particularly the great riot and Ephesus where they're all shouting greatest Diana of the Ephesians. The point is God is establishing his new temple on earth as in heaven, bringing heaven and earth together and the breath of the Spirit in the people of God constitutes us as the new temple people.

I find that helpful in reading John because John announces from the beginning for those who have eyes to see that he's writing about the temple. Chapters 1 and 2 make that very clear. He spoke of the temple of his body and all that and all the way through John where kind of building up and saying what's going to happen when Jesus gets to Jerusalem? Is there going to be another showdown between him and the temple? At the end of chapter 12 instead of having that, we get this scene in the upper room.

This is what the real temple now looks like. It is the Father's love present in Jesus,

binding his people to him, breathing upon them the promise of the Spirit so that they can be new temple people so that the love with which God has loved, God the Father has loved, God the Son may be by the Spirit in them. This is the basis of it all.

Without this sort of framework simply telling you to be people of love is an encouragement to kind of beat yourselves up morally and say oh dear I've tried and I'm not terribly good at it. I better try a bit harder. Well maybe sometimes that is depending on your personality one of the ways in to reminding yourself of your obligations but there's no good just reminding yourself of it like a commandment which hangs on the wall.

Oh you've got to be a bit more loving. Oh dear I better go and try. No you need to be worshiping people.

You need to be people who are experiencing day by day, week by week. That powerful love of God in whatever areas of your life corporate personal you need it so that then when you know deep down that you are loved like that you have the confidence to be able to love others. When I have seen I've seen great examples in my life of people who unafraid go and love the unlovely, the people who everyone else ignores or walks by.

I've seen some Christian brothers and sisters who are just totally at ease loving sharing their lives with people of all sorts who other people are afraid of and I know some of those people and I know that they are people who live day by day in the love of God and hence it's no big deal to share that love with others. Thank God that there are some saints in our own day who are shining examples to us. Of course part of the problem with all of this discourse all of the wretched word love is that we got one word to do about 50 different jobs.

As I say in one of my books I think it's a book called Virtury Born. The word love has been trying to do far too many things at once and somebody really needs to sit down with it and explain to it about the dangers of multitasking and the need to delegate. C.S. Lewis wrote that book The Four Loves about 50 years ago but actually there's 44 not just four and he had the Greeks had different words for them but you need to divide them up.

So we can easily collapse in our day and generation into thinking that love is simply an emotion and then it becomes nonsense to command somebody to love because how can you command somebody to feel an emotion for somebody that they simply don't feel and don't want to feel and of course that's putting the cart before the horse. Of course the emotions matter and if you know anything about personality types whether you do the Enneagram or the Myers-Briggs or any of those you'll know that we all approach these things from different angles and some people live in their heads so much that they have to come to the emotions by reminding themselves intellectually that they have got these things called emotions and it might be good. I know a young man won't give you his name or details but somebody is quite close to me who actually just like that and

confessed with a smile that one day he said to himself in his mid-twenties, you know I suppose one of these days I ought to get married and yeah that might be a nice thing to do but what sort of person would I maybe well so and so there now she seems very nice girl and perhaps I ought to think about maybe perhaps one day I might fall in love with her little realizing that the girl in question had actually been hoping and praying this would happen for quite some time but he had to think his way into actually and they're now a very happily married couple I'm happy to say but it was a kind of a case study for me in somebody starting in their heads and coming through now for most of us that's not how it happens for most of us it may be a much more odd rich mixture of the emotions and the intellect and so on but my point is this love when we meet it in the Bible is a covenanted commitment of God to his human creatures to his world God so loved the world God saw all kinds of things in the world which grieved him to his heart but grief is the shadow side of love as we surely know from our own experience in bereavement and so on and when God is grieved to his heart as it says in Genesis 6 and so on it doesn't mean God stops loving it means that his love takes the form of that grief and that grief takes him all the way to the cross and so love for us is a commitment and commitments are hard to keep and we remind ourselves to keep those commitments again and again and out of those commitments the affections and the emotions which may go up and down with the weather and with our state of health and all kinds of other things the emotions have to be told yes when you're running with what you ought to be doing great enjoy it that'll be fantastic and when you're not well too bad we need to get on and do this stuff anyway we live in a culture which is prized authenticity and spontaneity above everything else not realizing that in genuine virtue theory genuine Christian virtue theory authenticity and spontaneity is what you get when you have been practicing for so long that what you do now comes naturally I was watching a concert on the television the other night I think it was one of the problems and watching some of the musicians and seeing fingers flying over keyboards and fretboards and so on my goodness and of course the answer is they are doing it naturally because from an early age they've been practicing the scales and arpeggios they just have to look at a page in music and it just happens it seems spontaneous but of course you know and I know that that's because of the hard work that's been put in we are called to be people for whom love will be like that for whom love will be the language which we learn with difficulty it's a language with lots of odd bits of vocabulary and lots of irregular verbs and so on and you have to practice it but my goodness once you've got it then you can speak it naturally and it just happens authenticity is the result the reward at the end of the hard work and when you see that in a family in a church in society it's a beautiful thing so we have to we constantly have to remind ourselves that the word love can go skittering off all around the room and do all sorts of silly things if we let it and that we have to corrallic back and say if we're going to use the word love in a Christian sense it needs to be anchored in John and John is of course anchored in Isaiah and the Psalms and those wonderful passages about the unshakable unbreakable love of God going all the way back to Genesis itself and so the church is to be an advanced guard assigned to the



world a model of new creation as I said the tabernacle and the temple were themselves small working models of new creation little places where heaven and earth will be held together dangerous places because if you stand at the intersection of heaven and earth that's a very tricky place to be dangerous things can happen as we know in the Old Testament there which is why we stand there only in and through Jesus himself only in and through the crucified and risen Jesus and only in the power of the spirit but when we stand there we are to be now the new temple the temple of the living God the place where heaven and earth meet and the sign of that must be the sign of love so many philosophies so many cultures want to pull heaven and earth apart either the materialist who say heaven is for the birds we're just going to do the earth thing or for the Platonist who say oh never mind about politics and society that's just dirty stuff we're cultivating our own spirituality and we're out of here one day both of those are a failure to grasp the doctrine of creation and to grasp the fact that when God made the world it's a world of love it's designed to work together because you see this is how we have to think about creation itself if you're going to understand love we have to understand creation theologians often ask the question why would a perfectly good God make a world that is other than himself because face it if God is totally good and if God is the most good thing you can imagine then if God makes something which isn't God it must be less than perfect so why would a good God make something that is less than perfect doesn't that make him less than perfect in fact and those are the sort of things by the way that seminars and systematic theology spend all afternoon talking about I hope for your sakes you don't spend too long thinking about them but recognize there is at least a question there what's the answer to it in the Old Testament it's clear God makes this beautiful creation out of pure generous love it's the overflowing of love God doesn't have to create but God is generous overflowing love and so he makes a world the great sentence in Genesis comes again again let there be let there be seas let there be birds let there be fields and trees let there be image bearing human beings let it be it's this generous outward looking love of God and within that we find that this is the mystery of the Trinity that God makes this beautiful world in order eventually to flood it with his own love in a fresh way think of Isaiah think of Habakkuk that the whole earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea Habakkuk the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters how do the waters cover the sea the waters are the sea the whole creation is made as a receptacle for the love of God in which creation will be more truly itself and yet simultaneously filled with the love of God this is again a temple image you see it in a passage like Psalm 72 which is one of the wonderful poems about what life should be like under the ideal king give the king your justice oh God your righteousness to the king's son then he will judge your people according to right he will defend the poor and look after the widow and care for the needy and the orphan pity and mercy will be the whole marks of his reign and it goes on and on emphasizing this is what justice looks like caring for the little people at the bottom of the pile and at the end of it all it says that the whole earth may be filled with God's glory our men and our men isn't that wonderful the reign of the Messiah enabling

the whole creation to be flooded with God's glory because in the last analysis justice and love turn out to be two ways of saying the same thing God caring so radically for his world that everything that is wrong and specially when the weak are crushed by the strong everything that is wrong will be put right and so the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord that's what God makes this world for in order that it be the receptacle of his love and yet be truly itself the world is not obliterated when it is filled with the love of God the world becomes truly itself as an Anglican used to celebrating communion the Eucharist and Lord supper call it what you will many many many times I have held beautiful silver or gold or sometimes jeweled chalice's you pour the wine in and you say the prayer and you realize that the chalice is a beautiful thing in itself but it is beautiful you discover because of what it is meant to contain and that its beauty is seen most fully when you pass it to somebody particularly if you know the sorrows of their heart as a pastor and you say the blood of Christ shed for you and the chalice doesn't cease to be a beautiful object but it becomes all the more beautiful because it is now the vehicle of the out poured love of God and in the same way the creation as a whole is beautiful its powerful its wonderful full of glory and fun and joy and all kinds of stuff everything from giraffes to ginger to you know go on do the illiterate of thing think of all the things you like beginning with G that God has made this world but when he fills it with his out poured love it becomes more truly itself that's why God made and that's you see then this is how it works we are saying this perhaps later tonight and we are talking in our little panel discussion about the meaning of the cross that when God makes the world out of generous overflowing love God knows that the world with its image bearing human creatures the heart of it is highly likely to go wrong because God gives humans the freedom they have to be free in order to love him in return but if that is to happen God knows that this will not produce a plan be it will not mean that he has to say oh goodness now what are we going to do that wasn't what was meant to happen well it wasn't what was meant to happen but if that happens it will call forth from God simply more of the same out poured generous love in the person of Jesus in the person of the word who becomes flesh to reveal the glory and Jesus himself I think resonates with the freedom and spontaneity of God's creation when he tells parables about the so are sowing and the so it goes around sowing seed all over the place and different things happen to these different seeds some bears a great deal of fruit but some seems not to Jesus is talking about God doing the kingdom in the same way that the Creator did the creation out of overflowing generous love there's all sorts of interesting lines to follow up there but when Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son or should it be the prodigal father he's talking about a father who in the Middle Eastern culture of the day would be a senior figure in the local community would take his dignity very seriously and yet when he sees his wretched scapegoat young son who's wasted the whole of his substance etc coming back in the distance he runs down the road throws his dignity into the air and runs down the road to greet him love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be parable after parable are about the great unthinkable unstoppable love of God that's the context within which we have to think what does it mean that Jesus did this love thing and what

does it mean for us to do the same because think about how this then works out as we pan back and think about Jesus in the gospels think about the different incidents in which we get these little vignettes and we realize oh my goodness that's how Jesus does it how Jesus loves at the end of Luke 13 the parallel passage in Matthew 23 as well Luke 13 Matthew 23 Jesus says Jerusalem Jerusalem that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to you how often did I want to gather you under my wings like a hen gathering the chicks and you would not there's a mystery there because we think of the love of God and we think of the sovereignty of God and people say if God is all powerful and all loving then surely love must triumph in the end and I hear Jesus saying and you would not because love cannot compel and Jesus loved his people the words of judgment on his lips against Karazin and Bethsader all the others that had resisted his message and ultimately Jerusalem itself these are words of sorrow not of a bitter anger there is there is a hard tone because he's seen the hard looks on faces of people who say we don't want your kingdom vision your kingdom vision means we have to give our bar kingdom vision that's what repentance means stop doing things your way and trust me for a different way instead they are looking for a rebellion against Rome they're looking for armed revolution they're looking for a military victory like happened 200 years before at the time of the Maccabees and would have happened a hundred years later at the brief time of the rebellion of Barcockfire in the 130s AD that's what they want they want Jesus to be starting a military and Jesus says no that's not how the kingdom comes as we saw yesterday the kingdom comes through the meek and the broken hearted and the hungry for justice people and the peacemakers and the poor in spirit and the pure in heart what sort of an agenda is that how are we ever going to make life better if that's all you're talking about and Jesus sees to the heart of it and he says I longed to gather you Jesus could see the storm coming that sooner or later the Roman elephant was going to get fed up with the Jewish mouse knowing at its tone would do what the Romans did best around the world and stamp on it Jesus could see that is coming it is when that comes it's because you would not Jesus great love when Tom loving when Tom grieving right the way through and particularly in Luke 19 when he rides into the city he weeps over it one of the defining moments in Luke's gospel is Jesus riding on the donkey in tears and the words seem to be dragged out of him like they do when somebody is sobbing if only you'd known if you had realized the things that make for but now they're hidden from your eyes because your enemies are going to come and destroy the whole thing because you did not know the day of your visitation this is what it looked like when Israel's God came back he came back in love he came back in tears he came back to die and you would not and you can see it again and again that the story of the rich young ruler in Mark 10 when Jesus says okay one thing you lack sell all and follow me he goes away Jesus it says in Mark 10 21 looked at him and loved him and he went away here is the puzzle of love that you love even if it's not going to be returned it wouldn't be love if it was just a deal I love you as long as you love me back in all this Jesus was being obedient again and again to the Psalms 72 vocation somebody asked me 18 months ago whenever it was not even that long ago when Theresa May became Prime Minister

anyway seems a long time ago somebody in a meeting elsewhere in London said if St Paul could write a letter to Theresa May what would he say I actually worried over that for two or three days and I tried various things it was kind of a fun question but I kept coming back to Psalm 72 that is the agenda for what rulers should be aiming at everything else should be secondary because that is how the earth will be full of the glory of the Lord and Jesus was obedient Jesus was obedient to the Psalm 72 vocation the Messianic template in which justice and love turn out to be two sides of the same coin so after Jesus had done what he'd done after Jesus had chosen that Passover had done the dramatic action in the temple had done the even more dramatic action in the upper room the last supper and the footwash you know when Jesus wanted to explain to his followers what his death was all about he didn't give them a theory he gave them a meal and a coded symbol because there are some things which you can only say in symbol and they go on resonating because because it's a meal every time we share that meal we celebrate it again and then we begin to understand in that pre articulate way and it comes out in theories but the theories are not the real thing that the thing is the real thing you know that this is so with many walks of life music you know if you go to a concert and read a program note you go to a classical concert and some bright spark at the London College music or wherever it is has written a whole paragraph about how the symphony works and how the theme goes from the major to the minor and goes into E flat and this and that and actually just listen to the music because the music will tell you its own story much better than any prose can I find the same with wine tasting notes not that I'm a wine buff at all but I just read this stuff what is that about just let me sip the thing and see but it's the same with the meaning of Jesus death the foot washing and the breaking of the bread and the pouring out of the wine these are what love is all about these are not mere examples of something whose reality is a theory so that you only get the reality when you get the theory the theory may help you keep a grip on the reality but the reality is doing it because the reality is doing it out there in the world and in the church and with one another so after that was all done after Jesus had gone to the cross and of course they all thought this was a disaster because it was at one level and it was only after the resurrection that they look back and began to realize Jesus won the victory on good Friday and we are now the people commissioned to live out of that but the whole point is if we're living out the victory of love we have to live out the victory of love so what do they do the little Jerusalem church they don't even stop to think this is going to be complicated when we're trying to apply it on a wider level but they share their possessions they sell up and they get together and they care for anyone who's in need and Luke in Acts says echoing a passage in Deuteronomy about covenant blessing there were no poor people among them because anyone who was in need was cared for by those who had something to contribute and then we can see this actually already working out because one of the first problems in the early church is the care of widows and that they're trying to organize how to live as a family have you ever imagined what that meant where nuclear families such as they were they're probably more extended than our nuclear families suddenly all find that they're getting together and that there

are dozens and hundreds of them and that they're supposed to live all as one family in which we all share and look after this is love this is agape when the New Testament uses the word agape oh it involves feelings it involves emotions but the first thing it involves is hard cash because there are people who need caring for and caring for people takes effort takes money takes will and takes practical organization so they call the deacons the seven and they commission them to make sure that the distribution of food to those who can't work for themselves to the aged the widows etc is organ and that's why in the pastoral epistles 1 Timothy 5 there's a whole section on who counts as widows because already it's a problem in the early church and we sometimes when we read 1 Timothy 5 we think oh come on Paul I'd much rather you were talking about justification by grace through faith because that's much more exciting but actually the practicalities of how you live as a family has every bit as much to do with justification by grace through faith as the theological theory if you're not prepared to think through what it means to live as one body as one family then you haven't begun to understand what the New Testament is about Jesus says at that point in Mark 3 when some people come to him and say your mother and brothers are outside asking for Jesus looks around who are my mother and my brothers here they are anyone who does the will of God is my brother and my sister and my mother that for a good Jewish boy is a radical saying one of the most radical sayings in the gospels the redefinition of family around Jesus and family in the ancient world meant people with whom you abound not just in ties of the occasional Christmas card but in ties of actual mutual living together sharing of common life as best you could and so we can see this going on see it going on in Paul's communities in Galatians 2 we find the incident where Paul and Barnabas with Titus have come from Antioch to Jerusalem because there's been a prophecy that there's going to be a famine now already in the early church they're quite separated geographically I can get from Edinburgh to London in four or five hours on the train or in the plane with all the waiting around that's not a big deal but to get that same distance and a little bit more from Antioch to Jerusalem you really have to want to do that in the ancient world and so when they hear in Antioch that there's a famine they they think immediately our brothers and sisters in Jerusalem are going to be a need because actually they did this crazy risky wonderful Jesus shaped experiment of sharing their possessions and they're going to be in trouble and we can help them and we must help them and so one of the first practical things that we find out about the early church is this translocal trans ethnic trans geographical sense of community this is what they meant by agape and so in Galatians 2 when that visit is over Peter and James and John give Barnabas and Paul the right hand of fellowship when they've been discussing the different evangelistic ministries they're going to have and the one thing they say is that we should go on remembering the poor and Paul says that was the very thing I was eager to do this is in the DNA of the church from the beginning this is agape this is what it means remember the poor there's a whole book on that the care of the poor in the New Testament edited by my good friend Bruce Longenecker in America some very interesting essays and studies and for people like me growing up in fairly comfortable middle class church contexts we didn't really

talk too much about that there was a poor box at the back of the church and people put money in it and there were people giving to charities but it was kind of a distance it wasn't something we reflected on too much I think it's time we took that seriously again and at the end of Galatians we find something very striking Galatians 6:10 Paul says while we have opportunity let us do good to all people especially those of the household of faith to see what he's saying of course you have an obligation to your Christian brothers and sisters you have the obligation of agape love within the family but the church must be known as the people who are generous just like God is generous generous to those outside love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be that is part of the church's DNA from the beginning and it's fascinating then in first Thessalonians 4 when Paul talks about love he says and you have to remember he was only in Thessalonica for five minutes before he was driven out of town and Paul is going through agonies because he's had to chase down the side of Greece and ends up in Athens and he's wondering how they're getting on because he knows perfectly well there'll be persecution and they'll be in trouble and will they have held on and will they still be living out the gospel in the way that he had modeled and shown them in the very short period he was with them and so he says I know that you already love one another and I want you to do so more and more what does he mean I know that you already have warm fuzzy feelings about one another so I want you to have even warmer and even fuzzier feelings but no of course not yes that'll come because when you are sharing your life with others and they with you then you will face up to difficulties yes but there will be an amazing sense of mutual belonging with the deep rich emotions that go with that but what he means is I know that you are already starting to do this business of sharing in practical terms with your strange new brothers and sisters we're talking about slaves sharing with masters and vice versa we're talking about men and women on equal footing we're talking particularly about Jews and Gentiles living together as brothers and sisters I know that you're already sharing your life with one another I want you to do it more and more I think today we could learn from this we could learn from our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world who are doing this I don't know much about African Christianity but I do know that many parts of Africa the church with with far fewer resources than we've got here in the UK they're nevertheless doing this stuff it's not an even picture of course these things never are but what Paul is saying is this way of life is apps it's not an optional extra for those who happen to feel like running a charity sometime this is part of ordinary Christian existence the word for it is agape love which is why already in second thessalonians just as there were problems about widows in act six so already in second thessalonians there are problems about people who are saying well if the church is now a friendly society where they hand out free meals and free cash and all the rest of it then I'll give up working I'll just sponge off them that's grand I'll say the prayers if I just get a free meal and Paul says no sorry that's not how it goes if somebody won't work let them not eat yes if people can't work then you must care for them but everyone has to pitch in and that's why Paul himself sets the example that though as an apostle he says in Corinthians he has the right not to have to work for his

living he is insistent that that's what he's doing in order to show that this is how the church should be that we have to work to earn what we can to share with those in need and for some reason which I don't fully understand there's a whole slew of references to this in the little letter of the little letter to Titus in Titus it comes back again and again this notion of good works and here there's a problem because those of us who are taught as good Protestants or evangelicals we hear the phrase good works and we think oh no no Martin Luther tortoise we're justified not by good works but by grace through faith well of course that's true but when we meet this phrase good works in Titus and then we'll come to it in a minute in Ephesians 2 that's not what he's talking about he's not talking about doing good moral deeds as opposed to doing bad moral deeds Titus 2 14 our great god and savior Jesus Christ gave himself for us that he might redeem us for all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds does that mean just keeping the moral law no it doesn't it means looking out in the community seeing what needs to be done and prayerfully accepting the vocation that I will go and put my shoulder to this bit of the wheel I have a lovely example in mind of an elderly couple I knew several years ago who when the man retired they decided what were they going to do in their late 60s and so on they started doing meals on wheels where they take hot meals to old people in old people's homes and you know they went on doing that that particular couple until they were themselves older than the oldest people they were taking the meals to which is just a lovely sign and not sort of theologically literate it was just a sort of sense that yeah there's something we can do we can help we know how to do that this is what it means doing good deeds and this is to be Paul says to Titus in the churches DNA all the way through chapter three verse one remind them to be ready for every good work if there's something needs doing in the community then the church should be in the forefront of doing it whatever that may be I gave some examples of this last night again in verse eight of chapter three that those who believe in God should be careful to devote themselves to good works I see again I feel protestant hackles rising people saying oh good works you're going to justify yourself no absolutely not you as von Robert said so clearly this morning when God gave the law to Israel through Moses it wasn't you keep this law and then you'll be my people it was I have redeemed you I have brought you out of Egypt that's done you are the covenant people now here is the way of life you're not earning anything you're expressing your gratitude that's all that there is to it and then at the end there in three fourteen Titus three fourteen let people learn to devote themselves to good works in order to meet urgent needs so that they may not be unproductive to so as you look around your community where are the urgent needs what needs is there a youth employment scheme that needs to be run does somebody need to set up a drug rehab scheme is there a problem about single mothers who need to go out to work and there's nowhere for their kids to be during the day could you help start a playgroup whatever it might be and many churches that I know have done things like that which have become a beacon of hope in local communities a sign of the generous overflowing agape of the creator God in Jesus and then Ephesians 2:10 one of my favorite verses on all of this we

are what he has made us created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life that's the NRSV I'm quoting there but that phrase we are what he has made us doesn't quite catch the feeling of the Greek.

Ouchu-gah Esmen-poy-amer we are his poem we are God's artwork poem think about that some of us may be sonnet some of us may be haiku some of us may be limerick some of us may be long winded epics goodness knows what but God wants the church to do in the world what a poem does in a classroom or in your heart and mind it opens up the possibility that there might be a new way of seeing things a new way of going about things that's what the church is supposed to be created in the Messiah for the good works which say hey guys there is a different way to be human we learn it by reading and seeing the story of Jesus by sharing the bread and the wine by foot washing literally and metaphorically we learn it by standing again again at the foot of the cross in gratitude and we then express it in outward flowing agape Romans 12 says the same thing rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep of course you do that in the church but you should do it in the wider world as well one of the most important things that happened in the Grenfell Tower disaster a few weeks ago was that the church in the persons of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Kensington were absolutely right there helping coordinate residents helping coordinate groups of people who could go and see the prime minister and the local council and so on and the local authorities seemed to be trembling and helpless but the church actually was able to do things which seems to have prevented things getting even more out of hand than they were I know that's an ongoing situation and so on but the church can often do things which nobody else can do and this is called agape we could talk about Paul's letter to Philemon that for another time perhaps in other words what we're talking about is a church that models the creators overflowing generosity a church that takes Jesus seriously when he says that you love one another as I have loved you and not just one another within this room not just one another within your family within your church but that you be people like that for the world at large in so far as you have opportunity of course there are many Christians who have very little opportunity to do that I'm in regular touch with a guy who translates my books into Farsi and he is a pastor in Tehran in Iran and he has to do most of his work in secret he never sees his own productions because they're not allowed to be published in Iran so he sends them electronically out of the country there's not much opportunity for him and his beleaguered family and his little church to do very much in terms of the kind of thing I'm talking about creatively out there in society he's doing it in other ways so you have to take the general principle and apply it wherever it needs to fit now I've said enough you've been very patient it's a long hot afternoon thank you very much thank you for listening today to Tom's talk on sacrificial love recorded a few years ago at London Bible week for premiere and I hope you've enjoyed all the talks that Tom gave that we've rebroadcast on the podcast over the last few weeks well we're back to our usual Q&A format of the show next week but for now god bless and see you next time you you [ Silence ]



