

CHAPTER 1

THE REVELATION THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

LESSON FROM A DRUG DEALER

My son and I spent hours on our driveway court, so we loved to challenge kids in the neighborhood to a basketball game. When Diamond and his friends rolled slowly through the neighborhood in his sporty Chrysler 180, bass thumping, I invited them to shoot some hoops.

Diamond looked amused. "I'll play you, old man." He swaggered toward me carrying a brown bag of liquor. One of his friends joined us while the other leaned against the low rider.

"Loser buys the winner a soda and a candy bar," I dared him.

Diamond grinned, a gold tooth showing. He counted on a win, clueless to the skills of my nine-year-old or my days playing basketball in college.

Every shot brought smack talk from Diamond's friend. "You're letting a little boy and an old man beat you."

Diamond cursed, clearly impressed. Our win brought a smile of respect across his face.

"Tomorrow, old man. Tomorrow." He promised to be back.

Diamond showed up at our house every day for the next six weeks. As we played basketball, I couldn't help but be impressed with the strong bonds he had formed in the community. His influence extended throughout the neighborhood because of his relational savvy. Even while we played basketball, little kids would come up and high five Diamond. Intentions far from moral, he built relationships with kids, buying them bikes or giving them money so they would do his drug runs or protect his territory.

I learned a valuable lesson from my drug-dealing neighbor. Like Diamond, I needed to be as relational and intentional with my neighbors if I wanted to influence them for God's kingdom.

In a moment of honesty, I had to ask myself: Was I willing to invest my time and my heart to develop the depth of relationships like Diamond had grown over the years? How far would I go to reach my neighbors for a much greater cause?

DISILLUSIONED

As a new believer in my early twenties, I shared my faith easily and at every opportunity. I fell in love with Jesus, and I wanted to tell everyone about my newfound hope. I didn't know a lot about the Bible, but what little I knew, I shared.

The more I hung out with Christians, the greater my distance grew with the unchurched. My church disciplined me on how to have a *personal relationship* with Jesus through prayer, Bible studies, sermons and other classroom-oriented training. While helpful, I wasn't disciplined in my *purposeful relationship* with Jesus, where I effectively demonstrated and communicated God's love to a lost and broken world.

As church leaders, it's easy to become consumed with *tending* to and caring for church members. Without providing the critical leadership structure and systems to help people grow in their *purposeful relationship* with Jesus, reaching lost people becomes less and less a reality.

Sadly, the more time I spent at church, the less I shared my faith. Eventually, I became disillusioned with unbelievers and their ungodly ways and became more and more critical and judgmental. This downward spiral in my heart resulted from a continual emphasis on knowing biblical truth in order to defend morality and debate with unbelievers. Rather than allow God's truth to change me, I was determined to change others. While my head grew in biblical knowledge, my heart shrunk in empathy and compassion for others. I lacked love and grace.

This hardness of my heart, and a distant life in the suburbs, isolated me from the harsh reality of many in my city. When I read newspaper articles about murder and crime in the inner city, I critically judged *those people* for their irresponsibility and blamed *them* for what they should or should not be doing. In my negative view, I thought *they* deserved the mess of problems they experienced.

Because of my cynicism, the distance between me and *them* left me unmoved and unaffected. Quite sadly, I felt no compassion, empathy or concern. I was clueless and unconcerned to the conditions impacting a large population of children, youth and families.

In my quest for truth and holiness, I forgot love and grace. My heart became cold toward those far from Christ. My constant emphasis on my *personal relationship* with Jesus moved me inward rather than outward toward loving others.

I somehow had become a Pharisee—religious.

Yikes.

THE REVELATION: LOVE-HOPE-FAITH

The inner city wrecked me.

I left my job as an engineer and my comfortable life in the suburbs for a life I never fathomed for me and my young family.

I thought God would send me overseas as a missionary, but he broke my heart and stirred me to compassion for my new neighbors instead. I hurt for them and wanted to share my hope. In an attempt to connect with my neighbors, I hosted block parties. However, as I tried to share my faith, I came off as harsh and confrontational. My heart was sincere, but my neighbors looked at me like I'd come from a different planet. Diamond made it look so easy, compared with my awkward, insensitive, clueless approach to reaching my unchurched neighbors.

Desperate, I asked God for revelation. He led me to 1 Corinthians 13:13. "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

"Love?" I exclaimed. "Why love?"

I must've read the passage about faith, hope and love a thousand times, but this particular morning, a question popped off the page. Why did God consider love the greatest of these? Surely faith was the answer. After all, didn't the book of Hebrews say it was impossible to please God *without faith*? And then Ephesians 2 echoes, "we are saved by grace *through faith*." Or what about the passage in Mark 8:36 which read, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and *loses his soul*?" (NKJV) Surely faith—not

love—had to be the most important. I prayed and wrestled with this passage for two weeks to understand what God meant.

“Lord, I don’t get this,” I cried out, and He finally answered.

*Ron, when you received me by **faith**, didn’t you get a **hope** like never before that your life could be different?*

I nodded in answer to the question which filled my spirit.

*Doesn’t that **hope** translate into actions of **love**, making love the ultimate expression of your faith?*

“Wow. Thank you, Lord,” I thought. “I like that.”

It’s as if those three words merged into one word where faith, hope and love came together. No longer was my faith separate and distinct from hope and love. My faith had elements of hope and love. The faith I carried could actually be *hopeful* and *expressed in love* toward others.

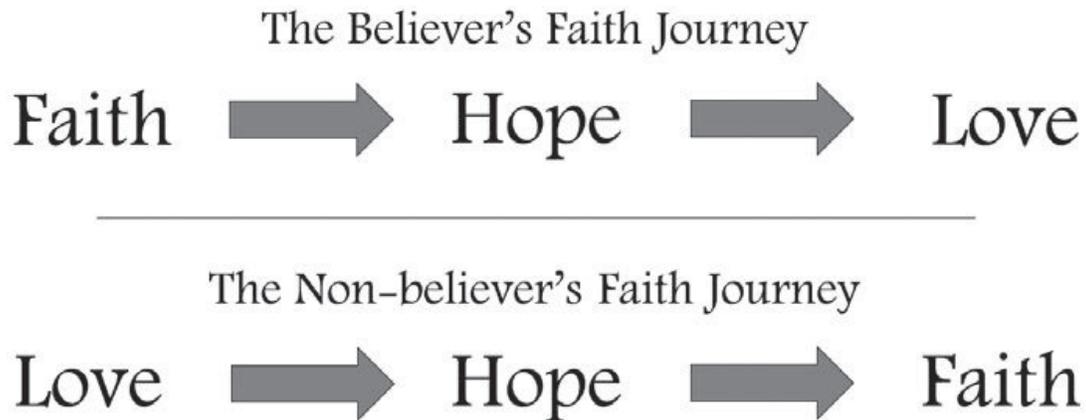
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The Lord spoke again. *Think back to the years before you became a Christ-follower. Didn’t “love” draw you to me? Didn’t the loving actions and encouraging words from other Christians give you a sense of “hope” that life could be different? As a result, didn’t that hope lead you to receive me by “faith?”*

The revelation knocked the spiritual wind out of me. As a Christ-follower, my faith gave me hope like I’d never known before which resulted in actions of love toward others. Before I chose to follow Jesus, however, seeing the loving actions of Christians gave me a vision of hope which resulted in steps of faith toward a life with Christ.

I’d never considered the complementary principles of *faith—hope—love* and *love—hope—faith*. For the Christ-follower, the movement progressed from faith, to hope, to love. Whereas, for the non-Christ-follower, the movement flowed in the reverse, from love, to hope, to faith. Just as love is the ultimate expression of our faith, faith is the ultimate acceptance of His love.

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As I reflected on this newfound revelation, God continued to give me insight.

*I know you love me, Ron, but you've been trying to reach unbelievers for me based on **faith**. God paused as the words took meaning.*

*Stop reaching them based on **faith** and focus on **love**. Love people, Ron. Engage them with love. You don't have to save people. I will draw all men to myself. When they ask questions, simply be prepared to give an answer for the hope that lies within you. I will draw them to myself and save them.*

As I considered my own faith journey, I realized my faith in Christ began with love. I didn't automatically come to Christ because someone shared the gospel with me. My brother and Christian friends in college first loved and valued me. I saw the excitement and hope with which they lived their lives. This hope led me to begin asking questions of faith. Ultimately, I accepted Jesus as my savior when they answered my questions by sharing the gospel.

As a Christian, this equation reversed. My newfound faith in Jesus gave me a hope that my life had meaning, and my future looked bright. This hope filled me with joy and excitement and resulted in expressions of love toward others.

This new revelation forever changed my understanding of the power of the local church and its capacity to reach lost people. I not only experienced a new personal freedom to love people without expectations and condemnation, this insight changed the way I led and positioned our church to reach people far from Christ.

Galatians 5:6b says, “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” (NIV) We simply need to love people. God will draw, save and change them—not us. Both as individuals and together as the church, our place is not to judge or change unchurched people. Jesus does all of that. Our job is to simply love people and receive them with open arms, always ready to give an answer for the hope that lies within us. (1 Peter 3:15)

We simply need to love people.
God will draw, save and change them—not us.

THE POWER OF LOVE

The longer I lived as a Christian, the fewer relationships I had with nonbelievers. My best friends were other Christians. Not only did we have small groups and Bible studies in common, we spent all our free time together.

Moving into the inner city showed me how few unbelievers I really knew—much less befriended.

Meeting Diamond and others in my new community shifted my paradigm. Combined with this new love-hope-faith revelation, I had a new freedom to love people right where they were—without condemnation.

Love welled inside of me for lost people. I no longer had to worry about the clash of my lifestyle with the unbeliever. I didn't have to share the gospel in a canned process. Love brought new freedom.

For example, after leading a team of volunteers in cleaning up an abandoned property, my staff and I returned the next morning to a complete mess. Shattered glass from the new windows we'd installed littered the floor while concrete mix dusted the entire site. Our tools were gone.

When we found out a local gang was responsible, my staff wanted to call the cops, but I challenged them to do something different. Rather than press charges, I suggested we get to know the young men and even take them out to eat. In hearing this, one of my employees exploded. Having been through this before, he wanted justice, not another mess to clean up. After a lively discussion with the entire staff, we closed our time in prayer, asking God to give us his heart for the situation.

Later that day, God used the very same staff member to invite the young men out for burgers. The connection and display of unconditional love was powerful. A week later, our team again invited them to join us for pizza, and we got to know the young men better.

I can still see the dumbfounded look of shock on their faces at the invitation. Either we were crazy, or we had something worth pursuing.

The young men expected retaliation; instead we showed love—the only power that can transform a life. Instead of stealing from us, the gang members began to respect our desire to clean up the neighborhood. From that point forward, we never had another incident. They went from taking and destroying our property to protecting it.

Intentionally loving people, no matter the situation or circumstance, is powerful. When our lifestyle reflects the life and love of Jesus, we are moved to make a difference when we see the chaos, confusion and craziness around us. We fulfill our calling to bring God's heavenly kingdom on earth by loving others no matter the circumstances.

That's the power of love.