

The Importance of Love

30 Bible Studies On Jesus' Commandment to “Love One Another”



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Number: 01

Verses: John 13:34,35

Topic: A New Covenant & a New Commandment

John 13:34-35 *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, that you also love one another. (35) By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."*

2 John 1:5-6 *And now I ask you, lady, not as writing a new commandment to you, but one which we have had from the beginning: that we love one another. (6) This is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, that as you have heard from the beginning, that you should walk in it.*

In John chapter 13 Jesus initiates the New Covenant at the Last Supper, then, after Judas leaves the room he announces the New Commandment – the only commandment of the New Covenant "...that you love one another as I have loved you!".

The Jewish Law, which was the Old Covenant, was national and neighborly and priestly and had around 613 commandments which could be summed up in two commandments – loving God and loving one's neighbor. In fact, Paul says loving one's neighbor fulfilled the entire Jewish law!

Matthew 22:37-40 *Jesus said to him, " 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' (38) This is the first and great commandment. (39) And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' (40) On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."*

Romans 13:9-10 *For, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not kill," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, in this word it is summed up, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (10) Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.*

Galatians 5:14 *For all the law is fulfilled in one word, in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

Now for a surprising twist... the Jewish Law was fulfilled by neighborly love, helpfulness and harmlessness (Good Samaritan style). That is the Old Covenant. The Good Samaritan could help his neighbor then get on with his life and yet still fulfill the Law.

The New Covenant tells us to love one another as Jesus loved us – that is in sacrificial, binding and eternal community. We are knit together in love into one new humanity in Christ, as part of an everlasting bond.

This takes love to a much higher level, a level that can only be fulfilled through the dynamic of the Holy Spirit. Now it's not a sharp break but rather an exaltation and expansion of the old commandment (love thy neighbor as thyself) to a new level (love one another as I have loved you).

1 John 2:7-10 *Brothers, I am not writing a new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which you heard from the beginning. (8) Again, a new commandment I am writing to you, which thing is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away, and the true light already shines. (9) He who says that he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. (10) He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him.*

We are to love one another, to love the brethren, to love the new community of God, with such intensity that: "the world will know that you are my disciples". Jesus calls "love one another" "My commandment", His own particular commandment, separate from the law of Moses or human commandments and the true sign of His discipleship.

In fact, the apostle Peter tells us that our love is to be "fervent":

1 Peter 4:8 *And above all things have fervent love for one another, because "love will cover a multitude of sins."*

Fervent love is much more than a polite smile on Sunday morning! This is a huge challenge to me. God is very, very serious about us loving one another. Its not optional and it is supposed to be intense! "Love one another as I have loved you" is the only "New Commandment" of the New Covenant. It is the very hallmark of being a real Christian!

This series will explore in-depth what it means to love one another in a truly Christian manner. I am also writing this partly as a challenge to myself. I need to take agape love seriously and place it at the very center of my busy life in ministry. Life is not about goals and destiny (which can be selfish) or about growing institutions (which can become oppressive or a treadmill) rather it's about loving "one another".

Indeed, if we don't love our brother we have not even begun to love God!

1 John 4:20-21 *If anyone claims, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how is it possible for him to love God whom he has not seen? (21) And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God should love his brother also.*

Number: 02 Verses: 1 John 4:7-8
Topic: Love Proves That We Know God

1 John 4:7-8 *Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; and everyone that loves has been born of God and knows God. (8) He that does not love does not know God, because God is love.*

There are 21 verses about "loving one another" in the New Testament and not a single verse about "loving one another" in the Old Testament. "Love one another" is the new commandment of the New Covenant and absolutely proves that we know and love God.

(BTW: The 21 "love one another" verses are: John 13:34, John 13:35, John 15:12, John 15:17, Romans 12:10, Romans 13:8, Galatians 5:13, Ephesians 4:2, 1 Thessalonians 3:12, 1 Thessalonians 4:9, 2 Thessalonians 1:3, Hebrews 10:24, 1 Peter 1:22, 1 Peter 4:8, 1 Peter 5:14, 1 John 3:11, 1 John 3:23, 1 John 4:7, 1 John 4:11, 1 John 4:12, 2 John 1:5 - see Appendix A)

Now let's look at the extreme claims made about agape love in 1 John 4:7,8:

- a) We are to *love one another* because love is of God
- b) Everyone that loves has been born of God
- c) Everyone that loves knows God
- d) He that does not love does not know God
- e) God is love

God is agape love, which is the very core of His being, and the motivation for His covenants, His mercy and faithfulness and His reason for sending Christ into the world to save you and I. This love is part of the Trinity. The Father is love, the Son is love and the Holy Spirit is love. [*Agape love is the new type of high, holy and selflessly obedient love that Jesus taught, lived and demonstrated. Agape is a Greek word for this love.*]

If we have true, selfless, caring agape love in our hearts then we are truly a new creation because we have God's nature implanted in us, His living seed, and we are putting on Christ (who is love) and are filled with the Holy Spirit whose first fruit is love.

Loving one another proves that we know God, love God and are Christ's disciples. Deep strenuous agape love is the sign of the true and holy saint of God. Love shows that we do not belong to this world because agape love is not found in the world (which is instead full of the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh and the pride of life 1 John 2:15-17).

If you have love, you have the Holy Spirit. If you don't have love you don't really have the Holy Spirit because love is the first of His fruit (Galatians 5:22,23) and without love you are nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-4).

In fact, the unloving, selfish and cold person is not a Christian, no matter how much he or she believes about God. If God is love, then if you don't have love, you surely don't have God. Thinking you have God, when you clearly don't have any love for others, is just self-delusion.

Religious zeal and doctrinal purity cannot replace the need for God's love in your heart! The Pharisees and Scribes and Sadducees had a deep belief in God, Judaism and the Bible but they were not saved and in fact "devoured widows' houses". They managed to completely memorize and study the Hebrew Old Testament and were zealous for its laws, and for their nation, without ever genuinely knowing God. Selfishness equals godlessness!

The Samaritan woman (John 4), on the other hand, found salvation because she willingly received God's love and straight away began to share that love with her village.

Corporate Christianity that works almost entirely by the rules of the business world, is flat-out apostasy. Frequently it is cold, heartless and bureaucratic. Agape love is personal and real and is incapable of being bureaucratic. The organization does not come before the person because organizations come and go but people are eternal souls beloved of God. The selfish, power-hungry "Christian leader" is going straight to Hell because he or she does not know God's love!

Christian leaders who accumulate vast amounts of power, wealth and the good things of this world unto themselves and who refuse to share them with their brothers and sisters in Christ who are in obvious need, do not know God's love:

(1 John 3:16,17) *By this we have come to know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives in behalf of our brothers. But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother having need, and shuts off his compassion towards him, how does the love of God abide in him?*

You can have a Ph.D. in Theology and run a mega-church or missions agency and yet be totally and utterly lost if you think only of yourself and of your tasks and of your own success and have not love!

And it's not just church leaders that I am talking about! If any so-called Christian goes to church and envies and hates everyone around him or her, then they do not have love. If they split churches, then they do not have love. If they just come and go and never make an effort to befriend anyone – then they do not have love.

The sign that you know and love God is if you have a new nature that belongs to the new "born-again" creation of God and that new nature is a truly loving nature. Mercy and kindness are more important than sabbath-keeping, tithing and theology (see Matthew 23). Christianity is not an institution, philosophy, a theology or a Sunday-morning ceremony, it is a new creation lifestyle of love!

Every time you have been disappointed with the Church it is generally because of a lack of love, either on their part, or on your part.

A church full of sad, lonely people is a contradiction in terms! There is no real church there if that is the case! It's a shell, a church in name only, because God's community is an agape love community and if it's not an agape love community then it's not God's community, because God is love!

Thus the Scriptures, and the very words of Jesus, call us to complete and total repentance from selfishness, materialism, greed and extreme individualism. We are called to immerse ourselves in a loving community whether we like it or not, even a very small community such as our family and a few friends. You may be unable to find a truly loving church in your city. They may all be cold, dead or heretical. But you can bloom where you are planted by loving those around you, your family and your "brethren". You cannot let resentment and disappointment and failure hold you back.

Love is non-negotiable. If you reject love you reject the God who is love and are damned to Hell (which is why the selfish Pharisees were called sons of the Devil and sons of Hell).

If you are truly born of God and if you truly love God then you must love other people, even very flawed and difficult people. If God loves you, then you must love them.

Jesus' commandment to love one another is much more than just loving your neighbor. It is "love thy neighbor", plus the power of the Holy Ghost, plus loving your brothers and sisters in Christ with great intensity.

Romans 8:29 tells us that God's plan for our lives is simply for us to be transformed into the image of His beloved Son – Who is pure love and pure holiness. Your manifest destiny is in Christ and is not in this world. You must love your destiny in Christ and forget about success in this world, because lusting after success in this world will make you competitive, ruthless, selfish and covetous and covetousness is idolatry.

I am calling you today to decide on love. To make love your choice and love your lifestyle and to make love your destiny because love is from God. The things of this world are passing away but the things that are from God abide forever, including faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love. Open your heart to God's love!

Number: 03

Verses: 1 John 3:14-24

Topic: Loving One Another Demonstrates That We Have Eternal Life

1 John 3:14-24 *We know that we have passed over from death to life, because we love the brothers. He who does not love his brother abides in death. (15) Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. (16) By this we have come to know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives in behalf of our brothers. (17) But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother having need, and shuts off his compassion towards him, how does the love of God abide in him? (18) My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. (19) And in this we know that we are from the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. (20) Because if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and He knows all things. (21) Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. (22) And whatever we should ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and we do the things pleasing before Him. (23) And this is His commandment: that we should believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and should love one another, just as He gave commandment. (24) And the one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, from the Spirit whom He gave us.*

The bible passage above is one of the most radical passages in the entire New Testament, because it states that:

1. We know we have passed from death to life if we love the brethren
2. On the other hand, if we don't love the brethren we abide in death.
3. If we hate our brethren, we are a murderer and are without eternal life
4. We know love because Jesus laid down His life for us.
5. We should lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters in Christ.
6. This includes laying down the good things of this life that others may have need of.
7. If we refuse to help the needy (with our goods) and have no compassion, we do not have God's love.
8. Love is to be active and practical, not just verbal.
9. If we demonstrate this practical agape love, we will assure our hearts before God.
10. We will also have our prayers answered because we are doing what is pleasing to God.
11. God's commandment is that we should believe in the name of Jesus and should love one another.
12. If we do these two things, which are one thing, we abide in God and He in us and have eternal life.

Many Western Christians are terrified of beholding human needs and/or being asked for money. We do not see generosity as a means of sanctification or of greater heavenly reward or of having the love of God in our hearts. We may even feel that the poor are trying to steal our hard-earned money "to spend on alcohol and drugs". However, we are talking about the saints here! About people who will not spend the money on drugs, but on food for their families, or on rent, or on essential bills.

We are talking about people with real needs, not just wants, or addictions. These people are among us, especially in today's economy.

Now I am not asking you to give to every panhandler, or to every advertisement on Christian TV, or to give to every cause that sends a mail-out or email to you! However, I do believe that God wants you to have genuine human connection and compassionate interaction with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Let's just take on common example where such compassion is both justified and worthy – supporting those who go out for the sake of the gospel:

3 John 1:5-8 *Dear friend, you are faithful in whatever you do for the brothers, especially when they are strangers (itinerant gospel workers). (6) They have testified before the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. (7) After all, they went on their trip for the sake of Christ's name, accepting no support from the Gentiles. (8) Therefore, we ought to support such people so that we can become their helpers in spreading the truth.*

However, the reaction of some power-hungry and selfish Christians (such as Diotrephes in the NT) is to deny such workers even their most basic needs:

3 John 1:9-11 *I wrote a letter to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be in charge, will not accept us. (10) For this reason, when I come I will call attention to what he is doing in spreading false charges against us. And not content with that, he refuses to accept the brothers. He even tries to stop those who want to accept them and throws them out of the church. (11) Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The person who does what is good is from God. The person who does what is evil has never seen God.*

Diotrephes threw the missionaries out of church and was hostile to those who wanted to be kind to them! This still goes on today and in my 30+ years of missionary work I have seen it many times both to myself and toward many other missionaries. The hardness of heart toward gospel workers is only increasing as "the love of many grows cold" and mission support is down 70-80% from even five years ago.

Now I am not saying this to get you to support me (or any other missionary) but rather to make you aware of the terrible thing that is happening in the hearts of many Christians. Practical love of the brothers is vanishing and is being replaced by mere politeness and mawkish sentimentality. There is even great cruelty and rudeness to those in need, reminiscent of the rich man / man-in-rags situation in James chapter 2 and Luke chapter 16!

We cannot delegate our clear Christian duty to love one another to the Government and /or to major social institutions. We cannot take the New Commandment and toss it out the window just because it is financially inconvenient.

Loving one another means meeting their practical, real human needs (as much as we can within our resources) and standing with them through the trials of life instead of running away.

Are you prepared to bless others and to help those in need in your fellowship / circle of Christian friends? Or do you deliberately go to a church that is at your income level so you won't meet any very needy people who might ask you for money?

If we really have true faith in Jesus Christ we will obey His two commandments to believe in Him and love one another. Our faith, and our eternal life will be revealed by our demonstration of practical humanity.

Ephesians 2:8-10 (below) tells us that there are two kinds of 'works' in the New Testament, religious works and good works. *Religious works*, known as 'works of the Law' are done to earn righteousness, these are man-centered, religious and unnecessary and we are not obliged to do them at all. On the other hand, *good works* are our works done out of love for others, they are absolutely necessary, are a sign of true living faith, and are what we are made to do as new creations in Christ:

Ephesians 2:8-10 *For by such grace you have been saved through faith. This does not come from you; it is the gift of God (9) and not the result of (religious) works, lest anyone boast. (10) For we are his masterpiece, created in Christ Jesus for good works that God prepared long ago to be our way of life.*

Indeed, faith without good works, done out of love, is not true faith at all:

Galatians 5:6 *For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters. What matters is faith that is active through love.*

James 2:14-26 *What good does it do, my brothers, if someone claims to have faith but does not have any works? This kind of faith cannot save him, can it? (15) Suppose a brother or sister does not have any clothes or daily food (16) and one of you tells them, "Go in peace! Stay warm and eat heartily." If you do not provide for their bodily needs, what good does it do? (17) In the same way, faith by itself, if it does not have any works, is dead. (18) But someone may say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without any works, and I will show you my faith by my works. (19) You believe that there is one God. That's fine! Even the demons believe that and tremble with fear. (20) Do you want proof, you foolish person, that faith without works is worthless? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.*

In fact, faith and love are mentioned together, as partners in the same verse, at least 21 times in the New Testament. Some examples:

2 Timothy 1:13 *Hold on to the pattern of healthy teachings that you have heard from me, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*

2 Thessalonians 1:3 *At all times we are obligated to thank God for you, brothers. It is right to do this because your faith is growing all the time and the love of every one of you for each other is increasing.*

There is simply no such thing as true Christian faith without practical Christian love. This especially applies to how we help out members of our own family who may be in financial distress:

1 Timothy 5:8 *If anyone does not take care of his own relatives, especially his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*

In other words, Christian faith and practical agape love go together so completely that if you do not show practical love for your family you have denied Christ and are worse than an unbeliever!

You cannot be saved and selfish. You can be religious and selfish but you cannot be genuinely saved and selfish. Selfishness is Christ-denial and is a deep and grievous sin against the very Holy Spirit of Love who is supposed to dominate our whole lives and fill us each day! Every single Christian must repent of selfishness.

A close relative of selfishness is self-indulgence which is the urge to have "fulfillment" of self at almost any cost. Self-indulgence is what sends your credit card over the limit. It also can bankrupt you spiritually. When self-indulgence leads to sexual self-indulgence it can destroy lives, families and marriages. Agape love is never self-indulgent, rather it considers the needs of others as well as our own wants and interests.

Philippians 2:4 *Do not be concerned about your own interests, but also be concerned about the interests of others.*

What I have written today may sound harsh, strident or even (to some) heretical. In fact I myself have never heard it taught (quite like this) by anyone. Practical Christian love is often derided as "salvation by works". This is nothing of the kind. No one is saved by works. We are saved by grace through faith as a gift of God. I take the Protestant position on that all the way. My own testimony is that of a very selfish and hard person who was stopped in his tracks one afternoon when God appeared to me as a light and saved me. I was a very wicked person before I was saved but God still saved me.

These days Minda and I support missionaries, have an extensive ministry of generosity and hospitality, and even grow vegetables to give away to others. This is not because we are especially good or because we are trying to earn our salvation but because God's love is in our hearts and we know these things are the right things, things that should and must be done for others.

If God has changed your heart then that will reflect in generous, kind, merciful acts of practical agape love especially towards your family and your brothers and sisters in Christ. These good works are a true sign that you have eternal life, that you know God, and that you truly love God and that you believe in His Son Jesus Christ.

Number: 04

Verses: 1 John 4:9-12

Topic: If We Love One Another God Dwells In Us And Perfects Us

1 John 4:9-12 *In this the love of God was revealed in us, because God sent His only begotten Son into the world that we might live through Him. (10) In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation concerning our sins. (11) Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. (12) No one has seen God at any time. **If we love one another, God dwells in us, and His love is perfected in us.***

Do you desire to be a God-indwelt, Spirit-filled glorious Christian in whom God's love is made perfect? Then simply "love one another"!

Love is the only true spiritual pathway to perfection. There is no alternative. There is no "selfish" way to get spiritual. You can study the Bible and theology for 100 years and have all knowledge but without love you are nothing. You can have faith until you move mountains, but without love you are nothing. You can speak with the tongues of men and angels and be edified in prophecy and know all about heavenly things, yet without love you are nothing! (1 Corinthians 13:1-4).

God will come and dwell in you with love and power once you start loving your friends, family and brothers and sisters in Christ with practical agape love and lay yourself down for them just as Christ became a propitiation for us on the Cross.

Once you make the tough decision to break out of your isolation, unforgiveness, little resentments, busy-ness, and self-protection, and genuinely take time out to love people, it is then you will be blessed! It is then you will grow and it is then you will be transformed because God is love and when you love God dwells in you and is with you!

Bible college is good if it helps you love people better. It is not much good if it does not have that effect. God dwells with those who love, not with those who just have ideas and philosophies! (see 1 Corinthians chapters 1-4 for Paul's explanation of this.)

There is a seemingly odd "insert" in the middle of today's verses: *(11) Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. (12) No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwells in us, and His love is perfected in us.*

This "insert" is explained a little later on in the same chapter: **1 John 4:19-21** *We love Him because He first loved us. (20) If anyone says, I love God, and hates his brother, he is a liar. For if he does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? (21) And we have this commandment from Him, that he who loves God should love his brother also.*

So then, in order to love God (whom we have not seen) we first have to love our very visible brother. You cannot hate your brother and love God – in fact the apostle John calls that a flat-out lie, a contradiction of reality! Once you get over your hatred of actual real people, then and only then, can you truly love God.

Indeed, since God loves us, and loved us first by giving His life for us, then we ought to love one another. That is our proper response to God's love.

One of the Bible's rules is that we should treat others as God treats us. For instance, if Christ has accepted us then we should accept others (Romans 14:7), and if God has been merciful and forgiving to us then we should be merciful and forgiving to others (Matthew 18). Since God has loved us with a very great and sacrificial love, then we should love one another also in the same way.

In fact, it is as we love (in strong and truthful ways) that we grow up spiritually:

Ephesians 4:15-16 *But that you, speaking the truth in love, may in all things grow up to Him who is the Head, even Christ; (16) from whom the whole body, fitted together and compacted by that which every joint supplies, according to the effectual working in the measure of each part, producing the growth of the body to the edifying of itself in love.*

And as the early Church loved one another, it also grew:

Acts 4:32-35 *And the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul. And not one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own. But they had all things common. (33) And the apostles gave witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power. And great grace was on them all. (34) For neither was anyone needy among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the prices of the things that were sold, (35) and they laid them down at the apostles' feet. And distribution was made to every man according as he had need.*

God dwelt among them and perfected them in love because they chose to love one another with practical agape love. Once they got rid of selfishness and possessiveness and materialism then God turned up and great grace was upon them all!

People mature in loving communities where they are regarded as true persons and not as mere owners of possessions. When the needs of the poor are being met then God is present. Let's go back to today's key verse and notice that the first word is "IF", it is a conditional promise, it depends on our willing choice to love: **If we love one another, God dwells in us, and His love is perfected in us.**

Memorize this verse above! It is an amazing promise! The family that chooses to truly and deeply and unselfishly love one another will be a family where God dwells and a family where God's love is perfected! Many families of mature Christians include a disabled child. The disabled child is a gift of God who forces the family to exercise agape love, in total unselfishness and this process matures that family in love. The disabled child slows the family down from being too busy in ministry and turns them into disciples instead of religious robots! (It is the neediest among us who teach us to become saints)

On the other hand, no one is matured in a theater. People go to a performance, are moved and touched, and then go out without relating to anyone else. They see, hear and feel and may even cry. Often they believe they have been changed but they are still much the same afterward. People can watch hundreds of edifying movies and still be unchanged

in how they really live. And people can go and hear sermons for twenty or thirty years and meet no one, love no one and be totally unchanged in how they live.

Change and maturity only happen in loving relationships. And it doesn't take much real love to change someone. An encounter of a few minutes may turn a whole life around.

So we see that information alone, without love, does not lead to change. We have to speak the truth in love if the truth is to have any deep impact on human lives at all. Which is why we are called to make disciples, and not just distribute literature. By all means pass out the tract – but put your name on it, and be open to relationships as well!

If you want God to dwell in your life, then exercise practical agape love towards a very needy person who cannot ever repay you. Stretch your love to the limit and you will be perfected in God (Matthew 5:44-48).

Luke 14:12-14 *And He also said to him who invited Him, When you make a dinner or a supper, do not call your friends or your brothers, or your kinsmen, or your rich neighbors; lest they also invite you again, and a recompense be made to you. (13) But when you make a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, (14) and you shall be blessed, for they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just.*

Matthew 10:38-40 *And he who does not take up his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me. (39) He who finds his life shall lose it. And he who loses his life for My sake shall find it. (40) He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.*

Luke 6:35 *But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return. And your reward shall be great, and you shall be the sons of the Highest. For He is kind to the unthankful and to the evil.*

Love is the narrow, hard and difficult road to spiritual growth and to the fullness of eternal life (Ephesians 3:19). Our flesh wants almost any other pathway to Christ-likeness. We will invest thousands of dollars in books and seminars as long as we can stay in our own little zone, largely undisturbed by difficult and needy people.

Look at all the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11. Nothing ever went right while they “stayed in their zone” and pursued their own comfort. It is only when they “went out” and suffered, and journeyed, and fought battles and suffered affliction with Christ and with the people of God, that the big glorious and wonderful things happened. Saints are made in messy places filled with love and sacrifice.

If we love one another, God dwells in us, and His love is perfected in us.

Number: 05 **Verses: 1 Thess 3;12, 4:9; 2 Thess 1:3**
Topic: God Personally Teaches Us How To Love One Another

If loving one another is absolutely essential to our spiritual growth (as we have seen in the prior bible studies) and yet such love is so other-centered and sacrificial that it is totally impossible for the natural man – then how do we acquire it?

You cannot go and buy two gallons of love at Costco and you do not get love through bible study plus self-effort (many have tried and failed). And you don't become loving by being "extra good", for the works of the Law do not create unselfish love.

The correct answer is that:

- a) Love comes from God who is love and
- b) The God who is love, teaches those who are born of God how to love.

1 John 4:7 *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and everyone who loves has been born of God, and knows God.*

This is well illustrated by the spiritual growth in the lives of the Thessalonian Christians:

(1 Thessalonians 3:12) *And may the Lord make you to increase and abound in love toward one another and toward all men, as indeed we also do toward you,*

(2 Thessalonians 1:3) *We are obligated to give thanks to God always for you, brothers, and rightfully so, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all increases towards one another,*

(1 Thessalonians 4:9) *Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for me to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another.*

In 1 Thessalonians 3:12 Paul prays that their love may increase and abound, in 2 Thessalonians 1:3 we find this has happened and their love is increasing, both individually and as a whole group! The "secret sauce" is revealed in 1 Thessalonians 4:9 - God Himself was personally teaching them to love one another, and to such an extent that Paul had no need to write any instructions to them about loving one another!

God the Holy Spirit is your personal anointing, the instructor Who abides deep in your conscience, who reveals to you the paths of righteousness and love and the things accompanying Christ. Indeed the Holy Spirit reveals the things "that eyes has not seen":

1 Corinthians 2:9-12 *But as it is written, "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard," nor has it entered into the heart of man, "the things which God has prepared for those who love Him." (10) But God has revealed them to us by His Spirit; ...(12)so that we might know the things that are freely given to us by God.*

Indeed the things of the Old Covenant were written in a book but the things pertaining to the New Covenant are written on our hearts by the Holy Spirit:

Hebrews 8:10-11 *"For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My Laws into their mind and write them in their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. (11) And they shall not each man teach his neighbor, and each man his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for all shall know Me, from the least to the greatest.*

God is our personal spiritual coach, who guides us into all truth!

John 16:13-15 *However, when He, the Spirit of Truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth. For He shall not speak of Himself, but whatever He hears, He shall speak. And He will announce to you things to come. (14) He will glorify Me, for He will receive of Mine and will announce it to you. (15) All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and will announce it to you.*

The Spirit of Truth will take the things of Christ and speak and announce them to us. The Holy Spirit will do this in order to glorify Jesus Christ! All the things of the Father are Christ's and they are, in turn, revealed to us personally through the Holy Spirit. Here are some more verses along the same line:

1 John 2:20 *But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things.*

1 John 2:27 *But the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as His anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true and no lie, and as He has taught you, abide in Him.*

John 6:45 *It is written in the Prophets, "And they shall all be taught of God." Therefore everyone who hears and learns from the Father comes to Me.*

Isaiah 28:26 *For his God instructs him to do right; his God teaches him.*

Now the Holy Spirit is given to fill each of us with the love of God (Ephesians 3:19), pouring it out into our hearts (Romans 5:5). So it makes sense that one of the main tasks of the Holy Spirit, would be to teach us how to obey Christ's New Commandment, that is the commandment to love one another as He has loved us!

(1 Thessalonians 4:9) *Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for me to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another.*

The Holy Spirit is the free gift and blessing of the Abrahamic Covenant (Galatians 3:14) and this blessing is given that we might fulfill the Law and live a life of love.

1 Peter 1:22 *Purifying your souls in the obedience of the truth through the Spirit to unfeigned love of the brothers, love one another fervently out of a pure heart,*

The life of love which is created within us by God, is made manifest in answer to our prayers. In fact Paul often prays that people would grow in love, because it works (as it

did with the Thessalonians)! One of Paul's greatest prayers for the saints to grow in love is in Ephesians 3:14-21

Ephesians 3:14-21 *For this cause I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, (15) of whom the whole family in Heaven and earth is named, (16) that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man; (17) that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, (18) may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height, (19) and to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge, that you might be filled with all the fullness of God. (20) Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, (21) to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, forever. Amen.*

You do not need a psychologist to teach you how to love your spouse – instead you just need to listen to the still small voice of God and pray something like this: “Lord, please instruct me each day in how to love my wife/husband with Your love, I thank You Lord that you will answer this prayer.”

The Bible tells us that if we ask something that is God's will, then we will receive it. And what is more in God's will than desiring to obey the command to love one another as Christ has loved us?

1 John 5:14-15 *And this is the confidence that we have toward Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. (15) And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him.*

God will give us the power to overcome our fears and love the brethren:

2 Timothy 1:7 *For God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.*

1 John 4:18 *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, because fear has torment. He who fears has not been perfected in love.*

One of our great fears is that we will be “burned” through lack of discernment, that is we will be unwise in love and end up being tricked, or even be used and abused. God can also help us in that area:

Philippians 1:9-11 *And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in full knowledge and in all perception; (10) that you may distinguish between things that differ, that you may be sincere and without offense until the day of Jesus Christ, (11) being filled with the fruits of righteousness through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.*

So we can pray that we may love boldly and fervently, yet also wisely and righteously, without being tricked into any sort of harm or compromise.

God will freely give you the ability to love others, for nothing is impossible with God!

Number: 06 Verses: John 13:34,35, John 15:17
Topic: Disciples = Lovers

John 13:34,35 *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."*

John 15:17 *These things I command you, that you love one another.*

The outward, world-facing, sign of truly following Christ, is having love for one another. If we have love for another, everyone out there will know that we are "for real" as Christians. If we don't love one another, and just bicker, squabble, divide and engage in law-suits against each other, then the world will call us "just a bunch of hypocrites"!

If you have love, then you are a disciple of Jesus Christ the Nazarene. If you don't have love, then you are not Christ's disciple. You might be the disciple of a pastor or a disciple of a theologian, a denomination or a cult, but without love you are not Christ's disciple.

Every course on basic Christian discipleship should focus on teaching Christians to love one another. For knowledge puffs up but love builds up! (1 Corinthians 8:1) so a course that is all head knowledge and does not emphasize the practical aspects of "loving one another" will only produce puffed up baby Christians, and not edified disciples. However, a course that teaches people to truly deeply love one another will be blessed by God (because it teaches people to obey His commandment) and produce real Christians!

Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is not about having a mentor or an accountability partner (rather your mentor is the Holy Spirit) and neither is it about returning to some ideal free-wheeling church structure from the first century. Lovers are disciples and disciples are lovers. If your life is all about loving people then and then only are you a disciple!

Selfish religiosity and churchmanship are not identical with discipleship. Knowing the rules of church order and the church constitution so well that you can crush all opposition at the member's meeting is not discipleship (though it may make you a very powerful deacon).

Discipleship is about knowing God, the God who is love, and who wants you to love others and to have eternal life:

John 17:3 *And this is life eternal, that they (Christ's disciples) might know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.*

In the ministry of Jesus Christ there was a clear distinction between the crowds who followed Him and the disciples who obeyed Him. The crowds came to be healed and bed fed and to hear stories and sermons. On the other hand, the disciples were with Jesus "through His trials" and wanted to be His friend, to love Him and be loved by Him and to do what He did, in total obedience (except for Judas).

The two verses below give us a bit of a glimpse into the costly and obedient friendship that Jesus was actually looking for:

Luke 22:28-29 *You are those who have continued with Me in My trials. (29) And I appoint a kingdom to you, as My Father has appointed to Me,*

John 15:12-15 *This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. (13) No one has greater love than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. (14) You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. (15) No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master does. But I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.*

Friendship with Jesus means doing “whatever I command you”. It also means continuing with Him in His trials and laying down our lives for one another. The upside of this is that we get to know everything that Jesus has heard from the Father, and we are treated as much more than mere servants (who are given instructions without understanding what they mean) and that, after the resurrection, a kingdom awaits us.

There was no kingdom for the selfish demanding crowds. In fact it was taken away from them and given “to others” (Luke 20:16). Without love they became nothing.

Unfortunately our modern church philosophy is oriented toward attracting the selfish demanding crowd rather than making obedient disciples who truly love one another. The crowds happily turned up, got healed, sat on the grass and listened attentively and said nice things, even at one point being so enthusiastic that they wanted to make Jesus King (John 6:15)!

But despite this enthusiasm the crowds were certainly not disciples. They did not love Jesus at any depth. Once things got inconvenient and the high priests gave them money they happily cried “Crucify Him!” By analogy, any pastor who has an immature crowd in his/her church, and has few disciples, can expect to get crucified.

Whenever Jesus wanted to turn a follower into a disciple He set them a challenge of renunciation in the name of practical love. For instance in Matthew 19 the Rich Young Ruler is asked to sell all and give it to the poor and follow Jesus, and later on in that same chapter Peter indicates that he has “forsaken all things” to follow Christ (Matthew 19:16-30). Other examples are Zaccheus, Matthew's call, and the sacrifices made by the early apostles and Christian communities. God calls us out of our selfish comfortable existences to forsake all things for the sake of God's love.

“Discipleship = living in sacrificial agape love” when we do that everyone will know that we are true followers of Jesus Christ the Lord!

Number: 07 Verses: Romans 13:8-10, John 15:9-17
Topic: Love Is A Life Not A Law

Romans 13:8-10 *Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves another has fulfilled the Law. (9) For: "Do not commit adultery; do not murder; do not steal; do not bear false witness; do not lust;" and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this word, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (10) Love works no ill to its neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the Law.*

John 15:9-17 *As the Father has loved Me, so I have loved you; continue in My love. (10) If you keep My commandments, you shall abide in My love, even as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. (11) I have spoken these things to you so that My joy might remain in you and your joy might be full. (12) This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. (13) No one has greater love than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. (14) You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. (15) No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master does. But I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. (16) You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you and ordained you that you should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain; that whatever you shall ask of the Father in My name, He may give it to you. (17) These things I command you, that you love one another.*

You cannot legislate love. Legalism never produces love. Living up to "rules" never produces love. Indeed you can have total military or monastic discipline and not have love. In fact you can bust a boiler "trying to" love people out of sheer obedience and willpower and you will get absolutely nowhere at all!

Love is a life not a law. You cannot earn love (just ask any young man trying to impress a girl and yet failing miserably). You cannot make your parents love you, your wife or husband love you or anyone else love you and you cannot make God love you. Love is a FREE GIFT! And like any free gift it can be given or withheld. The untold misery of love withheld is the story of many lives!

But the good news is that God has not withheld His love but has freely bestowed it upon us. His love and forgiveness are absolutely free gifts! Here are a handful of very many verses that confirm this:

John 3:16-17 *For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (17) For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through Him.*

Hosea 14:4 *I will heal their backslidings; I will love them freely; for My anger has turned away from him.*

Ephesians 2:4-9 *But God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love with which He loved us (5) (even when we were dead in sins) has made us alive together with Christ (by grace*

you are saved), (6) and has raised us up together and made us sit together in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus, (7) so that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. (8) For by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, (9) not of works, lest anyone should boast.

Luke 7:42 *And they having nothing to pay, he freely forgave both...*

Romans 5:5-8 *And hope does not make us ashamed, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us. (6) For we yet being without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. (7) For one will with difficulty die for a righteous one, yet perhaps one would even dare to die for a good one. (8) But God commends His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.*

Romans 8:35-37 *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? (36) As it is written, "For Your sake we are killed all the day long. We are counted as sheep of slaughter." (37) But in all these things we more than conquer through Him who loved us.*

Romans 5:18-21 *Therefore as by one offense sentence came on all men to condemnation, even so by the righteousness of One the free gift came to all men to justification of life. (19) For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of One shall many be made righteous. (20) But the Law entered so that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound, (21) so that as sin has reigned to death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Love, forgiveness, righteousness and eternal life are all absolutely free gifts!

We deserve death, we deserve lovelessness, we deserve rebuke, we deserve punishment, we deserve curses (from broken moral laws) and we deserve death and Hell – but instead God freely and instantly gives us eternal life without our having to earn it in any way, shape, or form!

Think of the thief on the cross. He had lived a violent and brutal life, as a robber he had probably beaten people to death, and even by his own confession he deserved death. At no point did he say he was framed or innocent or a basically decent human being. He was not saved because he underwent any religious ceremony of any kind. There is not one single good work attributed to that thief. But he was instantly, completely and gloriously saved to be with Jesus in Paradise – and on that same day!

Luke 23:40-43 *But answering, the other rebuked him, saying, Do you not fear God, since you are in the same condemnation. (41) And we indeed justly so, for we receive the due reward of our deeds, but this Man has done nothing amiss. (42) And he said to Jesus, Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom. (43) And Jesus said to him, Truly I say to you, Today you shall be with Me in Paradise.*

For this man to be saved EVERYTHING has to be a free gift. His forgiveness was free and unearned, his salvation was free and unearned, his eternal life with Jesus in Paradise was free and unearned, the compassion and mercy of Christ upon him was free and unearned. A guilty man, without any natural or spiritual hope, who had no "place" on the Rabbinical spiritual ladder of progress in God, was found in Heaven by grace! The same or similar is true of Saul/Paul, the Samaritan woman at the well, and many others.

1 Timothy 1:15-16 *The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. (16) But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.*

Precisely nothing is earned 'by the works of the Law". The Law only results in condemnation and death (see Romans 7, and Galatians chapters 2 & 3). The Law does not bring justification or eternal life:

Galatians 2:16-21 *yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.(19) For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. (20) I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (21) I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.*

Love is an outcome of grace and is the result of a promise. Love does not flow from gritty obedience. Nor does love come from following some religious program. Love is a free and gracious gift that is poured out into our hearts by the promised Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5, Galatians 3:14, Ephesians 3:14-21).

Going back to the verses that we began this bible study with: Romans 13:8-10 tells us that love of neighbor fulfills and abolishes the Law. The law is over for you once you start loving people! Once you live in love you never have to think about a single rule ever again. You have done all that God commands – fully. That's what "fulfilling the Law" means!

Once we start living in love we move up a notch – to abiding in love, to receiving God's infinite and eternal love in Christ, and loving one another! We find this in John 15:9-17 and I urge you to read and reread those verses many, many times. They are a deep key to the new life that is to be found in Christ Jesus.

In this New Covenant we live in God's love. It's our home where we abide continually. It's not something we earn. It's a place where we dwell!

John 15:9,10 *As the Father has loved Me, so I have loved you; continue in My love. (10) If you keep My commandments, you shall abide in My love, even as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.*

Well what is the one simple commandment we have to keep in order to abide in God's love?

John 15:12-17 *This is **My commandment**, that you **love one another** as I have loved you. (13) No one has greater love than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. (14) You are My friends if you do whatever I command you..... These things **I command you**, that **you love one another**.*

Once we receive God's love we have to pass it forward. That's the rule. God loves us, and then we are to love others. If we keep this going, then we abide in God's love. When we do this one thing we obey the one commandment of the New Covenant – the command to love one another. Jesus gave many instructions and left many teachings but he gave only one commandment, one clear order for all Christians, and that was to love one another! But we love one another, not out of effort but out of grace. We love because God loved us first!

1 John 4:16-19 *So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. (17) By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. (18) There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. (19) We love because he first loved us.*

So forget about all that religious stuff (the thief on the cross did not need it and neither do you) and start asking for God's freely given love, so that you in turn can freely "love one another".

Forget about church and bible studies and tithing and candles and incense and Christmas and Easter and priests and robes and pleasing the senior pastor or holding a church office. Without love they are nothing. Without love they will just curse your life with the curse of the law and cut you off from Christ (Galatians 5:1-11)!

Just hang out with God, believe in Jesus and start loving people. Love is a lifestyle not a law. You don't have to perform. You don't have to achieve a certain "love quota". You just have to abide in God's love by loving the brethren!

This is both very simple and very difficult and I confess that it has taken nearly 35 years of Christian living to get to this place. My path has taken me to every extreme of the religious journey, from jungles to committees and from pulpits to computers. None of that stuff works. Only loving people works.

As a final encouragement, if you want your prayers answered – love one another:

John 15:16, 17 *You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you and ordained you that you should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain; that whatever you shall ask of the Father in My name, He may give it to you. These things I command you, that you love one another.*

Number: 08 Verses: Romans 13:8-10, 1 John 3:4-7
Topic: Love Is Not Lawless

Romans 13:8-10 *Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves another has fulfilled the Law. (9) For: "Do not commit adultery; do not murder; do not steal; do not bear false witness; do not lust;" and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this word, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (10) Love works no ill to its neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the Law.*

1 John 3:4-7 *Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness, for sin is lawlessness. (5) And you know that He was revealed that He might take away our sins, and in Him is no sin. (6) Everyone who abides in Him does not sin. Everyone who sins has not seen Him nor known Him. (7) Little children, let no one deceive you. He who does righteousness is righteous, even as that One is righteous.*

Love is from God and God is holy, righteous and just. So God's love will also be holy, righteous and just! We see this on the Cross when God's love and God's justice worked together for our justification. Our sin incurred God's wrath and the penalty for that sin was paid by Jesus Christ who died for us to be both saved and holy!

Ephesians 1:4 *according as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love,*

1 John 3:4 tells us that "sin is lawlessness". Now God's love is not sinful! So God's love is not lawless, rather it fulfills the Law! God's love does what is righteous and thus does no harm to a neighbor (Romans 13:10).

So love is not lawless, instead love upholds the law. Love does what is good and wise and true! Indeed love has certain boundaries and moral constraints:

1 Corinthians 13:4-7 *Love is patient, love is kind; love does not envy; love does not boast, is not puffed up; (5) does not behave disgracefully, does not seek its own, is not provoked to anger, thinks no evil; (6) does not rejoice over unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; (7) bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

This raises the problem of how we ascertain what sort of things are good and righteous and lawful for love to do, obey, and be regulated by. How is love lawful and not licentious? Do we revert to 613 Jewish Commandments in the Torah? Do we invent a new Torah, a Christian Torah? Neither of the above! We listen to the Holy Spirit in our conscience as we are led by the Spirit and we serve one another in love.

We serve in the newness of the Spirit not the oldness of the letter. The new law of the New Commandment is written on our hearts. As a result the Holy Spirit leads us, teaches us and instructs on how to serve one another both in liberty (from the Law) and in love!

Let's see how Paul explains this in the epistle to the Galatians:

Galatians 5:13-18 *For you, brothers were called to freedom; only do not use freedom for an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. (14) For all the law is fulfilled in one word, in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ... (16) I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall by no means fulfill the lust of the flesh. ... (18) But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.*

Love is not a license to sin (Galatians 5:13)! But neither is love legalistic (Galatians 5:18)! In fact Christians are called to freedom and not to legalism. Earlier in that same chapter Paul tells the Galatians that they were called out from the religious "yoke of bondage" and were never to go back under it again:

Galatians 5:1 *Stand fast therefore in the freedom in which Christ has made us free, and do not be loaded down again with a yoke of bondage.*

So agape love is freely given and is not some onerous religious duty! It is not an excuse for burn-out. We do not have to change the entire world. Nor are we obligated to satisfy the wants and needs of every other human being.

On one hand love is not lawless but neither is agape love a burden for our souls:

1 John 5:3 *For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome,*

Matthew 11:28-30 *Come to Me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. (29) Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (30) For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."*

So then how do we know and keep His commandments if they are not a big list, etched in stone on the courthouse wall? His commandments are written in our hearts by the Holy Spirit! It is as we obey the Holy Spirit and are led by the Spirit, that we end up obeying His commandments as a by-product of the spiritual life of love.

Under the Old Covenant the commandments were written in a book which was then interpreted by scribes and lawyers and taught to the people who then obeyed them. In the New Covenant this is entirely done away with.

In the New Testament the commandments are put within us, and are directly written on our hearts by the Spirit. Thus we have no need of lawyers, Scribes, Pharisees or teachers of laws! For God Himself teaches us how to love one another.

1 Thessalonians 4:9 *Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for me to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another.*

1 John 2:27 *And as for you, the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him.*

We will never attain the holiness of God by struggling to understand and obey 613 commandments. However we will attain the holiness of God if we serve one another in love, in the power of the Holy Spirit! As we do this, God's holy and heavenly love will be poured out within us, and we will serve God in reverence and awe.

It is not up to us to decide what love is like. That is God's job. Our life of love is fully His to control. We do not go around "figuring out" how to love people (that only leads to exhaustion). Instead God Himself tells us who to love, when to love, how to love, where to love and so on. Our love is Spirit-led and somewhat of a mystery.

Love is an abiding, holy, interior spiritual state of the conscience, that listens to God, and which produces practical benevolent action as the Holy Spirit directs. Love is not an exterior set of laws, rules and regulations. It is not a "code", a book, a program, or "of the letter". Love is of the Spirit alone. Yet neither is love a capricious, lawless, will-of-the-wisp spontaneous emotion that justifies every moral outrage under the sun!

Thus an unemotional person who gives generously and helps the hungry is far more loving in biblical terms than a warm , friendly, highly emotional person who blesses with the lips alone! Love is both disciplined enough to be holy and strong enough to accomplish some real good.

Number: 09 **Verses: 1 John 4:7-9**
Topic: Love Is A Spiritual State of Being

1 John 4:7-9 *Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; and everyone that loves has been born of God and knows God. (8) He that does not love does not know God, because God is love. (9) By this the love of God is manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, in order that we might live through Him.*

Love is of God and God is love and the love that existed in God was manifested in Christ. God's very deepest inner being is love and so love is a state of inner being. Love is who God is and love is who we are when we are in Christ. Because God is Spirit, love is therefore a *spiritual* state of being.

Love is eternal because love is of God and God is eternal. Love is spiritual because love is of God and God is spiritual. Love is patient because love is of God and God is patient.

When we think about love, we should first think about who God is, because God is love. Even God's wrath is an expression of His love, particularly His holy jealousy for His people. God hates sin because sin tears people apart. If God loves you then God must hate the sin that destroys you!

Yesterday I wrote that: "Love is an abiding, holy, interior spiritual state of the conscience, that listens to God, and which produces practical benevolent action as the Holy Spirit directs."

Love flows from having God within you. Love begins with being born of God and knowing God. As you relate to God (know Him) His love flows from His inner being, to your inner being. You become one spirit with God.

1 Corinthians 6:17 *But he that is joined with the Lord is one spirit with Him.*

The place where God's Spirit joins with our spirit is the place where we are taught of God and hear from God and "know with" God and that place has traditionally been known as the conscience ("con" = with / "science" = know so conscience = know with).

1 Timothy 1:5 *Now the goal of the commandment is love out of a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith,*

A good conscience is one that allows God to teach us how to love others, and works hand-in-hand with a pure heart and sincere faith to produce the goal of the commandment, which is love!

Love exists prior to any loving thought or loving action. However sometimes Christians get the impression that love is merely a personality trait, like extroversion, or a social trait such as affability. Perhaps this is because love is listed as a "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22,23) and this list sounds a little bit like a list of personality traits and social traits. We

are also told to “put on” love (Colossians 3:14) as the bond of perfection, thus love seems to be exterior and not interior. But this is a misreading of the text.

The verse about “putting on love” is plural and refers to the church at Colossae loving one another. The Colossians as a community are to put on love, but its not “fake it until you make it”, rather the love is already there, resident in their hearts through Christ, and they just need to take it out and put it on. Similarly the fruit of the Spirit are the outward manifestations of the inwardly resident Holy Spirit, who is God, who is love.

Love and hatred, light and darkness, are states of the human spirit. They are the shapes the soul takes, the very framework and fabric in which we live our lives. This is even deeper than the human will! If your human spirit is filled with the Spirit you will love people whether you want to or not! We see this in Jesus who, out of compassion, ministered to people, even when his human will just wanted to go aside and rest! People who are full of love, love others, “almost despite themselves”.

True agape love controls us, shapes us and orders our days.

2 Corinthians 5:14 *For the love of Christ constrains us, judging this, that if one died for all, then all died;*

The love of Christ within us constrains us from doing evil, saying unkind things, being selfish, committing adultery or scheming against another person. When we are filled with the Spirit love takes over the reins of our life and even takes hold of our tongue which is then filled with praise to God:

Ephesians 5:18-21 *And do not be drunk with wine, in which is excess, but be filled with the Spirit, (19) speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; (20) always giving thanks for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, (21) submitting yourselves to one another in the fear of God.*

Acts 4:31-32 *And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the Word of God with boldness. (32) And the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul. And not one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own. But they had all things common.*

So we see that love is a spiritual state of our being, when it has become one spirit with God, and that this love then manifests itself in gracious words and selfless deeds.

God's love is intensely personal. God loves people not “causes”. Causes can become cruel, manipulative, overriding and all-demanding. Causes can burn people out, but love builds people up!

Love is a person offering themselves to another person, just as God offered up His only begotten Son on our behalf! And just as God the Holy Spirit has come to dwell among us and be in us.

Because love is an abiding and eternal state of being God does not stop loving just because He is sometimes rejected. Love bears all things. Love endures all things. Love keeps on loving. Love is eternal and abiding and all the rejection and rudeness in the world cannot make it shrivel up, wilt and die.

However while love does not die love certainly may change its object. An abusive husband may find that his continual rejection of his wife causes her love to go elsewhere. She is still a loving person, she just now loves someone else! Similarly God may have a great plan and destiny for someone, but if they reject it then His love and blessing will go somewhere else! But God remains loving and righteous and just.

So how do we arrive at a loving state of being, that is so joyously powerful it takes over our tongue, our thoughts, our actions and our attitudes and even our finances so that we are selfless and godly in all that we do? Are we at that point where nothing is too much trouble for us when it is done for those whom God has given us to love?

1. We can pray to be filled with God's love. (Ephesians 3:14-21)
2. We can pray to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18, Acts 4:31,32)
3. We can start doing small, simple, loving things, one at a time, and opening our hearts to love's manifestation in our lives. Dorcas did this! (Acts 9:36)
4. We can pray for those who persecute us and do good to even our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48) and thus grow in love for difficult people.
5. We can meet the obvious physical needs of others (1 John 3:16-18)
6. We can shrink back from evil and do good (Romans 12:9)
7. We can honor one another in love (Romans 12:10)

Fundamental to all of the above is being "born of God". Love will not dwell in us, until God truly dwells in us. We become born of God by believing in Jesus Christ, and this then leads us into that place where we abide in God and in God's love:

1 John 4:15-16 *Whoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwells in him and he in God. (16) And we have known and believed the love that God has in us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.*

Faith in Jesus Christ establishes the connection with God through which flows the abundant love of God. We need to confess Christ, to live out Christ, to believe in Jesus Christ and in the power of His Name.

Number: 10 Verses: Rom 12:9, Ezek 33:31-32, Ps. 55:21

Topic: Avoid Fake Love

Romans 12:9 *Let love be without hypocrisy, shrinking from evil, cleaving to good;*

Ezekiel 33:31-32 *And they come to you as the people come, and they sit before you as My people, and they hear your words. But they will not do them. For with their mouth they show much love, but their heart goes after their unjust gain. (32) And lo, you are to them as a singer of love songs with a beautiful voice, and able to play well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they do not do them.*

Psalms 55:21 *His speech was smooth as butter, yet war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords.*

There are some very dangerous and manipulative people out there and some of them are attracted to the power and prestige of ministry. These people are very good at producing "fake love" and are technically called psychopaths or sociopaths (not as in ax-murderers but as in people without any conscience or empathy). The Bible calls them "wolves" (as in wolves in sheep's clothing) and some of their main characteristics are:

- 1) Glib and superficial
- 2) Egocentric and grandiose
- 3) Lack of remorse or guilt
- 4) Lack of empathy
- 5) Deceitful and manipulative
- 6) Shallow emotions
- 8) Impulsive / Poor behavior controls
- 9) Need for excitement
- 10) Lack of responsibility
- 11) Early behavior problems
- 12) Adult antisocial behavior

Herod the Great most certainly was a psychopath, as were Annas and Caiaphas, some of the Pharisees, the wizard Simon Magus (Acts 8) and many false teachers. Today the complete lack of real empathy of some (a minority of) senior pastors and mission leaders for their staff/volunteers etc. is cause for deep concern. The manipulative, completely uncaring, and ruthless Christian visionary who burns out all those around him is a common problem in many ministry circles. When this is compounded with lying and deception you need to put on your running shoes! You won't hurt their feelings because they have no real feelings to hurt. Their "feelings" are just masks for power!

These "wolves in sheep's clothing" have made a lifetime study of how to press people's buttons in order to gain followers (who are often good, but gullible Christian believers).

Acts 20:29-30 *I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; (30) and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.*

These 'wolves' do not just manipulate the Scriptures, they twist words and emotions, playing on people's minds. They are like whitewashed tombs, outwardly righteous but inwardly "full of dead men's bones" (Matt 23:27)! Jesus tells us that we can discern them by their fruits – that is by the fruits of the Spirit and the fruits of their actions:

Matthew 7:15-23 *"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. (16) You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? (17) So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. (18) A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. (19) Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (20) Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.*

Jesus also tells us in Matthew 7 that these people are "lawless" which indicates that they set themselves as rebellious independent authorities, doing their own thing, not fearing God or truly reverencing Him, and with no true knowledge of the God who is love:

(21) "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. (22) On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' (23) And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

These wolves had "mighty miracles" but they did not have true agape love or righteousness. Their works were void of the Holy Spirit and were done in the flesh or perhaps by hypnotism or even in the power of Satan:

2 Thessalonians 2:8-12 *And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the breath of His mouth and shall destroy with the brightness of His coming, (9) whose coming is according to the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, (10) and with all deceit of unrighteousness in those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, so that they might be saved. (11) And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie, (12) so that all those who do not believe the truth, but delight in unrighteousness, might be condemned.*

The End Times will see the world's best con-artists in operation. These evil workers will have charm and charisma, they will be wonderful story-tellers, convincing liars, glib, exciting, grandiose, shallow and manipulative, as described at the commencement of this study.

The Scriptures even call it "all deception" and a "strong delusion". So strong will be this wickedness that it will almost be possible to deceive the elect:

Matthew 24:23-24 *Then if any man shall say to you, Lo, here is Christ! Or, There! Do not believe it. (24) For false Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders; so much so that, if it were possible, they would deceive even the elect.*

These terrible people will make you "feel great" and show you signs and wonders but will, in fact, be wolves who aim to devour (if possible) your very eternal soul!

I believe we are now fast approaching, or are even in, a time of deep and masterful deception, of Madison Avenue Christianity, of mind-control cults, of false miracles, of many a false anointing and even of false Christs!

2 Corinthians 11:4 *For if, indeed, the one coming proclaims another Jesus, whom we have not proclaimed, or if you receive another spirit, which you did not receive, or another gospel, which you never accepted, you might well endure these .*

2 Corinthians 11:13-15 *For such ones are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. (14) Did not even Satan marvelously transform himself into an angel of light? (15) Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves as ministers of righteousness, whose end shall be according to their works.*

2 Timothy 3:1-5 *Know this also, that in the last days grievous times will be at hand. (2) For men will be self-lovers, money-lovers, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, (3) without natural affection, unyielding, false accusers, without self-control, savage, despisers of good, (4) traitors, reckless, puffed up, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, (5) having a form of godliness, but denying the power of it; even turn away from these.*

One of the signs of these "wolves" is that they are "without natural affection". They have no empathy, no real feelings. They do not really "care about" anyone except how they will fit into their cause, program, or church. They pretend to be warm but are actually cold and hostile.

False apostles will have false love. They will make us feel fantastic but their words will be empty of genuine practical sacrificial action. They will always call on you to sacrifice for them, but they will never sacrifice for you! Remember Jesus gave His life for us, and did not first ask us to give our lives for Him! Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep (John 10).

True love is demonstrated by true action, good fruits, faith in Christ Jesus, and by dwelling in righteousness. We need to have a clear understanding of what true love looks like or we will be cleverly manipulated by those who want to devour us (especially if we are emotionally needy or undiscerning).

Let love be without hypocrisy (the wearing of masks). Let us be true to one another, shrinking from evil and cleaving to the good!

Number: 11 Verses: 1 Cor 5:8, Ephesians 6:24, Philippians 1:10
Topic: Love Must Be Sincere

1 Corinthians 5:8 *Therefore let us keep the feast; not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.*

Ephesians 6:24 *Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. Amen.*

Philippians 1:10 *that you may distinguish between things that differ, that you may be sincere and without offense until the day of Jesus Christ,*

Love and truth hang out together. We are to “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) and love must be “without hypocrisy” (Romans 12:9). We want and need both truth and love. True sincere love is what Christianity is about.

Sincerity is a bit more than “truth” as in the sense of merely being factual or straightforward. Sincerity is transparency of the soul. Sincerity means that there is no hidden agenda. Love is simply given because you genuinely love that person and want the best for them. It is a straight-out gift with no strings attached. No games, no guile, no hidden payoff, no artful designs.

Sincerity indicates that the intention of the will and thoughts of the mind are “pure”. The Greek word in 1 Corinthians 5:8 and Philippians 1:10 is *eilikrina* which means purity, clearness, sincerity, and has the derivation “judged by sunlight” or transparency. In Ephesians 6:24 the word for sincere is *aphtharsia* meaning incorruptibility, purity and sincerity, it also has the sense of perpetuity, as things pure and incorruptible last forever.

Sincere people stand out clearly in a world full of games. Sincerity is such a clear Christian virtue that insincerity is almost a hallmark of the fake Christian. Insincerity devalues the whole person because once you detect it, you never trust them again:

Sincerity makes the very least person to be of more value than the most talented hypocrite. (Charles Spurgeon)

The insincere affections of the used-car salesman do not impress us much, no matter how skilled or well-trained they may be. Insincerity and gullibility go hand in hand. They thrive in each other and often are found in the same person. The best way to stomp out insincerity is to call it out. If you are tough, sharp and discerning and do not receive flattery even for an instant the insincere will realize that they have better prospects elsewhere!

Rebuke flatterers and they will eventually depart from you, and those around you will have a much better chance of being “true friends”.

Thus a wise Christian does not believe everyone or everything but is discerning and understanding of people, doctrines and situations:

Philippians 1:9-10 *And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in full knowledge and in all perception; (10) that you may distinguish between things that differ, that you may be sincere and without offense until the day of Jesus Christ,*

Colossians 1:9-10 *For this cause we also, since the day we heard, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that you might be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, (10) that you might walk worthy of the Lord to all pleasing, being fruitful in every work and increasing in the knowledge of God,*

Hebrews 5:14 *But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, even those who because of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.*

Our great help in this is the study of the Word of God:

Hebrews 4:12-13 *For the Word of God is living and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing apart of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. (13) Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in His sight, but all things are naked and opened to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.*

Even Jesus was cautious about people and did not think that anyone was "good":

John 2:24-25 *But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people (25) and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.*

Matthew 19:17 *And He said to him, Why do you call Me good? There is none good but one, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.*

Jesus in turn warned His disciples about hateful, deceptive and untrustworthy people:

Matthew 10:16-18 *Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves. (17) But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to the sanhedrins, and they will scourge you in their synagogues. (18) And you shall be brought before governors and kings for My sake, for a testimony against them and the nations.*

While Jesus taught a lot about faith and about believing God, He does not expect us to believe in other people or their deceptive quackery (which is common in some circles):

Matthew 24:23-26 *Then if any man shall say to you, Lo, here is Christ! Or, There! **Do not believe it.** (24) For false Christs and false prophets will arise .. (26) Therefore if they shall say to you, Behold, He is in the desert! Do not go out. Behold, He is in the secret rooms! **Do not believe it.***

Sincerity needs to be tested. As they say in military circles" "In God we trust, everyone else we verify!". Or as politicians say: "The thing you most need in politics is sincerity, if you can fake that, then you have it made!"

Fake sincerity, fake faith and fake love are everywhere in religion. This turns many people off. But God is not fake and we should believe in Him and the Scriptures while testing all things by the Word!

1 John 4:1-3 *Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. (2) By this the Spirit of God is known: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, (3) and every spirit which does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard that it is coming, and now is already in the world.*

1 Thessalonians 5:21 *But test all things; hold fast that which is good.*

Hypocrites and liars hate exposure. If you are wise and discerning and "show that you know" then they will have three choices A) Repent, B) Rage, or C) Retreat. Since repentance among liars is rare, you will generally find that they tend to rage or retreat.

Love must be sincere. But how can we be sincere ourselves?

1. Check and double-check your own motives, "examine yourself". Live in the light!
2. Let your "Yes" be yes and your "No" be no.
3. Repent of all forms of deceit and manipulation. Even if someone is very gullible, a Christian does not exploit them or lie to them or flatter them or use them.
4. Never promise anything you suspect you may not be able to deliver, just in order to make someone feel good. Don't "dangle carrots" that don't exist.
5. Don't make vague hopeful promises, instead make contractual commitments for which you can be held accountable.
6. Trying is lying. Don't say "I will try to" say "I will get it done.."
7. Don't hide stuff (agendas, the real financial situation etc.) from those you love.
8. Be transparent and verifiable, allow people to check you out.
9. Determine to get rid of the lame excuses that you most often use.
10. Don't rely on charm, good looks, personality, wealth etc. to "buy you a pass".

Number: 12 Verses: John 15:12,13, 1 Timothy 5:8
Topic: Love Is Local First

John 15:12-13 *This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. (13) No one has greater love than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. (14) You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. (15) No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master does. But I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.*

1 Timothy 5:8 *But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially his family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an infidel.*

Loving one another begins with your friends and family. This is always its primary locus of action. We are to love "our circle" of people that God has "given us". Love is local first! Jesus regarded the disciples as His friends and as those whom God had given Him:

John 17:6 *I have revealed Your name to the men whom You gave to Me out of the world. They were Yours, and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word.*

If we put these things together we can conclude that God brings certain people into our lives and we are to love them. They are our friends and those friends are gifts from God, given to us by God Himself!

In contrast God does not ever tell Christians to love a church building, a cause, a project, a denomination, a political party, a nation or even a particular doctrine (though we are to love the truth). We are also NEVER given the impossible task of "loving everyone" since God knows well that we are "dust" and very finite and limited in our ability to love. The closest we get to this starts with "as far as it is possible with you.."

Romans 12:18 *If it is possible, as far as is in you, being in peace with all men.*

I cannot concretely "love Africa" but I can love wife Minda, and make her a cup of coffee!

The starting point for love is the twenty or thirty people who make up those you are most responsible for. For Jesus this was His mother, brothers, sisters, the twelve and some close friends like Lazarus, Mary and Martha. Perhaps this was the 120 on the day of Pentecost, the inner circle. Those whom Jesus personally "loved" as He loved John the apostle. For Paul it was his central band of apostles and elders (Timothy, Titus, Silas etc.).

Now you and I don't have the capacity for love that Jesus had (at least I don't) so twenty to thirty is a good starting number! We can still be benevolent and minister to strangers and to those we meet but the "friends and family" circle is where our heart is to be.

In biblical terms those in our inner circle of general intimacy are called our "household" - those we have in our house regularly. If we are selfish and inconsiderate toward the obvious needs of our "household" then we are worse than an unbeliever and have denied the faith (1 Timothy 5:8). Christian parents who neglect or seriously abuse their children

are in serious trouble with God! And adult children of older parents who refuse to help them in their old age are in for a shock on Judgment Day!

Never mind what society says or what the government provides, we are to care for our own. If "love one another" is Jesus' central command, and if "love one another" is central to the entire Christian faith, then we CANNOT neglect those closest to us "because it's not convenient" to do so. Your agenda is not more important than God's agenda and God's agenda says "love one another". It is a commandment, not a suggestion!

This local, specific and personal nature of love is a huge blow to many of us in the ministry. Being in the limelight is immensely rewarding and very seductive. It is fun to travel and to speak at conferences. Applause is great and we can want more and more of it until our schedules are crammed, our bodies are worn out and our families hardly see us at all! Of course everything is being done in the name of "important ministry" but often there are emotional compensation things going on as well. We think we love the world, but often, in truth, we just love ourselves and almost no one else and no one knows us or spends any time with us because we are "just too busy".

To put it bluntly, a minister without any true close friends has forsaken the gospel. I fully understand the need to have some "distance" and the treacherous nature of church gossip and politics, but if you cannot have friends in the church, then you MUST find friends outside the church because the "love one another" command is non-negotiable. One of the best ways to do this is to have a "band of brothers" ministry team approach.

Be like Jesus and select a band of people, a team, who you will "go into battle with" and do the work of God. Think of group ministry, not personal ministry of "our" significance, not your significance. Build loving faith-filled teams of transformational Christians.

For Jesus His friends WERE His ministry and His friends were the reason that He laid down His life! At one point Paul could not rest until he had fellowship with Titus. Love is central to who we are as Christians and love means that we should be totally committed first and foremost to our "household".

Love is local and practical and particular. It is Dorcas knitting a sweater for an older widow to keep out the cold. It is Jesus cooking fish on the beach for a very broken Peter or Timothy bringing Paul's cloak and his scrolls before winter.

For us "local love" is remembering birthdays and anniversaries, bringing small gifts, thinking of a neighbor going through a divorce, seeing your wife is tired and doing something thoughtful, listening to your kids when they are telling a story about what happened at school and believing that it's important to you because it's important to them.

Local agape love is all about turning up, being there, and reassuring your friends and family that they truly are a top priority for you even though you truly are awfully busy with "stuff". But "stuff" is not the same as love!

At my funeral no one is going to say something like: "Wow, John preached over two thousand sermons and knew lots of bible verses...". No one will care how many days I spent at the office. They will care about who I was as a person, how I loved them, how I prayed for them, treated them and the example I was (or was not) to them.

You have to love your wife, even if she snores, and you have to love your husband even if he likes to sleep in on weekends while you are busy doing chores. Love involves deep humble considerateness and caring for real people in real contexts in real ways and we can only do "so much" caring, so stick to your thirty folk and treat them well.

By the way you are allowed to choose your friends prayerfully (just as Jesus chose His disciples). You can choose who to love (God does and it's called election). But once you have chosen to love them don't try "loving Africa" as well. Love them, your friends and family, love the ones that God has given you to love!

1. Choose good wise friends with whom you can do things for God.
2. Develop those friends and let them develop you
3. Honor your family, all of it!
4. Be aware of who your "household" is – make a list of your core people
5. Prioritize them. Make quality time for friends and family
6. Center your life around your friends and family more than around church activities.
7. Make financial sacrifices for your friends and family.
8. Be aware of their needs, both large and small, and meet them.
9. Ask them for help, be open and vulnerable
10. Teach them how to love you and show them how love works
11. Verbalize how much you love them + be practical about it
12. Pray for them and let them pray for you
13. Tackle projects together, such as fixing a bicycle, planting a garden or going hiking together. Projects create opportunities to know each other and work together.
14. Don't worry about how you are feeling instead worry about how you are acting.
15. Remember there is nothing less important than "being important" so don't let "being important" take you away from loving one another!

Number: 13 **Verses: Ephesians 4:2**
Topic: Bearing With One Another In Love

Ephesians 4:2 *with all humility and meekness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love,*

Romans 15:1-3 *Then we who are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. (2) Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good, to building up. (3) For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me."*

1 Corinthians 13:4-7 *Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, (5) Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; (6) Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; (7) Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.*

Love is patient and puts up with much! Deep patience is a sign of true grace and it is God's patience that leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). Bullies are impatient however great men and women of God are forbearing. Forbearance gives great dignity to the wearer.

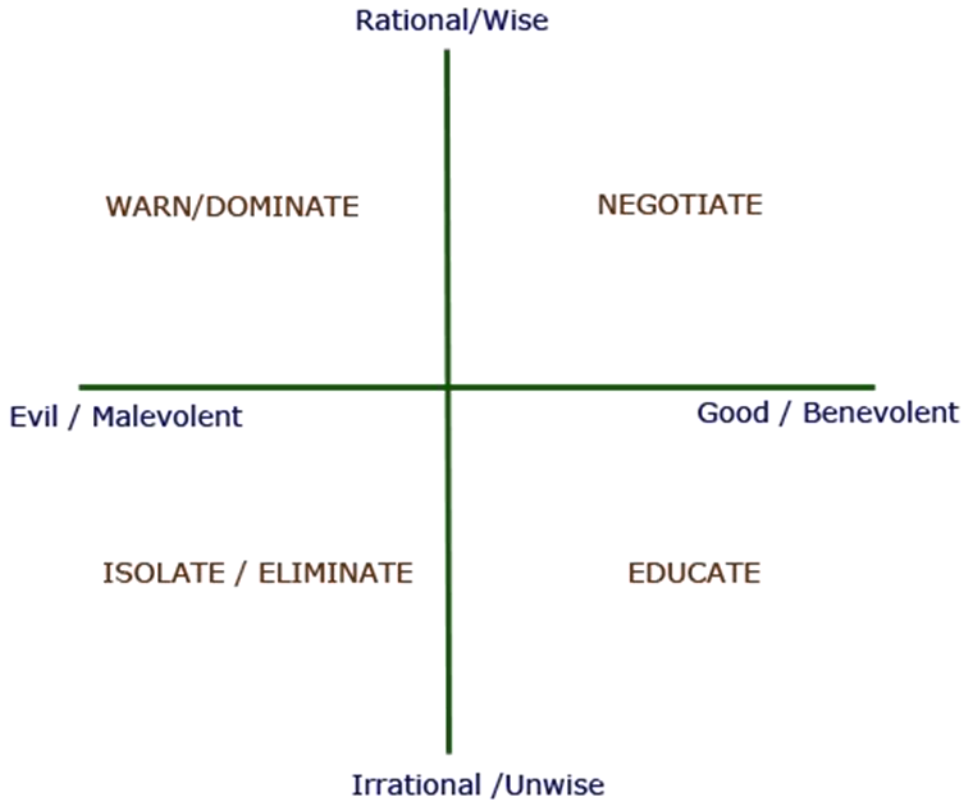
On the other hand, if you want to trash all your relationships, just be impatient and put up with nothing, go and point everything negative out, and do so in public! Resentment breeds inside of children with impatient parents and workers with impatient bosses. (Then resentment turns into rejection and rejection into revenge).

So patience, forbearance and long-suffering are essential to maintaining "peace in the household" (which is that group of around 20-30 people at the core of our existence). We have to "bear with" our husband, wife, children, key leaders, close friends, in-laws and family of origin. We have to supply "grit" to those relationships and decide to preserve them at almost any cost. Irritability in key relationships is like sandpaper, it rubs them thin!

However Proverbs tells us that there are some people we should NOT be patient with: the violent, the corrupt, the persistent fool, the prideful and scornful person, the immoral temptress, the chronically lazy "sluggard", the flatterer, the toxic gossip, and so on. These people need to either be avoided or rebuked.

Often we are impatient with good people (because they will take it) and tolerant of wicked people (because we are either scared of their power or beguiled by their charms)!

The following diagram is a "Response Chart" that is a quick guide on how to handle people:



The graph divides people into four groups, along the lines of wisdom and goodness (a quick note I am not talking about total goodness which is God's alone, but about general considerateness and benevolence):

A person who is both good and wise (in the upper right quadrant) can be negotiated with, they will listen to you and they are rational and will think carefully about plans and consider their own self-interest in a balanced manner. You are to forbear them, be patient with them and sit down and talk with them as equals. They generally can be trusted.

The people on the lower right quadrant (good but unwise) need to be educated, counseled and disciplined. They may not even be acting in their own self-interest (let alone yours) and can be neurotic, clueless or naive. However they want to be good and wish you no harm. These people you pastor, pray for and instruct. You are very, very patient with these people but you do not grant them any serious responsibility.

The people in the upper left quadrant is evil/malevolent but is still rational with worldly wisdom. They are evil and crafty, and act solely in their own interests and *against* your interests. Negotiating with them as cooperative equals won't work. They have deep

cunning, are often manipulative and are full of selfish ambition. They may completely lack a conscience, empathy or remorse. Don't appeal to their "good nature" and certainly don't trust them. Talk softly, carry a big stick and draw firm lines in the sand with them. You warn and discipline these people and you may need to make it clear that you have a contract and a lawyer, or that you will even call the police.

The person on the lower left is both evil and chaotic, Pol Pot of Cambodia was in this category, he was a deeply superstitious murderous tyrant surrounded by occult practitioners. Pol Pot's powerful evil and utter folly starved whole populations to death. This category contains violent criminals, habitual predators, terrorists and suicide bombers. These people are malevolent and mad and do not even consider their own self-interest.

They do not even respect force but will blow themselves up with a "I Lose – You Lose" mentality. Such people simply cannot be dealt with, have no insight and no good intentions that can be appealed to. Leave these guys to the SWAT team! They can only be isolated (imprisoned) or eliminated. Flee fast, because forbearing them can literally be suicide.

Hopefully your family, close friends and key leaders are all on the right hand side and can be either negotiated with or educated. These are the people whom you love, forbear, and give yourself for. The household of grace.

On the left hand side Jesus says in Matthew "beware of men..." so there are some folk we should be very wary of, and if possible, disconnect from.

Ok then, should we forbear with the phone company, cable company or mortgage company when they are clearly and illegally ripping us off? (For instance the time when over \$200 was added to our mortgage when the bank "thought we would like mortgage insurance" and just added it without our consent). No! This is when you get on the phone and politely threaten a lawsuit. Yes, really.

Don't blow up, don't abuse the person in the call center, but make it clear that you will NOT put up with being ripped off. If they won't listen and the amount is substantial send in a formal fax lodging a legal complaint. I have never yet had to go to court but I do get things sorted out. (Fax works much better than email because it implies an office, money and power).

Nine times out of ten, that smiling salesperson at the used-car lot does not have your best interest at heart. The kindness is totally fake. They are in the shrewd, evil, manipulative, worldly wisdom category, and you need to negotiate realizing that, yet treating the person with politeness and respect.

Ok, I think you get the idea now! We need to be both patient and careful. With those we love, those in our household, who are safe, we "bear all things". These are our "brothers" and we stand with them, love them, take them back, mend the fences, grant grace and find forgiveness seventy times seven! On the other hand even Jesus did not forbear with the Pharisees but rebuked them and isolated (said absolutely nothing to) Herod. Jesus

educated and disciplined the clueless but good (e.g. Nathaniel), rebuked the smart but evil Pharisees, and will totally crush Satan.

Forbearance is part of growing people! Paul "suffered all things for the sake of the elect" and pastors groan and travail over the flock and parents weep over children. We love the person but hate the sin, and pray for grace! Remember God is patient with you so you ought to be patient with others!

Number: 14 **Verses: 1 Peter 1:22**
Topic: What Is Brotherly Love?

Some cults talk about "the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God" and teach that every person on earth is "our brother and sister". This view has penetrated the church, politics and much popular spirituality. However this is not a biblical view at all! It leads to a mushy, sentimental gospel with no urgency for evangelism or missions.

"Brotherly love" has thus come to mean a sort of vague, chummy, affable, benevolence toward humanity in general and no one in particular. The sort of thing you display at Washington fundraisers for worthy causes while dressed in a dinner suit!

Quite contrary to this sentimental version of reality, the Scriptures speak in a plain and straightforward way of a vast separation between Christians and the unsaved. The Bible refers to a "kingdom of darkness" and a "kingdom of light" (Colossians 1:13, Ephesians 5:8, 1 Peter 2:9), of a clear need for fleeing from the world and its lusts (Titus 2:12, 2 Peter 1:4, 1 John 2:15-17) and even of children of the Devil and children of God!

1 John 3:10 *In this the **children of God** are revealed, and the **children of the Devil**: everyone not practicing righteousness is not of God, also he who does not love his brother.*

John 6:70 *Jesus answered them, Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? And **one of you is a devil?***

So who are the "brothers" and what is true biblical "brotherly love"? The brothers are those who are saved of God. They are children of God. Those who have truly been "born-again" into the family and household of God.

If someone is not "born-again" they are not our brother or sister in a spiritual sense! The disciples of Jesus are His family! Those who are born-again do the will of God!

Matthew 12:46-50 *But while He yet talked with the people, behold, His mother and His brothers stood outside, desiring to speak with Him. (47) Then one said to Him, Behold, Your mother and Your brothers stand outside, desiring to speak with You. (48) And He answered and said to him who told Him, Who is My mother? And who are My brothers? (49) And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, Behold, My mother and My brothers! (50) For **whoever shall do the will of My Father in Heaven**, the same is My brother and sister and mother.*

Thus it is not just “church-attenders” or nominal Christians but obedient, bible-believing, born-again Christians who long to do the will of God that are “brethren”.

Also holiness makes us brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ for “He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are one....”

Hebrews 2:11-12 *For both He who sanctifies and they who are sanctified are all of One, for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brothers, (12) saying, "I will declare Your name to My brothers; in the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to You."*

So Christians who are holy (set apart for God) by being born-again and obedient unto God are called brothers of Jesus Christ! What an awesome privilege. Indeed we are called children of God, and are distinct from the world!

1 John 3:1-3 *Behold what manner of love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God. Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. (2) Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be. But we know that when He shall be revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. (3) And everyone who has this hope on him purifies himself, even as that One is pure.*

So we can see clearly now who the “brothers and sisters” are – the disciples of Jesus, those doing the will of God, those born of God and made children of God and sanctified by the blood of the Lamb Himself!

So brotherly love is that deep spiritual love that flows among those who are in God's family. It is the flow of sacrificial love within God's holy and heavenly community. It is intense, it is deep, and it is eternal!

1. Brotherly love occurs within a rejoicing holy, community of grace:

2 Corinthians 13:11-14 *Finally, brothers, rejoice. Perfect yourselves; encourage yourselves; mind the same thing; be at peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. (12) Greet one another with a holy kiss. (13) All the saints greet you. (14) May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.*

1 Peter 1:22 *Purifying your souls in the obedience of the truth through the Spirit to unfeigned love of the brothers, love one another fervently out of a pure heart,*

2. Our brothers (and sisters) are those who sincerely love God:

Ephesians 6:23-24 *Peace to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (24) Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. Amen.*

1 John 4:20,21 *If anyone says, I love God, and hates his brother, he is a liar. For if he does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And we have this commandment from Him, that he who loves God should love his brother also.*

3. The brothers and sisters are those chosen by God for salvation and sanctification:

1 Thessalonians 1:4 *knowing, beloved brothers, your election of God.*

2 Thessalonians 2:13 *But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brothers beloved of the Lord, because God has from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth,*

4. These are known as the "household of faith":

(Galatians 6:10) *So then as we have time, let us work good toward all, especially toward those of the household of faith.*

(Ephesians 2:19) *Now therefore you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God, and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom every building having been fitly framed together, grows into a holy sanctuary in the Lord; in whom you also are built together for a dwelling place of God through the Spirit.*

5. Brotherly love is an essential part of being saved, and brotherly love is not displayed by the unsaved:

1 John 3:10 *In this the children of God are revealed, and the children of the Devil: everyone not practicing righteousness is not of God, also he who does not love his brother.*

1 John 3:14 *We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brothers. He who does not love his brother abides in death.*

So brotherly love is a special spiritual love that is so unique that only people who are truly saved display it. Thus it is qualitatively different from normal family love, affection, romantic love or many other kinds of love that can be, and still are, displayed by those who are "in the world".

It is love that flows from God Himself to us and through the living, breathing, body of Christ with all its gifts, functions and hierarchy. Brotherly love actually constitutes the true Church. The true Church is the community that exists within the Beloved. It is those who dwell in grace and who show grace. Those who have brotherly love are the true Church. Those who do not display love of the brethren are not part of God's true Church.

1 Corinthians 13 (positioned as it is between the gifts chapters 12 and 14) makes it clear that love gives meaning and direction to the gifts and is their true context of operation. Without brotherly love the gifts are just "so much noise". So brotherly love is extremely important and we will explore it more as we go through this series.

Number: 15 Verses: Hebrews 13:1-3
Topic: Let Brotherly Love Continue!

Hebrews 13:1-3 *Let brotherly love continue. (2) Do not be forgetful of hospitality, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it. (3) Remember those who are in bonds, as bound with them, those who suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body.*

Christianity is not a private affair that is just between you and God. Being a true Christian includes genuine outward acts of faith. It includes such things such as showing brotherly love, maintaining hospitality and caring for persecuted Christians.

The inward-minded prayer closet Christian is missing the point! And the mystic in her cave and the solitary monk on a pole in the desert may actually (if they isolate themselves too much) be sinning against God's clear command to "love one another as I have loved you". The goal of the Christian life is not mystic feelings of awe or deep spiritual experiences but love for all that God has created especially the brethren, who are His children, in His image!

The phrase "Let brotherly love continue" should perhaps be better translated as "Let brotherly love be uninterrupted" or "Let brotherly love abide always" (Gk: *meneto*, from *meno*, to abide).

Jesus lived a life awash in constant love and only interrupted his love of the brethren in order to more deeply commune with His heavenly Father. Jesus did not interrupt His love for people, even when He hung on the Cross, where He showed love to the soldiers, the thief, His mother, the apostle John, and of course to you and I.

The kind of Christian who goes from meeting to meeting, website to website, and fills their lives with books, music and DVDs is trying to have the things of God, without having to interact with messy reality (e.g. other people) too often. This kind of self-centered Christianity goes stale and turns into a kind of spiritual neurosis.

While teaching is good, teaching alone is insufficient. We need to "roll up our sleeves" and start caring about our brothers and sisters in the Lord e.g. by showing hospitality.

As a bible teacher I could happily spend all day chasing down Greek verbs and studying commentaries. This is very pleasant work. It is when I stop doing that and have to interact with a real human being that the problems begin!

Of course those who interact with people all day (e.g. high school teachers) may need to spend some time in the Word just in order to retain their spiritual poise and sanity!

So the goal is to live an uninterrupted life of love toward God and also towards others. This of course is a rather lofty achievement. Getting there is a kind of "one-step-at-a-time" process. So we need to ask "what interrupts our love?" Here is a list of a few of my (rather depressing) answers:

1. Preoccupation with self and with our own feelings and needs and crises
2. Constant feelings of inferiority and an overwhelming desire to please others
3. Greed and covetousness and self-protection (to love might cost me money...)
4. Worshiping our own agenda so that we are always "too busy" for others
5. A preoccupation with our own social or religious image and a desire to stay away from people of a lower social or spiritual "rank" unless they affirm us in some way.
6. Anger, resentment, bitterness, rejection, self-pity, moroseness and grudges
7. The desire for revenge, spitefulness, retaliation and retributive "justice"
8. Lustful thoughts, pornography, sexual immorality, using people for gratification
9. Dividing people into "important vs. unimportant" or "useful vs not useful to me"
10. Argumentativeness, intellectualism, and/or doctrinal divisions
11. Pride, superiority, "coolness", vanity and elitism
12. Distorted thinking that misunderstands people's motives and actions
13. Easily taking offense and being hard to please
14. The habit of avoiding people (often over trivialities or imagined slights)
15. Grumpiness, irritability and a general dislike or contempt for humanity
16. Aggression, the tendency to fume, rage and be angry
17. Being very particular over everything, perfectionism, a critical spirit
18. Spiritual deadness, prayerlessness, no desire or motivation to love others.
19. Depression, sourness, dejection and emotional dryness.
20. The need to control or have power over others.
21. The need for everything to be convenient, comfort-orientation
22. The desire to "stay in the groove" and never change or adventure out of it.
23. Immaturity, the desire to be babied, "it's all about me"
24. Fear, anxiety, imagined perils, lack of trust in God
25. Disappointment; "I tried loving people and I just got burned..."
26. Laziness, "I just couldn't be bothered"
27. Pleasure orientation, the need for everything to be fun or entertaining
28. Living in a delusional world/ full of daydreams / drugs, alcohol
29. Gambling, addictions, having your life controlled by a habit or substance
30. Idealism, being consumed by a theory or idea & sacrificing people for it.

I am sure that you can think of others!

As you can see it is very, very easy to find a reason not to love people or to adopt a non-loving lifestyle. A drug addict who lives for the next fix and is totally selfish in the pursuit of drugs has stopped loving because drugs are more important than agape love (and similarly for gamblers etc.).

So we need to stop doing those things that stop us from loving others. For instance, if vanity and materialism are serious obstacles to our regard for other people then we need

to bring those attitudes to God for cleansing and for change. We need to start unclogging our spiritual arteries so that we are no longer hardhearted.

Continual love requires supernatural strength. The power to love comes from the Holy Spirit, who empowers our new nature, and strengthens us in the inner man, giving us the faith to both know God's love, and to make it known.

So the first step in attaining brotherly love is to pray for it and to believe in it, with the clear intent of putting it into practice.

We should also pray for one another to grow in love just as the apostles Paul and John prayed for the Christians in the churches of Asia Minor to dwell in love.

Love is foundational to everything else in the Christian life and foundations should be always present. A consistent Christian is not loving one minute, and then cold, mean and nasty the next. You might love in different ways, and use different means, but your intent in all things – prayer, service, your daily work, relationships etc. should always be love.

You can love and still be busy (since love is an action not just an emotion). Jesus and the apostles were busy loving people! Abiding and continuing in love means no “exceptions” thus no deceit or dishonesty. If your work involves you selling a shoddy or dishonest product, then ask God for different work. It is not ever God's will, not even for a single second, for you to tell lies or to rip people off.

You can abide in love and still be in secular work. You do not need to go into “the ministry”. You can be a kindergarten teacher and abide in love, or a nurse, or an accountant, or a doctor, or a car mechanic and still be honest, loyal and caring and you can even charge a fair price for your services. You do not have to do everything for free. A stay-at-home mum who abides in love and cares for her family is higher up on God's spiritual chart than a totally selfish evangelist!

When we abide and continue in love we abide and continue in the Vine, who is Christ Jesus. Please read the following rather long passage with some prayer and reflection:

John 15:4-12 *Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it remains in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. (5) I am the Vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, the same brings forth much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. (6) If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered. And they gather and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. (7) If you abide in Me, and My Words abide in you, you shall ask what you will, and it shall be done to you. (8) In this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, so you shall be My disciples. (9) As the Father has loved Me, so I have loved you; continue in My love. (10) If you keep My commandments, you shall abide in My love, even as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. (11) I have spoken these things to you so that My joy might remain in you and your joy might be full. (12) This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*

When we abide in love, we abide in Christ's commandments, our prayers are answered, our life becomes fruitful and we glorify God. On the other hand, if we decide not to love, and abide in selfishness, we dry up, become fruitless and useless and get "gathered up and burned". In the terminology of Mark's gospel, we "lose our souls" (Mark 8:34-38).

This incredibly powerful and compelling conclusion is a fairly straightforward interpretation of dozens of different Scriptures (not just John 15). Even the world thinks Christians should always be loving and should love one another. Even the world thinks that stingy, cold, selfish people are without true souls. If this is so, how do so many Christians fiercely resist any thought of engaging in intense brotherly love?

I think it boils down to the fact that selfishness seems sane and sensible while love seems downright crazy and risky. Love takes faith. Jesus could love because He truly believed. He knew Heaven and its rewards and could forsake all. But we balk, we cringe, we hesitate. We aren't so sure that love will work out for our benefit any day soon, and the Cross is terrifying!

Mark 8:34-38 *And calling near the crowd with His disciples, He said to them, Whoever will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. (35) For whoever will save his life shall lose it; but whoever shall lose his life for My sake and the gospel's, he shall save it. (36) For what shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? (37) Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? (38) Therefore whoever shall be ashamed of Me and of My Words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man shall also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.*

Let brotherly love continue, even if it hurts sometimes!

Number: 16 Verses: 1 John 2:10

Topic: How To Never Stumble Spiritually

1 John 2:10 *He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no offense in him.*

The word "offense" used here is "skandalon" (in the original Greek) which comes from a certain type of snare or trap and means to stumble, offend, make a serious mistake, be ensnared in sin or commit a "scandal". Other translations put it this way: *ESV: Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling.*

More simply put, if we love our brother in the Lord, we will dwell in God's light and never make the sort of mistake that causes people to say: "Oh my goodness, that's just so awful..." First, let's take a look at what the apostle John means by being in God's light:

1 John 1:4-7 *And we write these things to you so that your joy may be full. (5) And this is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. (6) If we say that we have fellowship with Him and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. (7) But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.*

1 John 2:8-11 *Again, I write a new commandment to you, which thing is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away, and the true Light now shines. (9) He who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in darkness until now. (10) He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no offense in him. (11) But he who hates his brother is in darkness, and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because darkness has blinded his eyes.*

These two passages obviously have very similar themes:

a) God is light and there is no darkness in Him whatsoever.

b) There is no fellowship between light and darkness. We simply cannot have fellowship with God and walk in darkness. To say that you can do so is lying.

c) We can be self-deceived. We can think we are "in the light" when in fact we are in the darkness.

d) The critical test of whether we are truly in the light is whether or not we love our brothers and sisters in Christ. This type of love is known as practicing the truth.

e) If we hate our brother we are actually walking in darkness. This causes us to stumble.

f) If we love one another, then we are truly in the light, we have fellowship with God and we also have fellowship with one another.

g) If we walk in the light by loving one another we do not stumble and the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin.

If we love one another, then we ARE in the light, we do have God, we are forgiven, we are cleansed and we are pleasing to God. This is GOOD NEWS. We do not need 613 commandments in order to please God and lead a blameless life! We just need to love one another, and then we will be without blame in God's eyes. And if we do occasionally sin we will be forgiven and washed clean! Love puts us on the right track and makes us OK with God.

The apostle Peter adds this perspective: **1 Peter 4:8** *And above all things have fervent love for one another, because "love will cover a multitude of sins."*

The loving Christian lives in the joy of the Lord. "I write this so that your joy may be made full." (1 John 1:4 above). Loving the brethren is the spiritual gateway to the joyous, Holy Spirit filled, clean-as-a-whistle life! Just get that right and the rest seems to fall into place in short order!

There is a downside as well. These passages also tell us that it is easy to be loveless, and to walk around in darkness, stumbling about in religious self-deception.

A couple of months ago I was helping a national missionary family with a very sick child to get a visa to the USA, so the child could be treated at the only hospital in the world that specialized in that particular disease. (This family are very close friends of ours). The visa application process required letters of support. One required letter was from the US branch of the major missions agency this family belonged to. The letter the missions director sent was cold, brutal and completely unresponsive. It simply protected the agency from everything without helping the family at all. It did not contain even a shred of compassion or human decency. Both my wife and I were deeply wounded for days by that brief letter. (What's worse is that there was no actual real risk for the mission.)

The person who wrote it was a theologically educated leader of a major mission agency whom I am sure thinks he is "in the light" and worthy of spiritual leadership. But the lack of human decency, let alone brotherly love, indicates that the true state of affairs is: that he is actually walking in darkness! His education and position has deceived him into believing that he is spiritually OK when his callous actions indicate that there is in fact a major spiritual problem.

The general principle is that if someone is cold and hard and corporate and tough then they are not walking in love, thus they are not practicing the truth. In that case they do not have genuine fellowship with God and are actually in darkness.

Religious organizations are full of such power plays and they are a significant reason why people are walking out of churches, Christian non-profits and mission agencies in droves and never returning. They see the hypocrisy, they see the hatred, superiority and coldness, intuitively know that it is not of Christ, and they are offended and stumble.

Instinctively we all know that the signs of real Christianity are things such as truthfulness, brotherly love, humility and godly wisdom. And that the signs of fake Christianity include hypocrisy, arrogant power games, coldness, and worldly wisdom. The New Testament even talks about the "wheat and the tares" and "false brethren".

There is an absolute existential separation between the generous, good-hearted loving sheep and the selfish ignorant goats in Matthew 25, and deep down we know that it is so. Something inside us reacts and says "That is just not Christian! How can anyone ever do such a horrible thing!" Indeed, Jesus tells us that no amount of ministry effectiveness can make up for such wickedness:

Matthew 7:20-23 *Consequently, by their fruits you shall know them. (21) "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. (22) Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name we cast out demons, and in Your name we did many mighty works?' (23) "And then I will confess to them, 'I never knew you! Depart from Me, you who work iniquity!'"*

These verses tell us that someone can have what appears to be a powerful and effective ministry and still be a worker of iniquity! With that warning in mind, let's get back to the positive side of things.

God has chosen us to be creatures of love and righteousness who dwell in His light for eternity:

John 12:35-36 *Then Jesus said to them, "For yet a little while longer the light is with you. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you; he who walks in darkness does not know where he is going. (36) While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become sons of light."*

Ephesians 5:8 *For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light--*

1 Peter 2:9 *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellent virtues of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;*

Colossians 1:12-14 *giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. (13) He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, (14) in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

We belong forever to the kingdom of light and of love. That is our home and our eternal dwelling place. When we love one another, then we are "at home in our home" having fellowship with God and with one another.

As C.S. Lewis once said in his book *Mere Christianity*: "God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other." As Christians we run on Christ and He alone is our food, and doing His will is our hidden manna, and His brotherly love is our sustenance.

Heaven is our home and we dwell in the light by loving our brothers and sisters in Christ. When we obey the New Commandment we please God and are "on the right track spiritually". Love puts us in right alignment with God because God is love.

The blameless Christian life cannot ever be achieved through works of the law (Galatians 2:15-21) but it can be achieved through the Spirit of love (Galatians 5:16-18). When we are led by the Spirit of love (the Holy Spirit) we are no longer under the law, indeed we are free, we live in the light, and we will know eternal joy!

Number: 17 Verses: 1 John 4:18
Topic: Love Is Unthreatened

1 John 4:18 *There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment. But he that fears has not been made perfect in love.*

2 Timothy 1:7-8 *For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. (8) Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but endure hardship with the gospel according to the power of God,*

Fear and love are opposites. Love casts out fear and fear stifles and inhibits love. The neurotic person who is full of fears and anxieties becomes self-centered and clamorous and is quite incapable of true love. So it's one or the other; love or fear. Therefore, if you are going to be perfected in love you will have to deal with all your fears.

God has given us a spirit of love and has not given us a spirit of fear. We are not to run around feeling threatened by people, circumstances, or even by demons. Jesus did not even feel threatened by Satan but used the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, to deal with the biggest bad guy on this planet! Courage and love go hand in hand and the righteous are as bold as a lion!

Proverbs 28:1 *The wicked flee when no man pursues; but the righteous are bold as a lion.*

Love is bold and courageous, faith is bold and courageous and the man or woman who dwells in the law of the Lord day and night becomes bold and courageous (Joshua 1). Courage is not natural for most of us, but if we ask God for boldness for the sake of the gospel then it will be granted:

Acts 4:29-31 *And now, Lord, behold their threatenings, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your Word, (30) by stretching forth of Your hand for healing, and miracles, and wonders may be done by the name of Your holy child Jesus. (31) And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the Word of God with boldness.*

Christians are to be strong, courageous, zealous, bold and forceful in the work of God. Not bullying the saints, but rather tearing down the strongholds of the enemy and forcefully entering the Kingdom of God and laying hold of it. (2 Cor 10:3-5, Matt 11:12)

The love of God is to be the dominating force in our lives, not the threats of men. We are to overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony! (Revelation 12:11)

Revelation 12:11 *And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb, and because of the word of their testimony. And they did not love their soul until death.*

Paranoia is the opposite of Christianity. Living in fear of recessions, conspiracies, and government take-overs and being spied on is to give room in your head to Satan's fear-generator! Let's see what God says about fearing conspiracies:

Isaiah 8:10-13 *Take counsel together, but it will come to nothing; speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us. (11) For the LORD spoke thus to me with his strong hand upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying: (12) "Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. (13) But the LORD of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.*

We are not to fear what everyone else is fearing (say a stock market crash) or to dread what everyone else is dreading (say a war or a conspiracy). We are not to walk in the way of the people. We are to take a much higher road and go and get God's perspective on our life and on our circumstances. We are to honor God as holy, as the One who is above all, who will be our fear and dread and the only One we really listen to about life.

Christians have always been persecuted, criticized and reviled (Matthew 5:10-12). We are to expect that and not to be surprised by it (2 Timothy 3:12, 1 Peter 4:12). It's par for the course for those who walk in the Spirit. The world hates the anointing and those born according to the flesh will always persecute those born according to the Spirit (Galatians 4:29). In Rome the Christians were "as sheep to be slaughtered" yet God's love was still ultimately victorious:

Romans 8:35-39 *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? (36) As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." (37) No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (38) For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, (39) nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

The feeling of threat is a deep, powerful and primal part of our lower nature, and when we feel a significant threat we tend to automatically do three things that are wrong:

1. We tend to overreact, in either fight or flight, rage or retreat. We do dumb things.
2. We capitulate, compromise and give in to sin or to sinful situations and we remain stuck in them for long periods of time "feeling trapped".
3. We refuse to grow, we refuse to use our gifts and talents, and we silence our witness for the Lord. Think of the one talent steward who starts off by saying "I knew you were a hard man and I was afraid..."

Thus our fears annihilate our sanctification. Indeed, fear is such a big spiritual issue that there are apparently 366 different bible verses saying "do not fear" or "be not afraid", one for each day of the year including leap years!

The antidote to fear is love. Love casts out fear so completely that there is no fear left at all in one who is perfected in love. Once we know God's love there is no fear of the consequences of obeying God. We do not love our lives unto death. We lay our lives down for others, we stand up for Jesus and we confess His Name before men.

The fear of the consequences of obeying God is huge. It can stop Christian growth completely as we say to ourselves: "I cannot do God's will in this matter because if I do then X or Y will happen to me." For instance: "I cannot wait for a Christian husband or I will turn into an old maid." But we are to obey God rather than men (Acts 5).

God's love enables us to rejoice in the tribulations that flow from doing the will of God:

Romans 5:3-5 *And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; (4) And patience, experience; and experience, hope: (5) And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.*

This was certainly the case with the apostles:

Acts 5:41 *And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.*

Acts 16:23-26 *And after laying on them many stripes, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailor to keep them safely; (24) who, having received such a command, thrust them into the inner prison and made their feet fast in the stocks. (25) And toward midnight Paul and Silas prayed and praised God in a hymn. And the prisoners listened to them. (26) And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened and all the bonds were loosened.*

In the above cases the fear and self-pity of the natural man was overpowered by the grace of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit, so the glorious new man, who is fed on the love of God, was able to respond with a heavenly perspective and a heavenly attitude!

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 *For this cause we do not faint; but though our outward man perishes, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. (17) For the lightness of our present affliction works out for us a far more excellent eternal weight of glory, (18) we not considering the things which are seen, but the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are not lasting, but the things which are not seen are everlasting.*

Paul rejoiced when Christians attained a sufficient maturity of faith so that they could endure persecutions with a Holy Ghost attitude:

2 Thessalonians 1:4-5 *So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure: (5) Which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer:*

On the other hand, churches that became dominated by their grim circumstances, fears and discouragements were given stern warnings:

Hebrews 10:34-39 *For you sympathized with me in my chains, and you received the plunder of your possessions with joy, knowing that you have for yourselves a better and enduring possession in heaven. (35) Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has a great recompense. (36) For you have need of endurance, so that having done the will of God, you may receive the promise: (37) "For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not delay. (38) But the just shall live by faith, and if he withdraws, My soul has no pleasure in him." (39) But we are not of those shrinking back to destruction, but of faith, to the saving of the soul.*

Fear is the absolute enemy of your soul and when we give in to fear we "shrink back to destruction" (Heb 10:39 above).

Make a list of all the fears that are holding you back in life, asking God to reveal them to you. Then pray specifically about each of them asking God for boldness, strength and courage. Ask for the specific word that will change your mind about that fear no matter how "rational and logical" it may seem at the time.

You are not to dwell in fear and neurosis, rather you are to dwell in peace, love and joy!

Number: 18 Verses: Acts 10:34,35 & James 2:1-5, 8-9
Topic: Love Is Unbiased

Acts 10:34-35 *Then Peter opened his mouth and said, Truly I see that God is no respecter of persons; (35) but in every nation he who fears Him and works righteousness is accepted with Him.*

James 2:1-5 *My brothers, do not have the faith of our Lord Christ, the Lord of glory, with respecter of faces. (2) For if there comes a gold-fingered man in fancy clothing into your assembly, and if there also comes in a poor man in shabby clothing, (3) and if you have respect to him who has the fancy clothing and say to him, You sit here in a good place, and say to the poor, You stand there, or sit here under my footstool; (4) Did you not make a difference among yourselves and became judges with evil thoughts? (5) Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He has promised to those who love Him?*

James 2:8-9 *If you fulfill the royal Law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well. (9) But if you have respect to persons, you commit sin and are convicted by the Law as transgressors.*

Sad to say, but race, class and culture are among the greatest social boundaries to brotherly Christian love. We are programmed, by our upbringing, to prefer the rich over the poor, our culture over other cultures, and our class and social group over other social classes and groups.

In Acts 10 the apostle Peter had to receive a vision three times from God, some rebukes, and direct instruction from the Holy Spirit before he would even consider going to a Gentile's home (that of Cornelius) and even afterward (Acts 11) he was subjected to much opposition from his fellow Jewish Christians.

In James chapter 2 the false distinctions between rich and poor and the social pecking orders in the church are called "judging with evil motives". Such partiality is even seen as a major transgression against the royal law of love!

God pushes us to love those we would not normally love including the poor, the blind, the powerless, and the disabled:

Luke 14:13-14 *But when you make a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, (14) and you shall be blessed, for they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just.*

We are to enlarge the circle of our heart and to consider ourselves reconciled to all!

Colossians 1:20-22 *And through Him having made peace through the blood of His cross, it pleased the Father to reconcile all things to Himself through Him, whether the things on earth or the things in Heaven. (21) And you, who were once alienated and enemies in*

your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled (22) in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy and without blemish, and without charge in His sight,

If our brother and sister in Christ has been reconciled to God, and we also have been reconciled to God, then logically we should consider ourselves also to be at peace and as reconciled with them!

This means that there should be no culture gap, no income gap, no gap over musical tastes, no generation gap, no gap over clothing or fashion or appearance or food or drink or any other thing!

If a young man with purple hair and a t-shirt comes into church and thinks that I am old and stupid, then that's bias! On the other hand, if I think that young person is inferior in some way – that is also bias! I am his brother and he is mine!

Where I live in Los Angeles there is a lot of “cyber-snobbery” over mobile phones, makes of laptop, etc. The iPhone trumps the Blackberry which in turn trumps a cheap LG feature phone, etc. Social rank is “phone rank” and there is even a term “phone shame” for people so poor that they have a really old cell phone! This may, at first blush, seem “harmless” but in God's eyes it is completely anti-Christian!

No possession or adornment (gold rings, fine clothes) makes us superior in God's eyes! God is “no respecter of persons! That means that God does not care or “respect you more” whether you are a Prime Minister or a garbage collector. Your rank, achievements, possessions, looks and stature are as nothing in God's sight.

1 Samuel 16:7 *But Jehovah said to Samuel, Do not look on his face, nor on his height, because I have refused him. For He does not see as man sees. For man looks on the outward appearance, but Jehovah looks on the heart.*

God's promotions and demotions have absolutely nothing to do with our personal or social attributes and standing in life:

Daniel 4:17 *This matter is by the decree of the watchers, and the demand by the word of the holy ones, so that the living may know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He will, and sets up over it the lowest of men.*

Love does not play favorites, does not establish a social pecking order or form cliques or act as if there are “in” and “out” groups. Neither is love racially prejudiced. Love is colorblind!

Love does not inherit grudges or carry out vendettas. In Christ the Jews will love the Arabs and vice-versa, and the Hatfield's will love the McCoy's. Old wars are forgotten about.

This includes denominational wars between Pentecostals and Baptists, Protestant and Catholics, Lutherans and Mennonites, Orthodox Christians and everyone else and so on.

Just because we were persecuted by group X three hundred years ago does not mean we can still refuse to fellowship with them! (However wrong doctrine is still a serious matter).

We have got to stop looking on the outside of people and reading the "labels" that they wear (and sometimes ostentatiously display). God looks on the heart and searches for faith, hope and love; and we should also adopt a similar attitude.

In Christ, the strong should not despise the weak but should rather serve them!

Romans 15:1-3 *Then we who are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. (2) Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good, to building up. (3) For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me."*

The "strong" group may include the rich, the educated, the fit and healthy, those with deep Bible knowledge etc. The "weak" group may include the poor, the uneducated, the disabled and new believers. The physically strong should help the disabled, those who have lots of Bible knowledge should help new believers, those who are rich should serve the poor and those who are educated should assist the uneducated (say with taxes and government forms).

In the larger picture, rich churches should help poor churches, mega-church pastors should help struggling pastors, and first-world denominations should help Third World denominational partners.

Our love has to stretch a little bit further tomorrow than it did today. Just as Peter was stretched to go beyond his natural social boundaries, so too will you and I be stretched to love others whom we are not 100% comfortable with.

If our love is to be righteous and ethical it has to be impartial! The apostles were very serious concerning this:

1 Timothy 5:21 *I charge you before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that you guard these things without prejudice, doing nothing by partiality.*

James 3:17 *But the wisdom that is from above is first truly pure, then peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.*

Notice the terms – without prejudice, without partiality, and without hypocrisy! We are to do absolutely NOTHING by partiality. This requires great self-awareness and self-discipline. Take a moment to ask God where you are being biased, and then for help to change your ways into the ways of Christ and the ways of love!

Number: 19 **Verses: Luke 10:36,37**
Topic: Love Is Helpful and Merciful

Luke 10:36-37 *So which of these three does it seem to you proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the bandits?" (37) And he said, "the one who showed mercy to him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."*

Matthew 9:12-13 *When Jesus heard that, He said to them, "Those who are healthy have no need of a physician, but those who are ill. (13) But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."*

Acts 20:35 *By all things I have shown you, that thus laboring it is necessary to help those being weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'* "

True Christianity has always been associated with generosity, helpfulness and mercy. In part because the parable of the Good Samaritan has always been one of the center-pieces of the gospel and has been taught in every church of every denomination that I know of. In fact, for most non-Christians, Christianity almost equals "kindness to others".

Kindness is central. The harshness of the Pharisees contrasts starkly with the mercy of Jesus in all four gospels. The epistles urge us to "bear one another's burdens" and there are numerous positive and uplifting "one another" commands.

However, before I talk about being helpful I would like to set some boundaries by discussing those kinds of people that you cannot ever help, and most of the time simply should not help, because they will either refuse, distort or exploit your help:

1. Those who love and practice lies, who dwell in deception and who enjoy falsehood.
2. Those who are wise in their own eyes; there is more hope for a fool than for them!
3. Those whose hearts are full of malice and hatred and who are deeply malevolent.
4. Those who wear masks well, projecting a "persona" that is false and hypocritical.
5. Those who deny their actions and refuse to admit the evil they have committed.
6. Those who frankly admit their actions but who think that they are wise in evil, and who often consider good people to be "just suckers".
7. Those who have reverse morality, calling good "evil" and calling evil "good". (This is the essence of the sin against the Holy Spirit).
8. Those who are totally consumed by greed, covetousness and corruption e.g. Judas
9. The completely lazy "sluggard" who will never act on even the simplest advice.
10. Serial seducers and totally immoral and predatory charmers (who may even try and wreck your marriage, "just for the fun of it", if you counsel them)

Many pastors have come to grief in trying to help people in any of the above ten categories (which are mainly taken from Proverbs and Ecclesiastes). For instance, you can counsel someone wise in their own eyes until "the cows come home" but they will always

find some way of contradicting you or out-smarting you! (I am reminded about Jesus' comment on "throwing pearls before swine!")

Matthew 7:6 *Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces.*

Despite these dangers you should help people anyway! We are not let off the hook of helping our neighbor just because a few of them are "bad apples"! Jesus may not have helped King Herod at all, but He did help thousands of other people! Love, mercy, kindness and generosity are still to be our chief characteristics!

Helping others is not an isolated action that is complete in itself. When you help someone they become part of your life story, you become part of their life story and together you become part of that ages long Story of God's Glory! The glory goes to God, and in time, an eternal reward goes to you!

Matthew 10:42 *And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward."*

To complicate matters even further there are The Three Big Stories that we as Christians are part of, each of which give meaning and color to our lives, and which we enter into as we love and help others. The Three Big Stories (in brief) are:

1. **The Story of Creation and The Cosmos:** Our part as created beings in matters on Earth and in Heaven, our stewardship of Creation, Our stewardship of our physical created body, its use and abuse, its death and resurrection, its role as a Temple, and its glorification in heaven. Our part in the total spiritual cosmos e.g Job's trials, spiritual warfare, our place in the Grand Design of Providence.
2. **The Story of Love and Redemption:** Our salvation, our testimony, the course of redemption, sanctification, relationships, actions of love, our growth in God, our place in redeeming acts of love and kindness, our role as agents of God's agape love. We need to be part of a "Love Story" revealing God's love to angels and to the world.
3. **The Story of God's Glory:** How we contribute to the story of God's glory through good works, patience, kindness, suffering with endurance, displaying God's perfect works in our character, seeking first His Kingdom and His righteousness, possessing Christ in us the hope of glory, doing great things for God (yet only in His power). Our ministry should be part of the story of His glory (not our own)!

When we love and help people we become part of a Divine Drama that runs through the ages and into eternity! Just think of the parents of Samson or Samuel, or of Ruth who helped Naomi and ended up in the line of David and of the Messiah, or of the women who gave to support the ministry of Jesus, or the man that loaned his colt to Him as he entered Jerusalem, or those who Hebrews says have "entertained angels unawares".

When Rahab did the simple act of hiding the Jewish spies in Jericho she became part of a divine drama and ended up in biblical history and an ancestor of Jesus! Many of the biblical heroes did a relatively small thing at an important moment, when courage was required. Quite a few of the great heroic acts of Scripture took only about five minutes!

Simple things, such as hospitality can save lives, change Kingdoms and win battles (Jael and her nail in the book of Judges). Stopping to help someone with a flat tire may get an anointed preacher to a church and see 100 people saved! A gift to a missionary may buy a vital and much needed piece of equipment for the work of the Lord. There is the story of someone who sent a hot-water bottle to a medical missionary in (of all places) the steamy jungles of the Congo, and it arrived on the exact day it was needed to save the life of a premature baby!

Actions of mercy, kindness, and generosity bring us great blessings because they take us into the Three Big Stories of Heaven and Earth. They get us lined up with God's priorities (mercy) and God's blessings and God's approval. This worked even for the Gentile Cornelius and he ended up with an angelic visitation, being visited by the apostle Peter, and his whole household believing and becoming saved:

Acts 10:3-4 *About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming to him and saying to him, "Cornelius!" (4) And looking intently at him and becoming fearful he said, "What is it, lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God...."*

A similar account is how a generous Roman centurion was considered worthy of a healing miracle:

Luke 7:2-5 *And a certain centurion's servant, who was highly valued by him, was sick and about to die. (3) And when he heard about Jesus, he sent elders of the Jews to Him, asking Him that He might come and heal his servant. (4) And when they came to Jesus, they begged Him earnestly, saying he was worthy for whom He should grant this, (5) for he loves our nation, and he himself has built us a synagogue."*

Luke spells out how kindness, mercy and helpfulness work for our benefit as well as for the benefit of others and for the glory of God:

Luke 6:36-38 *Therefore be compassionate, just as your Father also is compassionate. (37) "And judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you shall be forgiven. (38) Give, and it shall be given to you: good measure, pressed down and shaken and running over they shall give into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it shall be measured back to you."*

Now let's get back to the verses that started this bible study and the words of Jesus:

- a) "Go and do thou likewise". (Be a Good Samaritan)
- b) "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." (God desires mercy above religious rituals)
- c) "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Generosity brings blessing)

Jesus clearly wants us to be helpful, merciful and very generous. This also ties in with His commandment to "love one another as I have loved you".

He gave us these commandments for our good, and not just because Jesus thought it was "nice" or would make the Earth a better place. Helpfulness, mercy, kindness and generosity are spiritual "triggers" that let loose the blessings of God. Just look for the word "blessed" in each of the following passages and see what it is associated with:

Matthew 5:7 *Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.*

Matthew 25:34-36 *Then the King shall say to those on His right hand, Come, blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. (35) For I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you took Me in; (36) I was naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.*

Luke 11:28 *But He said, No; rather, blessed are they who hear the Word of God and keep it.*

Luke 14:13-14 *But when you make a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, (14) and you shall be blessed, for they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just.*

2 Corinthians 9:5-7 *Therefore I thought it necessary to exhort the brothers that they would go forward to you, and make up beforehand your blessing, it having been promised that this would be ready, thus as a matter of blessing, and not as of covetousness. (6) But I say this, He who sows sparingly shall also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully shall also reap bountifully. (7) Each one, as he purposes in his heart, let him give; not of grief, or of necessity, for God loves a cheerful giver.*

In each of these cases blessing from God came to those who entered into the adventure of being kind, merciful, generous, thoughtful and so on, out of obedience to the revealed will of God in His commandments.

God's love is merciful, kind, generous, forgiving, reasonable, and practical. God's love is not just a thought or word. God sent His Son, not a Christmas card. God's love actually did good for you, and so you ought to actually do good for others, just as the Good Samaritan did.

When you love one another as God has loved you, in tangible ways, then you enter into a cosmic story and become one with God's actions in the world. This in turn will bring meaning, purpose and joy into your existence. Jesus acted as he did because He knew that was exactly what His Father in Heaven was doing! He was compassionate because God's agenda is compassion!

John 5:19-20 *Then Jesus answered and said to them, Truly, truly, I say to you, The Son can do nothing of Himself but what He sees the Father do. For whatever things He does,*

these also the Son does likewise. (20) For the Father loves the Son and shows Him all the things that He Himself does. And He will show Him greater works than these, so that you may marvel.

Number: 20 Verses: Colossians 1:13-22
Topic: Love And The Story Of The Son of God

Colossians 1:13-22 *For He has delivered us from the power of darkness and has translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son; (14) in whom we have redemption through His blood, the remission of sins. (15) who is the image of the invisible God, the First-born of all creation. (16) For all things were created in Him, the things in the heavens, and the things on the earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers, all things were created through Him and for Him. (17) And He is before all things, and by Him all things consist. (18) And He is the Head of the body, the church, who is the Beginning, the First-born from the dead, that He may be pre-eminent in all things. (19) For it pleased the Father that in Him all fullness should dwell. (20) And through Him having made peace through the blood of His cross, it pleased the Father to reconcile all things to Himself through Him, whether the things on earth or the things in Heaven. (21) And you, who were once alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled (22) in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy and without blemish, and without charge in His sight,*

Yesterday I wrote briefly about the Three Big Stories that we can be part of, they were:

1. The Story of Creation and the Cosmos
2. The Story of Love and Redemption
3. The Story of God's Glory

There actually are all One Story – the Story of the eternal Son of God, who became incarnate in Jesus Christ and who will return in glory! This Son of God is the One through Whom and for Whom the worlds were made and by Whom all things consist:

Colossians 1:15-17 *(15) who is the image of the invisible God, the First-born of all creation. (16) For all things were created in Him, the things in the heavens, and the things on the earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers, all things were created through Him and for Him. (17) And He is before all things, and by Him all things consist.*

The story of Creation has its beginning and end in the Son of God – the whole of Creation was made in Him, for Him, by Him and through Him. The Son of God is the very beginning of all things! They were made by Him and nothing was made without Him:

John 1:1-3 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (2) The same was in the beginning with God. (3) All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.*

The story of the Son of God begins with Him being the heir of the entire Universe, the first-born of all Creation. He is the Boss of the created order! As part of God's Creation we are part of the story of God's Son for Whom we were made! The Son of God existed way before Creation and it is "in Him", that is within His sphere of power, authority and being, that all things consist:

Colossians 1:17 *And He is before all things, and by Him all things consist.*

So the planets and stars and angels and goldfish – indeed all created beings are simply elements in the story of the Son of God. We exist for Him, our careers are for Him, our love is for Him, our worship is for Him, even our eating and drinking is for Him:

1 Corinthians 10:31 *Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.*

Love and Redemption And the Story Of The Son

The second story, the story of Love and Redemption is also clearly part of the story of the Son of God:

Colossians 1:14, 18-20 *(14) in whom we have redemption through His blood, the remission of sins. ... (18) And He is the Head of the body, the church, who is the Beginning, the First-born from the dead, that He may be pre-eminent in all things. (19) For it pleased the Father that in Him all fullness should dwell. (20) And through Him having made peace through the blood of His cross, it pleased the Father to reconcile all things to Himself through Him, whether the things on earth or the things in Heaven.*

The created Universe went astray. It sinned, fell, became disordered and started to bring shame on God. It became full of wickedness and violence; indeed, it even became hostile to God! His Creation had entered into the power of Death, it was self-annihilating and perishing! This rebellious Universe needed to be brought back to God, made at peace with God and reconciled to God and this was delegated to God's beloved Son to do:

John 3:16-17 *For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (17) For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through Him.*

So Christ was sent into the world to die on the Cross and reconcile all things to Himself, even things on Heaven or on Earth, indeed the entire created order needed to be brought back to God! God's created order was falling apart and dying from sin and Jesus was sent into this world to rescue it!

Romans 8:20-22 *For the creation was not willingly subjected to vanity, but because of Him who subjected it on hope (21) that the creation itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. (22) And we know that the whole creation groans and travails in pain together until now.*

The part of Creation that we are most aware of is the human part, and that part is where the story of Love and Redemption finds its potency in the work of Jesus Christ, the Savior and Son of God who reconciles the world to Himself:

2 Corinthians 5:17-19 *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old things passed away; behold, all things have become new. (18) And all things are of God, who reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and who gave to us the ministry of this reconciliation, (19) that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not reckoning their transgressions to them, and committing to us the word of this reconciliation.*

In Christ, God has committed Himself to us in love, to save us, redeem us and to bring us back into full fellowship with Himself and with the entire created order. This section of the story of the Son of God is being acted out in crusades, evangelistic meetings, counseling sessions, and missionary efforts around the globe.

Glory And The Story Of The Son

Thirdly the story of God's Glory is part of the story of the Son of God. The Son has a Kingdom and this Kingdom has a glory:

Colossians 1:13 *For He has delivered us from the power of darkness and has translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son;*

Matthew 6:13 *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.*

2 Timothy 4:18 *And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work and will preserve me to His heavenly kingdom, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.*

The Holy Spirit exists to glorify the Son by releasing the things of God into the earth:

John 16:13-14 *However, when He, the Spirit of Truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth. For He shall not speak of Himself, but whatever He hears, He shall speak. And He will announce to you things to come. (14) He will glorify Me, for He will receive of Mine and will announce it to you.*

The Holy Spirit glorifies Jesus who in turn glorifies the Father:

John 14:13-14 *And whatever you may ask in My name, that I will do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. (14) If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.*

So the glory of the Son, also glorifies the Father:

Philippians 2:9-11 *Therefore God has highly exalted Him, and has given Him a name which is above every name, (10) that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of heavenly ones, and of earthly ones, and of ones under the earth; (11) and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

So as Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is enthroned in triumphant glory and receives the Name that is above every other Name, the Father is greatly honored by the successful

(and marvelous) work of the Son. In this age the story of glory is the story of the ever increasing glory of the Son of God!

Love & The Story Of The Son

Our life story only gains cogency when it becomes part of the Story of the Son of God. For example, the story of Billy Graham is part of the story of the Son of God winning souls back from sin and the story of William Booth (founder of the Salvation Army) is the story of the Son of God ministering amid the darkness, poverty and squalor of Victorian London.

My story has zero validity on its own. My story is totally empty and without meaning as are all human activities "under the sun" (that is those things that are done without taking Heaven's agenda into account). Solomon saw this clearly when he looked at his own achievements (see the book of Ecclesiastes). Without Jesus we can do nothing, and without His love we are nothing!

In John 15 Jesus instructs His disciples on how to stay "in the story" by abiding in Him and loving one another so that they may have fruitful and powerful lives:

John 15:4-12 *Abide in Me, and I in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit on its own, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. (5) I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; because apart from Me you can do nothing. ... (7) If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what ever you may desire, and it shall be done for you. (8) By this My Father is glorified, that you may bear much fruit; and you will become My disciples. (9) "Just as the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. (10) If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and I abide in His love.(12) This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*

It becomes clear now! By obeying Christ's command to "love one another as I have loved you" we join in with God's plan for divine fruitfulness!

More than that we become part of God's plan to create a Universe of loving, moral beings in His own image.

Romans 8:28-29 *And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (29) Because whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers.*

Notice that this wonderful plan is "to those who love God"? As we love God, by loving our brothers and sisters in Christ, then God's plan starts unfolding for us. The Story of the Son is a dramatic, global, even cosmic love story and it is as we join in that love story that we find our meaning, purpose and glory in life!

Number: 21 **Verses: John 15:1-14**
Topic: Love Is A Fruitful Fruit!

John 15:1-12 *"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. (2) Every branch in Me which does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch which bears fruit He prunes, so that it may bear more fruit. ... (4) Abide in Me, and I in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit on its own, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. (5) I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; because apart from Me you can do nothing. ... If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what ever you may desire, and it shall be done for you. (8) By this My Father is glorified, that you may bear much fruit; and you will become My disciples. (9) "Just as the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. (10) If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and I abide in His love. (11) These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may abide in you, and that your joy may be full. (12) This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ..."*

The main task of fruit is not to be food or to have great taste, rather it is to carry the seeds that lead to the reproduction of the fruit tree! Fruit is supposed to be fruitful! Oranges are full of orange seeds which are supposed to produce orange trees! Grapes are full of grape seeds, and are supposed to reproduce grapevines. And olives, with their delicious olive seeds are supposed to produce, guess what – olive trees! The taste is partly so that animals eat them and excrete them in a big bunch of fertilizer!

(It is only with all the hybridization and genetic engineering that modern fruit is sterile and sometimes even without seeds at all but that is not God's intention.)

So it is with the fruit of the Spirit. God's love is supposed to bear fruit, and that fruit should "reproduce" in people's lives! Indeed, we are to bear "much fruit", and that fruit should also be fruitful and alive and good!

Let's look at John 15:1-12 (above):

1. We bear fruit by abiding in the Vine which is Christ and submitting to God's pruning
2. If we abide in Christ, and He in us, then we bear much fruit
3. Part of being fruitful is having amazing answers to prayer
4. Abiding = obeying Christ's commandments=Loving one another as I have loved you

Love is at the exact center of God's will and keeps us abiding in Christ, being fruitful and having wonderfully answered prayers! In contrast, hatred and resentment and selfishness, cause us to be "dead branches" that are burned up and thrown away. God wants to prune off all the "dead" parts of our lives so we can bear even more fruit!

Instinctively we sense this is true when we see a bitter, hateful and resentful person and get the impression that they are without true spiritual life. Such folk have withered up inside and been cast out from grace, in part because they have never allowed themselves to receive or to give out grace! Rage, bitterness, contentiousness, spiritual pride and legalism cut us off from Christ:

Galatians 5:1-4 *Stand fast therefore in the liberty with which Christ has made us free, and do not again be held with the yoke of bondage. (2) Behold, I, Paul, say to you that if you are circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. (3) For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do all the Law, (4) you who are justified by Law are deprived of all effect from Christ; you fell from grace.*

(In the time of Paul "circumcision for full salvation" was a contentious heresy, full of spiritual pride and legalism, and was based on works, not faith.)

In the last couple of bible studies we have talked about God's agenda for our lives. When we decide that the story is about God, and not about us, we start the process of being fruitful. Yet as soon as we make the story about ourselves we become "dried up". So if our love is to be a fruitful fruit we have to fix our eyes, not on ourselves, but on Jesus, who is the author and perfecter of our faith:

Hebrews 12:1-3 *So therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every impediment, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, (2) looking unto Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (3) For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you be weary and discouraged in your souls.*

Discouragement bears no good fruit. It only produces resentment, despair, hostility, prayerlessness and unbelief. It saps our strength of action, robs us of boldness, turns us inward and makes our life sour and grumpy and loveless.

The way out of discouragement is to focus on Jesus and what He gladly endured on our behalf! When we stop thinking about our own story and focus on the story of the glory of the Son of God, then our spirit is strengthened and we are empowered! The cross shows us that not every moment in life is "fair" and that even Jesus had to suffer for God.

There are many weary discouraged saints who no longer believe that God loves them or that He will "turn up" for them to answer their prayers. They have given up, and for all practical purposes are almost atheists. For them God exists but does nothing "good" on their behalf. God's love is not real and tangible for them, and after a while their own capacity for zealous love diminishes. Eventually they retain a shell only, a private and intellectual faith full of ideas but lacking any substantial power.

Love cannot bear much fruit once discouragement has settled in. Discouragement leads you back to self-life and is a great and terrible enemy of the pilgrim child of God, which Bunyan rightly called "Giant Despair"!

The Thessalonian church endured a great deal of persecution and discouragement and so Paul wrote to them extensively about the End Times, endurance and such things. Yet Paul always commended their love for one another. It seems that the Thessalonian Christians "encouraged the discouraged" and Paul would use terms such as "just as you also are doing" meaning that it was current daily practice:

1 Thessalonians 5:11-14 *(11) Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing. (12) And we request of you, brothers, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and instruct you, (13) and to regard them beyond all measure in love, because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. (14) Now we exhort you, brothers, admonish the disorderly, encourage the discouraged, be supportive of the weak, be patient toward all.*

Now this very encouraging and supportive community is one example of how we can help each other to be totally fruitful. By encouraging one another we can help each other to remain in Christ, to be enthusiastic, to remain hopeful, and to bear fruit!

Fruit often needs a trellis for support (e.g. our tomato bushes) otherwise the fruit falls on the ground. Other fruit trees need to have their branches tied up. As we become "supports" for one another we help each other to "bear much fruit".

This is why you need to be part of a network of friends and ideally part of a long-term loving and supportive small group where you can be actively involved and known. The fruit of love is a living and very spiritual thing which must be cultivated in community. We grow in love; we do not manufacture it with programs!

As we minister to one another we become the body of Christ and thus abide in Christ and become fruitful. You cannot become fruitful just reading your Bible at home. You have to go out and love somebody! Love will be a fruitful fruit when we water it with encouragement, comfort, consolation and prayer and speak the truth to one another in love.

Ephesians 4:15-16 *but speaking the truth in love, we may grow up in all things into Him who is the head--Christ; (16) from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the working of the measure of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the edification of itself in love.*

Quick Summary: Your fruitfulness will come as you exercise one another in an encouraging and supportive Christian community, and thus abide in Christ, experiencing powerful answers to your prayers (John 15:7). Discouragement is your enemy and you need to get out of discouragement by focusing on Christ and joining a positive faith-filled Christian community or small group.

Number: 22 **Verses: Matthew 6:12-15**
Topic: Love Forgives Debts

Matthew 6:12-15 *And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. (13) And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. (14) "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. (15) But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

The Greek word used here for debts is *ophelema* and has the sense of a "a thing justly or legally due, a thing owed, a financial or moral debt". The word "as" literally means "because" so a more literal rendering of verse 12 would be:

"And forgive us all that we owe to God, both financially and legally and morally because we are also forgiving others of everything they owe us, financially, legally and morally".

This verse tells us that God lets us off the hook BECAUSE we also let others off the hook.

(The phrase "let off the hook" conveys the exact sense of the Greek word *aphes / aphiemi* or to "forgive, release, depart from, disregard a matter, let alone".) This is further amplified in verses 14 and 15 above which state that if we forgive, we are in turn forgiven, however if we refuse to forgive, then we are (quite justly) not forgiven.

One of the great "rules of thumb" is that God will treat us as we also treat others e.g. blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy, God deliver us if we deliver the poor (Job 29:11,12; Psalm 41:1), God refuses to consider the prayer of the inconsiderate (1 Peter 3:7) and so on. This especially applies to the area of forgiveness and having power over others. There is of course the terrifying end of the parable of the unforgiving servant:

Matthew 18:32-35 *Then his lord, after he had called him, said to him, O wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. (33) Should you not also have pitied your fellow servant, even as I had pity on you? (34) And his lord was angry, and delivered him to the tormentors until he should pay all that was due to him. (35) So likewise shall My heavenly Father do also to you, unless each one of you from your hearts forgive his brother their trespasses.*

In this parable a servant who owed an immense amount of money, ten thousand talents (one talent was about 75lbs of gold) and is forgiven, attacks and imprisons a fellow servant who owes him the equivalent of about a hundred dollars. The king is furious and throws that wicked and unforgiving servant into jail because he did not also let his fellow servant off the hook of his financial obligations.

Now please remember that Matthew had been a tax-collector. In fact, Matthew was probably the chief tax-collector at Capernaum and one of the three chief tax collectors in all Israel (also along with Zaccheus the chief tax collector at Jericho). Now what does an

ancient Jewish-Roman tax-collector know about debt-collecting, thuggery and about never letting anyone off the hook? Quite a lot would be my guess!

Matthew had previously made his living by exacting "the last penny" out of people and "handing them over to the jailers" if they refused to pay! Just as Paul went from ultra-legalism to the apostle of grace, so Matthew's conversion transformed him from Mr. Super-Scrooge to penning the gospel of forgiveness!

For Matthew this was very real, and for us today in our "business mentality" world it should also be very real. We should never use our power over others to exact every last cent from them. We should forget about the fifty dollars that was never paid back. We should let family grudges pass on by, and we should not go around constantly saying "but you owe me". Christians should be soft-hearted! Besides the things that are not repaid now will be repaid later at the resurrection of the just:

Luke 14:13-14 *But when you make a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, (14) and you shall be blessed, for they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just.*

Expecting an exact return is worldly thinking, the thinking of sinners, and Christians are to go way beyond that kind of mentality to the mentality of grace and of heavenly reward:

Luke 6:34-36 *And if you lend to those of whom you hope to receive, what thanks do you have? For sinners also lend to sinners, to receive as much again. (35) But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return. And your reward shall be great, and you shall be the sons of the Highest. For He is kind to the unthankful and to the evil. (36) Therefore be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.*

The concept of "debt" is very broad and is much bigger than just iniquities, sins and trespasses! It is everything that we have some sort of legal or moral power to extract from one another. Divorce settlements, house repossessions, social obligations, and even sexual expectations within marriage!

Adult children often feel that they are owed a huge "love debt" by uncaring, selfish or abusive parents who ruined their childhood and who have never expressed much in the way of affection. And there are indeed some truly awful parents out there who impose cruel and excruciating childhoods on their offspring. However, carrying this "love debt" around inside of us does us no good at all! We may not be able to excuse their behavior or justify their behavior but we can let go of that "love debt" and forgive their behavior!

You do not have to say that black is white or that evil is good, but you have to let go of that darkness and evil and let your parents "off the hook" of your rage and hurt! God will forgive you because you have forgiven your parents! One way to do this is by writing a "letter to God" about your childhood, listing your grief and pain, then stating your forgiveness and closure of the issues, and then burning it! No one needs to see it!

I used to live in Southern California which is probably the most litigious place on earth and where there are (I am told) about one-third of the world's lawyers!

These numerous attorneys are being hit hard by the recession and are now encouraging everyone to sue everyone else! This includes Christians taking legal actions against their churches and pastors and against one another. Scripture clearly forbids this:

1 Corinthians 6:1-8 *Does any of you, having a matter against another, dare go to court before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? (2) Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? (3) Do you not know that we will judge angels? Let alone ordinary matters! ... (6) But brother goes to court against brother, and this before unbelievers! (7) Already therefore, it is actually a defeat for you that you have lawsuits against one another. Why not rather accept wrong? Why not rather accept being defrauded? (8) But you wrong and defraud, and these things to your brothers!*

Christians are to be tender-hearted and to let each other off the hook as sinners forgiving each other, in the love of God!

Ephesians 4:30-32 *And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you are sealed until the day of redemption. (31) Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and tumult and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. (32) And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you.*

Philippians 2:1-4 *If there is therefore any encouragement in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any tenderesses and mercies, (2) then fulfill my joy, that you may be like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord and of one mind. (3) Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves. (4) Do not let each man look upon his own things, but each man also on the things of others.*

Colossians 3:12-14 *Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender feelings of mercy, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering, (13) forbearing one another and forgiving yourselves, if anyone has a complaint against any. As Christ forgave you, so also you do. (14) And above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfectness.*

“As Christ forgave you, so also you do”. We should treat others tenderly and mercifully just as God in Christ treats us, “forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you” and not grieving the Spirit or breaking the unity and fellowship of the Holy Spirit!

Let go of your indignation, wrath and fury; for the wrath of man does not work the righteousness of God (James 1:20)! Start letting people off the hook! Let your kids off the hook, your parents off the hook, and your friends and church mates off the hook. Even let your pastor, God and the cosmos in general off the hook! Find mercy in your soul and live it out, for merciful love is Christ in you, the hope of glory!

Prayer: *Lord teach us to forgive others as You indeed have forgiven us!*

Number: 23 Verses: Romans 8:14-19
Topic: Love Reveals The Children of God

Who are the true heirs of this world? Who will inherit all things on the Last Day? For there are currently many false claimants, for example the Devil (Luke 4:1-11) and the Beast (Revelation 13). Who is it, who in the end, will inherit the kingdom of God? We do know some of the answers, as unlikely as they seem just now:

Matthew 5:5 *Blessed are the meek! For they shall inherit the earth.*

1 Corinthians 3:21-23 *So let no one glory in men; for all things are yours, (22) whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours, (23) and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.*

In fact the whole of Creation groans under these false and evil claimants, and awaits the revelation of who the true sons of God really are. There will be a vast liberation of all things when the sons of God come into their inheritance and rule and reign over Creation with righteousness and love:

Romans 8:14-19 *For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. (15) For you did not receive a spirit of slavery again to fear, but you received a Spirit of adoption by which we cry, Abba! Father! (16) The Spirit Himself witnesses with our spirit that we are children of God. (17) And if children, also heirs; truly heirs of God, and joint-heirs of Christ, if indeed we suffer together, that we may also be glorified together. (18) For I calculate that the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to compare to the coming glory to be revealed in us. (19) For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly awaits the revelation of the sons of God.*

This story of the sons of God starts with a kingdom prepared for us “before the foundation of the world” (Matthew 25:34)! The entire Creation was made through Jesus, by Jesus and for Jesus. Creation finds its culmination in Christ and is held together by Him. The whole meaning of life, the Universe and everything is found in the story of the glory of the Son of God and every tree, flower and planet has its foundation in Him, because they were made “for Him” (Colossians 1:15-20, John 1:1-3, Hebrews 1:1-3).

In the beginning the Creation did not yet exist, and it was brought into existence to tell the story of the Son of God, to reveal Him to men and angels and heavenly beings, almost as a huge stage set to tell a grand drama about Jesus and His redemption. Eventually, when the story of redemption has been told, this Creation will be rolled up and a new heaven and a new earth will be made in which righteousness dwells and where God will dwell with men who will inherit the Kingdom (Revelation chapters 20-22). But who are these mysterious people, these sons who reveal the Father?

Those who reveal Christ most are those made in the image of God. They are the sons of God, those who bear the family likeness and spiritual genetics. Indeed, the preaching, lifestyle, sufferings, miracles and testimonies of the first apostles revealed the life and nature of Christ to a remarkable extent:

2 Corinthians 4:9-13 *being persecuted, but not being forsaken; being thrown down, but not having been destroyed; (10) always bearing about the dying of the Lord Jesus in the body, that also the life of Jesus may be revealed in our body. (11) For we who live are always being delivered up to death on account of Jesus, that also the life of Jesus may be revealed in our mortal flesh; (12) so that death indeed works in us, and life in you. (13) But having the same spirit of faith, according to what has been written, "I believed, therefore I spoke," we also believe, therefore we also speak,*

Galatians 1:15-16 *But when God was pleased, He having separated me from my mother's belly, and having called me through His grace, (16) to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the nations, immediately I did not confer with flesh and blood,*

The purpose of Paul's life, from birth, was that God "might reveal His Son in me"! Incredible! Paul was to be a living revelation of Jesus the Son of God! Now we have this revelation of the gospel and the apostolic witness in the New Testament. But as 1 Corinthians 13:10 tells us this knowledge is "partial" and awaits a full revelation of God.

The day of the Lord's Return will finally be the day when the Son of Man is fully revealed to the unbelieving world and the saints, sons, and heirs of God are revealed with Him:

Luke 17:30 *According to those things, it will be in the day the Son of Man is revealed.*

Colossians 3:4 *Whenever Christ our life is revealed, then also you will be revealed with Him in glory.*

1 John 3:2 *Beloved, now we are the children of God, and it was not yet revealed what we shall be. But we know that if He is revealed, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is.*

Yet, at some time before Christ is revealed, the Antichrist (the Man of Lawlessness) and the children of the Devil are revealed (the tares, the mini anti-Christ) and cast out of the inheritance! (2 Thessalonians 2:3-10, 1 John 2:19, Matthew chapters 13 and 25). These false heirs and claimants are removed so the true heirs may be revealed and shine forth and inherit the kingdom prepared for them!

There are those whose lives are not a revelation of Christ, but are instead a clear revelation of the works of the flesh, and they will not make it into the Kingdom of God:

Galatians 5:19-21 *Now the works of the flesh are clearly revealed, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lustfulness, (20) idolatry, sorcery, enmities, fightings, jealousies, angers, rivalries, divisions, heresies, (21) envyings, murders, drunkenness, revelings, and things like these; of which I tell you beforehand, as I also said before, that the ones practicing such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

Similarly, the children of the Devil are revealed by two things:

- a) a lifestyle of unrighteousness and
- b) not loving one's brother:

1 John 3:9-11 *Everyone who has been begotten of God does not sin, because His seed abides in him, and he is not able to sin, because he has been born of God. (10) By this the children of God and the children of the devil are revealed: Everyone not practicing righteousness is not of God; also the one not loving his brother. (11) Because this is the message which you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another,*

On the other hand, we can also conclude from the above verses that the true children of God are born of God, practice righteousness, and truly love one another:

1 John 4:7 *Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; and everyone that loves has been born of God and knows God.*

1 John 3:14 *We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brothers. He who does not love his brother abides in death.*

1 John 3:23-24 *And this is His commandment, that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as He gave us commandment. (24) And he who keeps His commandment dwells in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit which He gave to us.*

God, who is love, is perfectly revealed in those who love one another, for this is His image and likeness. Those who love one another are of God. The children of God are revealed through their love. Love proves that we are Christ's disciples and assures our heart before God that we are truly His. The revelation of the sons of God is a revelation of those who are truly righteous and truly loving.

The children of God are not revealed by some doctrinal test alone no matter how deep and thorough (though doctrine is important). For even the Devil and the demons can have right doctrine (James 2:19). The Pharisees had right doctrine, and sat in the seat of Moses, but Jesus called them children of Hell and of the Devil (Matthew 23:1-5, John 8:44)! Thus it is not our knowledge that counts, but our faith, and how our faith works itself out in love (Galatians 5:6).

Love is the lifestyle that reveals who the sons of God are, and is the spiritual sign that tells Creation who its true heirs will be. Those who love one another will take over Satan's dominion completely and reign and rule with Christ Jesus for a thousand years until the new heaven and the new earth and then be co-heirs with Him in the New Creation!

Matthew 19:28-30 *And Jesus said to them, Truly I say to you, You who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you also will sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (29) And everyone who left houses, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for the sake of My name, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life. (30) But many first ones shall be last, and last ones first.*

Matthew 25:34 *Then the King will say to those on His right, Come, the blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*

Galatians 4:6-7 *And because you are sons, God sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, Abba! Father! (7) So that you no more are a slave, but a son, and if a son, also an heir of God through Christ.*

In Matthew 25 it is those "sheep" who have a lifestyle full of loving acts (food, clothes, visiting etc.) directed toward the "least of the brethren" that end up inheriting the Kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world.

This is not salvation by works! Rather the loving works are a sign and a true revelation of the existence of the born-of-God nature. Their love reveals that they truly are children of God (who is love) and are thus entitled to receive the inheritance!

Love does not save the "sheep", instead it is perhaps like a test of descent or parentage, or their new birth certificate that shows they belong to the family of God. Love indicates that our profession of faith is real and true. Love shows that Christ is truly within us and that we have the "mark of God" in our lives, the Holy Spirit, whose sign and fruit is love.

In this present evil age (Galatians 1:4) Creation is ruled over by dictatorial selfishness and "those who destroy the earth" (Revelation 11:18) and it groans with earthquakes, disasters, famines, signs in the heavens and with wars and rumors of wars (Matthew 24).

Soon however this evil cosmic regime will tumble down and be done away with! The false claimants to the throne who said "let us kill the heir so the Kingdom will be ours" will be cast out, the tares will be burned, the Devil will be cast into the lake of fire and a new heaven and a new earth will come about, one in which righteousness dwells.

The ONLY people who will be victorious and who will be able to enter this new and glorious Kingdom will be those who have already entered into the love of God. And these will be those who, by faith, have decided to love one another!

Number: 24

Verses: Colossians 3:9-10

Topic: Love Does Not Play Games

Colossians 3:9-10 *Do not lie to one another, having put off the old man with his practices, (10) and having put on the new, having been renewed in full knowledge according to the image of the One creating him,*

Love does not lie, cheat or play games. Love does not need to sin in order to win. Love does not engage in corporate politics. Thus love is "not of this world". Rather, love flows out of the new nature, which is incorruptible, and does not engage in any form of corruption or deceit.

Love "puts off" the old man with his corrupt practices. The old manipulative ways are discarded. The thief stops stealing, and the flatterer stops trying to con people, the flirt stops abusing his/her power and the tough competitive person stops "playing the game" with everyone that they meet.

In Ephesians Paul spells this out at quite some length, please read these verses carefully:

Ephesians 4:17-25 *This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should not walk from now on as other nations walk, in the vanity of their mind, (18) having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart. (19) For they, being past feeling, have given themselves up to lust, to work all uncleanness with greediness. (20) But you have not so learned Christ, (21) if indeed you have heard Him and were taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus. (22) For you ought to put off the old man (according to your way of living before) who is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, (23) and be renewed in the spirit of your mind. (24) And you should put on the new man, who according to God was created in righteousness and true holiness. (25) Therefore putting away lying, let each man speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.*

Christians are members of one another and are to speak the truth in love to one another. We are to be sincere and without hypocrisy. The truth is in Jesus and people who are in Jesus are to be fully truthful in every single aspect of their lives. We are to have a robust soundness of being; without "image", manipulation or flakiness. No "spin", no misleading people, no pressing people's buttons. We are not to say one thing and mean another!

Such transparency, honesty and guilelessness is costly in life and business. It is "almost impossible" to truly love people and simultaneously be a worldly success! This is because worldly success nearly always requires a strong commitment to self and to selfishness. You get it, and you keep it, and you hold on to it for dear life!

The worldly-wise person sees nothing at all wrong with the occasional lie, a bit of backstabbing, an outrageous profit, the exploitation of the gullible and so on. For the worldly person their motto is: "Sometimes you just have to sin in order to win".

To succeed in life, you have generally to be somewhat of a moral failure, and to succeed as a Christian you often have to be something of a failure in the world's eyes (just as the apostle Paul was). There are some professions such as teaching where this is less of a problem but as the world gets worse and worse, more and more pressure is brought to bear on Christians to compromise (for instance to instruct children in anti-Christian values). Most Christians should prepare themselves for a severe conflict between conscience and career at some point in their lives!

Those who end up abandoning worldly success (and its lack of ethics) for conscience's sake or for the work of God are seen as "fools for Christ's sake":

1 Corinthians 4:9-13 *For I think that God has set forth us last, the apostles, as it were appointed to death; for we have become a spectacle to the world and to angels and to men. (10) We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are honorable, but we are despised. (11) Even until this present hour we both hunger and thirst and are naked and are buffeted and have no certain dwelling place. (12) And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it; (13) being defamed, we entreat. We are made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now.*

I remember talking to some Chinese Christians who told me the story of a lady Christian doctor who chose to have a second child rather than have an abortion. The doctor was fired from her position at the hospital and a heavy fine was levied upon her! People who knew her considered her career-ending move extremely foolish since abortion is so widely practiced in China! This woman chose conscience over career and took up her cross for Christ:

Galatians 6:14 *But may it never be for me to boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*

Matthew 16:24-27 *Then Jesus said to His disciples, If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and let him bear his cross, and let him follow Me. (25) For whoever may desire to save his life will lose it. But whoever may lose his life for My sake will find it. (26) For what will a man be benefited if he should gain the whole world, but forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give as an exchange for his soul? (27) For the Son of Man is about to come with His angels in the glory of His Father. And then "He will give reward to each according to his practice."*

When we play games, even small ones, it is always for some kind of pleasure or pay-off. We think we will gain something worthwhile by the move. But in the process of the game we actually lose things of infinite value. Each act subtracts. With each lie we die. And every trick makes the inner man sick. When others are deceived the Holy Spirit is grieved (Ephesians 4:25-30). We gain the world (which is passing away) but in the process we lose our eternal souls. We are liked but we do not love, we are rich but we are restless, we are successful yet we are without grace in our lives.

So why do people lie, cheat and manipulate? For self-protection, money, status, image, power, sexual favors, to please people, curry favor, get them to do what they want when

they want it, and to “win” in every transaction. In some cases, they do so simply because: “that is just the way business is always done around here”. It's the worldly way, the “wise” way, the way that “gets you somewhere” and because “nice guys finish last”. After all, with a sucker born every minute why shouldn't you take advantage of them?

However, Christians are not to walk in the crafty ways of this world. The New Testament makes it abundantly clear that you simply cannot love God and befriend the world (James 4:4), or serve both God and Mammon (Matthew 6:24). We are crucified to the world, dead to the world (Galatians 6:14), and we are not to enter into partnership with the world or the spiritual principalities and powers that inhabit it (2 Corinthians 6:14-18).

Not only are we called to leave the world behind but we are also called to renounce the manipulative methods that the world uses:

2 Corinthians 4:2 *But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness, nor adulterating the Word of God, but by the revelation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.*

2 Timothy 3:12-14 *Yea, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (13) But evil men and seducers will go forward to worse, deceiving and being deceived. (14) But continue in the things that you have learned and have been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them,*

1 Corinthians 2:1-5 *And I, brothers, when I came to you, did not come with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring to you the testimony of God. (2) For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. (3) And I was with you in weakness and in fear, and in much trembling. (4) And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, (5) so that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.*

The cost of gamesmanship is way too high, if you “sin in order to win” you will, one day far too late, find out that the wages of sin is death! Games tend to get out of control. Flirting leads to adultery which leads to divorce and even, in some cases, even to death. Lying leads to compulsive lying which leads to being found out, and to distrust, dismissal and sometimes even to jail. One-upmanship leads to continuous competition, which leads to the golden treadmill, which leads to high levels of stress, which leads to nervous breakdowns and heart attacks.

In this life playing the “tougher” life-games can lead you to one of three places: jail, hospital or the morgue. And ultimately if you are a serious hard-ball game-player and keep on lying then your final destination is the Lake of Fire:

Revelation 21:8 *But the fearful, and the unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, will have their part in the Lake burning with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.*

Number: 25

Verses: Phil 1:9-11, Eph 4:13-15

Topic: Love Is Not Easily Deceived

Philippians 1:9-11 *And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in full knowledge and in all perception; (10) that you may distinguish between things that differ, that you may be sincere and without offense until the day of Jesus Christ, (11) being filled with the fruits of righteousness through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.*

Ephesians 4:13-15 *And this until we all come into the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a full-grown man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; (14) so that we no longer may be infants, tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine, in the dishonesty of men, in cunning craftiness, to the wiles of deceit. (15) But that you, speaking the truth in love, may in all things grow up to Him who is the Head, even Christ;*

Love and truth walk hand-in-hand and cannot be separated. Jesus was the incarnation of both grace and truth (John1:14-18). Christians are to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) and love is to be discerning, wise and perceptive (Philippians 1:9-11).

However, there is a rather prevalent view in some pietistic Christian circles that the more simple, trusting, naive and gullible someone is, the more faith they possess and the more spiritual that they are! This is religious folly at its worst and is at complete odds with the biblical teaching on wisdom as a cardinal spiritual virtue. Side-by-side with this is the idea that Christians should be "completely non-judgmental" and not form opinions about others, or about their honesty, truthfulness or trustworthiness.

In direct contrast to this view, Proverbs says that gullibility is a gross moral failure because it rejects wisdom's influence upon the life of the believer and fails to make the effort to seek out wisdom and understanding and is in fact a disastrous form of folly. (Proverbs 1:22,23,32, 7:7, 14:15-18).

In the N.T. Paul takes the first four chapters of 1Corinthians to explain that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of wisdom, knowledge, revelation and truth who imparts the things of God to us "so that we might know" all that God has for us (1 Cor 1:9-16). Thus simple, naive and gullible people can only end up in that state by actively refusing to be taught of the Holy Spirit (John 14:26, 1 John 2:20,27)! This refusal to learn from God is sin!

Gullibility and faith are total and complete opposites. The phrase "gullible Christians" should be an oxymoron (a contradiction in terms). Indeed, being "completely non-judgmental" is spiritual suicide and leads people to be "tossed around by every wind of doctrine" and taken captive by the wiles of deceit (Ephesians 4 above).

In fact, both Ephesians (above) and Hebrews tells us that gullibility is for the immature, for babes in Christ, and that mature Christians are able to clearly tell the difference between good and evil:

Hebrews 5:13-14 *For everyone partaking of milk is unskillful in the Word of Righteousness, for he is an infant. (14) But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, even those who because of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.*

There is a great deal of evil and deception out there and it is only increasing in these latter days:

1 Timothy 4:1 *But the Spirit expressly says that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and teachings of demons...*

In Matthew 24 and Mark 13 (parallel passages) Jesus warns the disciples over and over again about being deceived and tells them not to believe certain people, especially about the End Times:

Matthew 24:4-5 *And Jesus answered and said to them, Take heed that no man deceive you. (5) For many will come in My name, saying, I am Christ, and will deceive many.*

Matthew 24:11-13 *And many false prophets will rise and deceive many. (12) And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many will become cold. (13) But he who endures to the end, the same shall be kept safe.*

Matthew 24:23-26 *Then if any man shall say to you, Lo, here is Christ! Or, There! Do not believe it. (24) For false Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders; so much so that, if it were possible, they would deceive even the elect. (25) Behold, I have told you beforehand. (26) Therefore if they shall say to you, Behold, He is in the desert! Do not go out. Behold, He is in the secret rooms! Do not believe it.*

Apparently the End Times will be full of cults, false teachers, false prophets and false apostles and especially of a strong Satanic delusion that will take over the world (except for those believers who love the truth):

2 Thessalonians 2:8-14 *And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the breath of His mouth and shall destroy with the brightness of His coming, (9) whose coming is according to the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, (10) and with all deceit of unrighteousness in those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, so that they might be saved. (11) And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie, (12) so that all those who do not believe the truth, but delight in unrighteousness, might be condemned. (13) But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brothers beloved of the Lord, because God has from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth, (14) to which He called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

This deception is a sort of idolatrous spiritual technology that is perceived as miraculous:

Revelation 13:13-14 *And it does great wonders, so that it makes fire come down from the heaven onto the earth in the sight of men. (14) And it deceives those dwelling on the earth, because of the miracles which were given to it to do before the beast, saying to those dwelling on the earth that they should make an image to the beast who had the wound by a sword and lived.*

And a Babylonian mixture of sorcery, witchcraft and economic persuasion:

Revelation 18:23 *And the light of a lamp will never more shine at all in you. And the voice of the bridegroom and of the bride will never more be heard at all in you. For your merchants were the great ones of the earth; for by your sorceries all nations were deceived.*

Indeed, the Devil and his followers are intent on deceiving as many people as possible:

Revelation 12:9 *And the great dragon was cast out, the old serpent called Devil, and Satan, who deceives the whole world. He was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.*

However, when we deliberately choose to obey love and walk in the commandments of Jesus Christ we will be freed from such powerful deceptions:

2 John 1:6-8 *And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, as you heard from the beginning, that you should walk in it. (7) For many deceivers have entered into the world, who do not confess Jesus Christ coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the anti-christ. (8) Look to yourselves, so that we may not lose those things which we worked out, but that we may receive a full reward.*

The last verse above informs us that there is a cost for falling prey to spiritual deception, we "lose the things which we worked out" and do not receive a full reward. Just as a con-man can take your money, and the reward of your labor is gone for good, so spiritual con-artistry can remove the reward of your works for God and that is also "gone for good"!

Gullibility is a moral failure and if you fail to ask for, or to exercise, God-given wisdom (James 1:5-8, 3:18) then you will end up paying a terrible price! It is the foolish and silly virgins that are locked out of the reward of the wedding feast! (Matthew 25:1-13)

Some additional verses (to those above) for further study on Deception:

Deception by Others: Mark 13:5,6; Luke 21:8; Romans 16:18, 2 Corinthians 11:13, Ephesians 5:5,6; Colossians 2:8; 2 Thessalonians 2:3; 1 Timothy 2:14; 2 Timothy 3:13; Titus 1:10,11; 2 Peter 2:12-16; 1 John 3:7; Revelation 19:20, 20:3,8,10

Self-Deception / Deception by Lusts: Matthew 13:22, Mark 4:19, 1 Corinthians 3:18, 6:9, 15:33; Galatians 6:3,7-8; Titus 3:3, Hebrews 3:13, James 1:22,26; 1 John 1:8;

Number: 26 Verses: 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, Hebrews 6:10 Topic: Your Love Equals Your Ministry

1 Corinthians 13:1-3 *Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become as sounding brass or a clashing cymbal. (2) And though I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. (3) And though I give away all my possessions to feed the poor, and though I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.*

Hebrews 6:10 *For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister.*

If you do not have love, you do not have a valid ministry, even if you have powerful revelations, prophesy, do miracles, give to the poor and have mighty faith (see 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 above). On the other hand, even a little bit of love, under difficult circumstances, constitutes a ministry that is not forgotten by God (Hebrews 6:10 above).

Knowledge, power and ability are helpful things to have however, on their own, these things do not constitute Christian ministry if they are separated from love. And "effectiveness" and "strategy" do not constitute Christian ministry if they are selfish and corporate in nature! A large crowd and much approval does not validate a ministry for "so they treated the false prophets" (Luke 6:26).

Even a compelling idea or vision for world-transformation is not necessarily a ministry, unless the vision is driven by love and carried out as part of a loving community.

Ministry must proceed from God's love and be done in love and out of love, not out of necessity, not out of feelings, and not from a good idea or even out of a compelling need.

However, once you have love, then by all means deploy knowledge, faith, and administrative skills in the service of love. Yet love must still be primary!

Just a word of caution, love may not be separated from the truth. So a valid ministry speaks the truth in love. For instance, you cannot discard big chunks of Scripture in the name of love.

Love should guide your actions and directions in ministry. The areas where you can most completely show agape love are the places where you should focus your ministry. For instance, some former drug addicts end up with a huge compassion and love for drug addicts and this love directs their ministry. Or someone may have a great love of children or the people of the Congo or for a certain church. Let your love lead you!

On the other hand, if there is an area where you do not have love, you either need to pray for such love, or to leave that ministry area alone. Do not go where your love cannot stay with you and lead you and motivate you. For instance, if you do not like administration at

all and it just makes you grumpy, upset and unreasonable, then obviously you should not even consider a ministry of church administration!

Since the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth and the Spirit of love then His leading and His plans will ALWAYS involve both love and truth. If we are walking in the Spirit, we will simultaneously be walking in love. The Holy Spirit will never lead you any other way. For instance, the Holy Spirit will never lead you to commit a selfish or hateful act.

Human reasoning is often selfish. The budget is often the bottom line. On the other hand, God's reasoning is loving, truthful, kind and wise:

James 3:17-18 *But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. (18) Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those making peace.*

If you were to walk only in love, where would that lead you? To the cross? To your neighborhood? To generosity? To hospitality? Follow love, righteousness and peace!

I am tired and weary of the power games of religion and of corporate decisions about strategic directions in ministry. Where is the love in that? James and John did not heal the lame man as part of a program, campaign or strategic decision, they healed the lame man because that was where God's love was flowing in that moment!

You have to follow God's calling, God's love and God's truth. You need to be like Jesus and just do the things that you see the Heavenly Father doing. It is not up to our will. It is better to teach the truth to three people than be an ear-tickling humbug to three thousand!

Ministry is not about our reputations, or about the offerings, or about human approval, it's about the glory of God made manifest in loving actions:

Galatians 5:13 *For you, brothers were called to freedom; only do not use freedom for an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.*

The true servants of God are those who serve in love. If we serve in pride, we are not serving as we should. We are all merely "unworthy servants just doing as we ought".

Luke 17:10 *So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'*

Love is your first duty. Other things (such as ensuring attendance) are secondary! "Getting people to come to church" is way less important than loving them and serving them. The Church is first and foremost a loving community of faith that walks in the truth. It is not a religious theatre that has to be filled by good marketing!

Love also answers the question of how much ministry you can undertake. You can only do as much ministry as love allows and you can only do as little ministry as love allows.

On one hand, if you are so busy and hurried that listening to others and caring for them is virtually impossible, then you are doing too much for God! If the fruit of the Spirit starts "falling off the tree" through stress, and you are impatient and impossible – then you are doing too much ministry. Love does not allow you to always be in a hurry!

On the other hand, if you're isolated from others, selfish and inward and never hospitable then you are not loving enough! You need to open up, be more loving, take more risks of love and do more ministry. Get away from the TV, turn off the computer, and move out of the office and start getting face-to-face with real human beings and meeting their obvious needs. Love does not allow you to always cruise along in selfish mode!

One of the more interesting verses in 1 Corinthians 13 says: "*And though I give away all my possessions to feed the poor, and though I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.*" (verse 3). How can someone give everything to the poor and still be unloving?

Ananias and Sapphira are an example of such behavior. In Acts 5:1-11 they sell their land and give the money to the apostles for distribution to the poor and apparently state that "they sold everything" (when in fact they had kept some for themselves). It was not retaining some of the money that was the problem. Rather it was the lie that they had "given the full price of the land" when in fact they had not!

Why did they tell this lie and try to deceive God? Probably because it would have made them appear to be very religious and brought high approval in the fledgling Christian community. The gift was not done in order to love others, but rather as public evidence of how spiritual they were! Their huge gift was simply a form of spiritual self-promotion!

What they should have said was something like: "We sold the land for X and kept Y amount for our living expenses and are giving the remainder to the poor." but that would not have sounded quite as good, besides they might have been trying to out-score Barnabas (see end of Acts 4).

Love is the only right motive for ministry. Ministry not motivated by love, is simply not ministry. Indeed, it is "as nothing". If you cast out demons, do mighty miracles and so on but have not love, you might end up being called "a worker of iniquity" (Matthew 7).

Paul says love of Christ "constrained" his work for the Lord:

2 Corinthians 5:13-15 *For if we are out of our mind, it is to God; or if we are in our senses, it is for you. (14) For the love of Christ constrains us, judging this, that if one died for all, then all died; (15) and He died for all, that the living ones may live no more to themselves, but to Him who died for them and having been raised.*

The Greek word here (sunecho) means to press, straiten (as in a straitjacket) or even to imprison. The love of Christ was so overpowering that it totally dictated Paul's every action in ministry. Paul could not move outside those prison walls, outside the straitjacket of love! Your ministry is not constrained by your budget but rather it is constrained by your love of Christ and of one another!

Number: 27 Verses: 1 Thessalonians 3:12

Topic: Love vs. Personality

1Thess 3:12 *And may the Lord cause you to increase and overflow with love for one another and for everyone, just as we also do for you.*

1John 3:18 *My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.*

Love and personality often get confused in people's minds. We are flat out telling the difference between someone who genuinely loves us and someone who is merely manipulating our emotions with their wonderful personality.

However, they are actually incredibly different! Love is a truthful and divine action as in "God so loved the world that He gave...": whereas personality is just an often-manufactured social appearance as in: "That motivational speaker sure has a great personality!".

The meaning of the word "personality" has gradually broadened out in common use to include our inner being as in the concept of "personality tests" but that is not the original definition or the definition I will be using in this study. Here personality will retain its meaning as how you are socially perceived e.g. as the "life of the party" or "that poor girl just has no personality".

Someone with a "great personality" can convince us that we are loved. They smile, touch, flatter, use nice words and persuade us until we are taken in. The sad truth is that we are just being manipulated for their own ends (to buy their DVD, vote for them or enter into an exploitative relationship with them.).

Love never exploits. Love never engages in wickedness. Love is never unjust. Love never asks you to go against Christ, against the Bible, against your conscience or against your own best interests. Love never steals your last dime.

Personality and love are often mixed up as in: "she just really loves on people", which translates as that the person is generally extroverted, is warmly affectionate and socially accepting and often compliments other people. While this is good, and is sure better than being hostile and nasty, it is not quite the same as agape love. For instance, such a person could just be selling you a set of very expensive cookware! Unfortunately, this rather phony "love as words and gestures" is the accepted form of love in many churches and little more is thought about it!

The Bible corrects this view stating: *My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.* (1 John 3:18). This tells us that true love is a verb, and not just verbal! Love is active. Agape love is shown in good deeds done in a truthful and non-manipulative manner.

The Bible asks us to "walk our talk" if we are going to claim to be loving. Many polite and socially adept people are in fact very selfish and self-centered (e.g. some diplomats). So we need a better definition of love, one that will guide us in our own actions, and also guide us as we interact with others.

Never think that being nice is enough. Niceness does not satisfy God at all. Many church back-stabbers are nice on the surface! Love is a benevolent action not just a social interaction.

Encouragement can be part of love, but on its own it is not quite there:

James 3:15,16: *Suppose a brother or sister does not have any clothes or daily food and one of you tells them, "Go in peace! Stay warm and eat heartily." If you do not provide for their bodily needs, what good does it do?*

In these difficult times we need to do much more than saying: "I will pray for you brother, now go home and be warm!". Instead we need to take some positive action steps toward helping that particular person, according to our ability to do so.

Modern technology allows certain people, with exceptional personalities, to create great and powerful delusions. People relate to television hosts as if they were part of the family and believe that the TV personality genuinely loves and cares for them, when in fact they are just a statistic, a mere single "viewer" out of millions! We agree with this delusion and give it power because we want to be entertained and it seems "harmless enough at the time".

However, it is far from harmless when the whole of life is considered. Video games, TV, music and the Internet can consume enormous amounts of time in virtual fantasy worlds. People lose say 20 hours a week interacting with cartoon figures, actors and models, who do not care about them at all, while ignoring Jesus Christ who does love them, who died for them and who truly wishes to bless them!

Weaker souls become obsessed with certain media personalities and think about them day and night. This is encouraged by advertising gurus, so we even have semi-religious phenomena such as the "cult of personality", "American Idol" and "rock star worship". Personality deceives and enslaves. You get the "enchanted" woman who wants men to adore her and be enslaved to her every desire; and the charismatic cult leader with hundreds of devoted followers under his authority. Many people are very needy emotionally and a ruthless person with a powerful personality can captivate them. Love of course is the exact opposite! Love frees and liberates. Love lets go. Love wants people to mature into independent adults, no longer swayed here and there by every wind of doctrine.

Personality thrives on adolescent instability and immaturity, whereas love works towards responsibility, dignity and nobility of character. Personality wants to produce slaves that rave. In contrast love wants to grow saints that reign - with Christ as kings and priests! Love does not create idols; love tells you to focus on God first. There is only one true religion and that is the worship of the God who created the heavens and the earth, the seas and springs of water (Rev. 14:7). The Bible forbids bowing down before idols, before people or before the works of our hands. (This was the "problem" with Mordecai who refused to bow down before the egotistical official Haman). Paul and Barnabas were truly horrified when the people at Lystra decided to offer sacrifices to them after they had healed a man lame from birth (Acts 14:8-18)!

We are to "put on Christ" not our make-up or our mask or our "business smile" when we go out the door! Instead of "developing a winning personality" lets "develop a Christ-like character"!

There are some who advocate personality as essential to ministry, as if preaching the gospel was some sort of sales promotion with quotas, tough closes and monthly bonuses. However, personality is quite independent of success in ministry. In fact, personality can hinder ministry by making people trust in men rather than having them trust in God. It seems that even the apostle Paul may not have had a "winning personality":

2Cor 10:10 *For it is said, "His letters are weighty and powerful, but his physical presence is weak, and his public speaking is despicable."*

The gospel is not a matter of slick pitches and personality but of words given by God:

1 Corinthians 2:2-5,13 *For I didn't think it was a good idea to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. **3** I came to you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. **4** My speech and my proclamation were not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a powerful demonstration by the Spirit, **5** so that your faith might not be based on men's wisdom but on God's power. ...**13** We also speak these things, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual things to spiritual people.*

So we see that Paul deliberately avoided the cult of personality, even saying at one point "who is Paul and who is Apollos..." (1 Corinthians 3:4 ff.), deriding the very idea of having a human following. Paul wanted people to follow Christ, not himself, and did not use human means of persuasion but rather spiritual words of wisdom and the demonstration of the Spirit and of power so that the faith of the new believers would not rest on human wisdom (which can be out-argued by a philosopher) but on the irrefutable and demonstrable power of God.

(2 Corinthians 4:2) *Instead, we have renounced shameful secret things, not walking in deceit or distorting God's message, but commending ourselves to every person's conscience in God's sight by an open display of the truth.*

The Good Samaritan is not known to us for his looks, charm and eloquence but for his loving and neighborly actions. The love of Jesus is not known by His outward appearance or stage personality but by His dying on the Cross (Romans 5:8)! In fact, it seems that Jesus was not considered to be humanly impressive in His day, read the following verses noting what people thought of Jesus is a social sense:

(Isaiah 53:1-5) *"Who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a tender plant, and like a root out of a dry ground; he had **no form and he had no majesty that we should look at him**, and there is **no attractiveness that we should desire him**. "He was **despised and rejected by others, and a man of sorrows, intimately familiar with suffering; and like one from whom people hide their faces; and we despised him and did not value him**. "Surely he has borne our sufferings and carried our sorrows; yet we **considered him stricken**, and struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, and he was crushed for our iniquities, and the punishment that made us whole was upon him, and by his bruises we are healed.*

The One who loved us and redeemed us was considered as despised, rejected, without value and unattractive! So your social potential and your ministry potential are completely unrelated!

Thus it is clear that being a loving person and having a great social personality are, in fact, almost opposites. Love is truthful, sincere, non-manipulative, honest, forthright,

spiritual and without masks or pretense and declares itself through action and through words of wisdom and through the demonstration of the Spirit and of power!

Number: 28 Verses: Luke 6:35
Topic: Love vs. Relationship

Now I'm really confusing you! Love versus relationship? Are not the two identical? Not quite! Let's look at this logically, then Scripturally:

1. You can love someone you don't even know e.g. by sending a gift to an orphanage in Africa, thus you can show love without having any relationship whatsoever.
2. You can love your enemies (who, by definition, you have an awful relationship with) and do good to them, pray for them and bless them.
3. You can love someone who is unresponsive, say in a coma, and sit by them, pray for them, and ensure optimal care for them.
4. You can love someone who you are totally baffled by (most parents of teenagers understand what I am saying here).
5. You can love someone who you have a terrible and uncontrollable relationship with e.g. an alcoholic spouse or a mentally ill relative.
6. On the other hand, you can be deluded and can think you have a great relationship with someone only to discover they don't love you at all!
7. Or you can have a mutually exploitative relationship that feels great in the short term but which is unloving and totally destructive (e.g. most, if not all affairs).
8. Some people have what I call imaginary relationships, with "invisible friends" or with people on TV who they see as part of their lives or even sitcom characters. You cannot love (agape love) a person who does not really exist!
9. You can even hate (in biblical terms) someone that you have a "great relationship" with! Extremely self-centered people are like that. Selfishness, coldness, and lack of empathy are considered hateful in the Bible and in most non-Western cultures.
10. Of course the ultimate example of this is that God loved us while we were yet sinners, were dead in our trespasses and sins, were hostile in mind toward Him, disobedient and ruled by lusts and passions and full of darkness, without relationship with Him at all. "We love because He first loved us..."

Now of course love should lead to and flow out of relationship, but we also have to love even in the absence of a positive relationship! For instance, we have to love our enemies, our difficult relatives, and the guy at the telephone company who keeps putting us on hold!

In such a fallen world as the one we live in we often face the dilemma that relationships are often completely out of our control, yet that God commands us to love people anyway. It may be utterly impossible to "have a good relationship with" a mentally ill parent, however it is within our ability to agape love our parents and to honor them. This is why God never directly commands "have a good relationship with" (the closest is the command: "be at peace with all men as far as it is possible with you..." see Rom. 12:18)

So we find that the Scripture never commands that we have a certain quality of relationship with people, even our spouses, but rather that we have certain concrete, observable and measurable attitudes and actions (such as humility, submission etc.).

Relationships often depend on someone-else's decisions and God never wants us to be held personally accountable for someone-else's poor life skills. Attempting to manage a "relationship" also means we believe we have some hope of changing the other person and possess the power and wisdom to do so (even through prayer). Yet that would violate the sovereign free will of the other person.

Love is a completely free gift which requires no return and that can be given even to the "evil and ungrateful":

(Luke 6:35) Rather, love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them, expecting nothing in return. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because He is kind even to ungrateful and evil people.

If God was not kind to evil people none of us would be saved by the blood of the Lamb!
(Romans 3:23, 5:8, 6:23)

So love and relationship are separate and independent concepts. Love is under our control but relationships are sometimes a tough call and will totally disintegrate in the Last Days:

(Matthew 24:9-12) "Then they will hand you over for persecution, and they will kill you. You will be hated by all nations because of My name. Then many will take offense, betray one another and hate one another. Many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. Because lawlessness will multiply, the love of many will grow cold.

(2 Timothy 3:1-5) But know this: Difficult times will come in the last days.) For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, without love for what is good, traitors, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to the form of godliness but denying its power. Avoid these people!

When the spirit of lawlessness comes in like a flood the world will become difficult, dangerous and treacherous and a "man's enemies will be those of his own household"; indeed, at that time there may be no one at all whom you can trust except God!

Even when our relationships become toxic we are still called to show God's agape love, even to our enemies, persecutors and betrayers. Jesus let Judas Iscariot kiss Him and even called Judas "friend" (Matthew 26:47-50). Our demonstration of God's agape love in and throughout such trials will prove our faith and result in either the repentance or in the stern judgment of our enemies.

So here is the big question: Will demonstrating God's agape love improve your relationships? The answer is a definite maybe but probably not! Jesus was filled with God's agape love and He just got betrayed and crucified and His close friends fled from Him when He needed them most. As we saw yesterday (in Isaiah 52:1-5) Jesus was despised, rejected, and turned away from. The most loving person in the world seems to have had lots of enemies and some very disappointing friends! We will see the reason for this later.

Even the love of Jesus did not win over the chief priests, Herod, the money-grubbing crowds or the traitor Judas. Love does not always "win". Sometimes it loses really, really hard. Love gets rejected for all sorts of reasons but one BIG reason is that God's love requires absolutely ethical behavior. We reject God's love because we don't want to change or be changed or to have to give up some pleasurable sin or dishonest practice or to alter a selfish and self-centered lifestyle.

Like the Rich Young Ruler, once we get the total picture of God's love, we move right along, sad, but in a definite hurry to get far away from it! God's love is going to ask us to be loving in return, it's going to ask us to "sell everything and give it to the poor and go follow Jesus!"

Jesus' love is not cozy and it can totally mess up our comfortable lives and sever our relationships with those near and dear to us:

Matthew 10:34-36 *Don't assume that I came to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household.*

In fact, many of the heroes of faith and love had some truly awful relationships: Abraham and his greedy nephew Lot, Isaac and the pagan wives of Esau, Jacob and his twelve out-of-control sons, David and his squabbling, murdering incestuous children, Jeremiah and the whole Jewish nation...

This bleak picture is only partly due to human fallibility. Much is due to the work of the Devil who accuses us to God, God to us, us to each other, and even us to ourselves, and so on, endlessly. The Devil is very successful at producing conflict, war and death. The Devil's reign of lawlessness will soon be complete and human relationships will go sour very quickly and permanently. The sudden and incredible breakdown of numerous Christian marriages is just part of this.

Yet at the same time God's love will be poured out upon His saints and flow out from them in glorious ways as His bride the Church is prepared to be "without spot or wrinkle" on the day of His return. The Church will be perfected in love, even as the world around us becomes completely selfish and totally wicked.

The end of this process will be a huge company of glorious martyrs who love God with their whole being and who love one another as Christ first loved them. Even in the most difficult and terrible of circumstances they will act as believers and live as believers and be sanctified and glorified as believers. Will you decide to be one of them?

Number: 29 Verses: Romans 5:6-11 Topic: Love Graciously Values The Person

Love graciously values the actual person, not what the person has to offer as a benefit of some kind. Love imparts value to the eternal soul, the deep, real inner human being made in the image of God. Love certainly acknowledges, but does not primarily focus upon, the externals. Love is not “after something” such as money, social status, being with a cool person, good feelings, a service of some kind, or an ego trip.

Now these external things (such as good feelings) are part of life and relationships but they are not central or primary to agape love. The Good Samaritan did not do what he did out of any desire for good feelings, personal benefit or for long-term gain. It was not cool, safe or profitable to hang out with and help a guy who had been beaten up by robbers. In fact, it was dangerous, expensive and inconvenient. The Samaritan even had to get off his animal and walk all the way to Jericho.

The Good Samaritan did what he did because he recognized a valuable human being in the image of God, who was in need of help. This manner is also how God loves us:

Romans 5:6-11 *6 For while we were still helpless, at the appointed moment, Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For rarely will someone die for a just person — though for a good person perhaps someone might even dare to die. 8 But God proves His own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us! 9 Much more then, since we have now been declared righteous by His blood, we will be saved through Him from wrath. 10 For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, then how much more, having been reconciled, will we be saved by His life! 11 And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have now received this reconciliation through Him.*

First let's take a look at how we are described from God's viewpoint: helpless (v.6), ungodly (v.6), still sinners (v.8), and enemies (v.10).

Secondly let's look at what God does for us: Jesus died for us (v.6,7,8), loved us (v.8), declared us righteous (v.9), saved us from wrath (v.9,10), reconciled us (v.10,11), and saved us by His life into blessing (v.10)

Thirdly let's “do the math”: We had zero to offer God and we got everything in return. We were helpless, hostile and condemned and we became saved, reconciled and justified. There was nothing in us that God wanted from us. We were not attractive propositions to God. In fact, He saw us as useless, ungodly, sinful, and at war with Him and still He loved us, and sent Jesus to die for us!

Agape love reaches out to the inner person, to the needy, helpless, lost, beaten-up soul. Agape heals the lame man, resurrects the dead girl, feeds the hungry, comforts the afflicted, and visits the prisoner, asking nothing in return.

Thus agape love is the exact opposite of the “I will minister to you as long as you donate (or tithe) to me” mentality. Sure the worker is worthy of his/her wages but they should not love people who pay more. People who cannot donate, or who do not tithe, should not be treated as second-class citizens within the household of God. Jesus did not die for us so that we could tithe to Him!

Much modern ministry is based on a "business plan" and I am frequently asked "What is your business plan for the sustainability of your ministry?" That is almost an anti-Christian question. Neither Jesus, Peter, Paul or any of the apostles had such a silly notion. You minister because it is what you have to do after God has called you and sustainability is not even a consideration:

1 Corinthians 4:9-13 *9 For I think God has displayed us, the apostles, in last place, like men condemned to die: We have become a spectacle to the world and to angels and to men. 10 We are fools for Christ, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored! 11 Up to the present hour we are both hungry and thirsty; we are poorly clothed, roughly treated, homeless; 12 we labor, working with our own hands. When we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; 13 when we are slandered, we respond graciously. Even now, we are like the world's garbage, like the dirt everyone scrapes off their sandals.*

Paul was hungry, thirsty, poorly clothed and homeless. Obviously he was in this economic condition because he did not have a "business plan". Rather Paul ministered in agape love, giving out the gospel for free and expecting nothing in return.

Why take such a crazy and impractical path in life? And why do this for years and years? Because for Paul the people who could not pay were just as valuable as those who could pay! Every lost and confused soul was valuable regardless of their net worth.

The gospel is often preached last of all to the poor. The nations with the least gospel proclamation are generally also those with the least income and the greatest danger. People are rushing to set up churches in Newport Beach but not so keen on Asia's urban slums! In fact, Jesus considered the gospel reaching the poor as being in the same category as some of His major miracles:

Matthew 11:4-6 *4 Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and report to John the things which you hear and see: 5 The blind receive sight, and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. 6 And blessed is the one who is not offended because of Me."*

Notice that Jesus starts with the lesser miracles of healing, then goes up in difficulty and just after "raising the dead" (a very low probability event) is the phrase "and the poor have the gospel preached to them". We need to get back to the apostolic attitude to ministry as outlined by Jesus when He commanded: "Freely you have received, freely give" (Which, by the way would probably be dismissed as an impractical business plan!)

Matthew 10:7-8 *7 And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' 8 "Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.*

Agape love gives freely and loves freely because it sees the intrinsic eternal worth of the person, and does not focus not extrinsic factors such as rank, appearance and ability.

Love values the image of God in Christ dwelling in the soul of the believer. This great glory dwells within each believer regardless of social factors and makes us equal in God's Kingdom (neither male nor female slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile ...).

Agape love takes the long view and tries to see humanity from an eternal perspective. That is as potential brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus Christ. This vast vision of our perfection as sons of God is a huge part of why God acts toward us as he does:

Romans 8:28-30 *28 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. 29 Because whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.*

Hebrews 2:11-13 *11 For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brothers, 12 saying: "I will declare Your name to My brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing praise to You." 13 And again: "I will put My trust in Him." And again: "Behold I and the children whom God has given Me."*

God loves us because in His eternal view of things God sees us as His sons and daughters and as younger siblings of the Lord Jesus Christ (Heb 2:11-13 above), for Whom God made the worlds (Col 1:15-20)! Your value to God does not consist in what you know, or even in what you do now, but instead in what you will become as the process of sanctification and glorification does its work (Rom 8:28-30 above).

This ideal and eternal view of human worth can only be understood by faith! We need God to open our spiritual eyes and ears to see the great value that He places on even sinful, helpless and ungodly persons so that we may love them as Jesus loves them and thus fulfill the commandment to: "Love one another as I have loved you".

This kind of love can only begin with a proper valuing of other people and an appreciation of the worth to God of even the most broken among us. People are never a waste of time or money. Jesus judges us by our attitudes toward "these, the least of My brethren..." and considers an action against them as an action against Himself (Matthew 25:40,45) and persecution of His Church as persecution of Himself (Acts 9:4,5)

Jesus identifies totally with those who are of faith, those who are His brothers and sisters in the Church. We should love our brothers and sisters in Christ because when we love them, we are also loving Jesus. This awesome and terrifying fact of Christ is us the hope of glory, is invisible to the world, but is clearly visible to those who desire to live in love, by faith, and in obedience to God. Let us love one another as Jesus Christ loves us!

Number: 30 **Verses: John 13:34-35**
Topic: As I Have Loved You...

John 13:34-35 (EMTV)

34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

John 15:12 (EMTV)

12 This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

John 15:17 (EMTV)

17 These things I command you, that you may love one another.

In this last bible study in the series we are going to look at Jesus' phrase: "as I have loved you" - which describes the *how* and *how much* of our love for one another.

What do we find about Jesus' love for His disciples?

1. Jesus loved them to the end and to the uttermost (John 13:1)
2. Jesus served them and washed their feet (John 13:1-17)
3. Jesus called them "friends" not "servants" (John 15:13-15)
4. Jesus deliberately laid down His life for them (John 10:11,15 and 15:13)
5. Jesus sent the Comforter to be with them and in them (John chapters 14-16) and filled them with the Holy Spirit (John 20:22)
6. Jesus sent them into the world with a trusted mission as His personal witnesses and representatives. (John 20:21)
7. Jesus sought out and restored fallen and broken Peter and the other disciples who had failed Him in his hour of need. (John 21:15-19)

Of course we know many other things as well such as that Jesus chose them, lived with them, rebuked storms for them, and trained them to pray and to engage in ministry. However, it is the seven things above that stand out to me most as indicating Jesus' love for His disciples.

These seven things indicate that Jesus had a total and irrevocable commitment to these eleven men with all their weaknesses, failings and misunderstandings. Jesus did not regard His disciples as slaves or as employees on a contract. There is no impression that they were there in order to build up Jesus' ego (after all He did wash their feet). They were friends, real friends, for whom He chose to lay down His life!

Here we find the fullness of Deity in bodily form befriending smelly Galilean fishermen!

Jesus did not pretend about this divine-human friendship. It was real and genuine and went all the way to the Cross. God befriended us in Christ! Indeed, God genuinely seeks friendship with us, real friendship with us, just as He did with Abraham!

James 2:23 (EMTV)

23 And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." And he was called a friend of God.

This quest for friendship, deep, real life-long and committed friendship, lies at the heart of the Christian life. We are to love others as Christ loved us! This is the new commandment of the New Covenant.

Jesus was totally committed to His friends and even His last words on the Cross were at times directed to them (and to God). Friendship was never out of the mind of Jesus! And the friends of Jesus also included others such as Mary, Martha and Lazarus (John 11:11).

The application to us is that friendship is not a side issue. Friends are not a secondary matter, something you have "if you have time". If you are making disciples, then you are simultaneously making friends and you should love those disciples as you love yourself. Thus we discover that ministry without true friendship is not fully Christian ministry.

Even the workaholic Paul was committed to his friendships with people like Timothy and Titus and was restless unless he could see them:

2 Corinthians 2:13 (HCSB)

13 I had no rest in my spirit because I did not find my brother Titus, but I said good-bye to them and left for Macedonia.

So we see that groups of friends such as the disciples of Jesus and the companions of Paul had key roles in the spread of the gospel. These strong friendships demonstrated and proved the love of God in Christ!

Christianity is not grounded in philosophy it is grounded in personal covenant friendships between the members of the Trinity, between God and man and between individual Christians in love! If you subtract love from Christianity, then the whole thing simply vanishes! For Christ came to bring reconciliation, that is, He came to fix the friendship.

If Christians are to love each other as Christ loved us, then we will have to change just about everything we do at church! We need to ask questions about how we love one another, encourage one another and build one another up in the faith. This is not just the job of the pastor! Every Christian is to live in love, which means that every Christian is to build some life-long committed friendships with fellow-believers.

Church can no longer just be a theater full of spiritual spectators. We have to get to know the name and even the life of the person next to us in the pew. And we have to move into small groups and micro-communities where we can, in faith, exercise the gifts of the Spirit in love.

This brings us back to the concept of the "household" that was discussed earlier in this series. The twenty or thirty people that we know well and who we are prepared to have in our kitchen at home at various times (depending on the size of your kitchen).

For Jesus it seems it was His mother and brothers and sisters, the twelve disciples, Mary, Martha and Lazarus and some others. Perhaps in His case it may have been 70 or even 120 or so. But for most of us it will be a much smaller number of people. These are the people we are to decide are "our folk". They are the people we will have a life-long commitment to. These are the folk whose feet we will wash, whom we will serve and

whom we will die for. Even if we travel in ministry we will come back and seek these people out again.

This is a much bigger concept than a "social circle". And it's way more commitment than just "befriending" someone on Facebook. This is "I will push your wheelchair and change your diapers when you are old" stuff. Without that kind of love, you do not really have love and without agape love, your ministry is as nothing.

This kind of deep commitment to others is lacking in our highly mobile and very self-centered society. Our lives tend to be more about our career, status, image, agenda and finances than about each other. In fact, we are terrified of intimacy and deride it using phrases such as "living in each other's pockets".

I am not suggesting that we all sell everything and join a Christian commune in Oregon. However, I am saying, and very strongly, that we need to factor our close friends and their human needs into our lives in very significant ways. We need to budget for giving. We need to practice hospitality. We need to have people in our home for more than an hour or two a month. We need to take down the walls and let people into our existence.

On the surface, friendship seems extremely inconvenient. We help people move and we hurt our back in the process. We lend money and it doesn't come back. We cook nice food and everyone arrives late and it is ruined. But what sort of inconvenience is that compared to the Cross?

I still miss my Bosch hammer drill that I had in the Philippines and a few other items "loaned" to friends but those losses are just small potatoes. Christian friendship and brotherly love is way, way, way more important than mere possessions!

Loving others as Christ has loved us is a spiritual goal that we are commanded to aspire to. It is indeed very difficult but it is not at all optional. It is not just for St. Francis of Assisi, rather, as we have seen in this series, it is for every single Christian convert from day one on to maturity in Christ.

You simply cannot be obedient to God and opt out of loving people. You may not live in a selfish Christian bubble. You are absolutely required to care for your brothers and sisters in Christ and to "wash their feet". However, you probably don't have to jump on the next plane to India. God will show you what to do. God Himself will teach you how to love one another (1 Thessalonians 4:9) if you submit to Him in this area.

In these final few paragraphs I am going to challenge you to reflect deeply on the amount of love that you are "living out" in your life. I will use Minda and I as an example of what can be done by two very ordinary people, not to condemn you but to show you what can be achieved within the confines of a very modest suburban existence without running off to join a commune. I'm not trying to boast but merely to show you what can be done, and what you can do also.

We grow large quantities of vegetables which we give away to others, especially those in need. When we need something done around the house we employ unemployed friends who have construction skills so we can augment their income and we pay above market rates. Once a month we have a prayer meeting with about twenty folk in the house. People come and go continually for prayer and counseling. When people come here they feel at peace. Somehow God turns up here, and we are no better than anyone else.

The neighbors, even non-Christians feel free to drop by. We give to missionaries and they often stay in our house when they are traveling through Los Angeles. We take people in when they are in distress and house them for up to months at a time (for instance, in a few days' time we will be opening up our house to a family who have a child with brittle-bone disease and they may stay with us for a year).

Our friends around the world know that we will give freely when we have the means to give. They also know that our means are limited and we feel free to tell them so. We don't have a "God-complex" and we are not trying to rescue anyone. In fact, everything seems very ordinary, easy and completely natural. There is no thought of "earning brownie points". Every square inch of the house gets used for ministry and from my home office I have an online ministry that touches 1.2 million people per year.

Minda and I are just two middle-aged missionaries on an average income and we do not even have extroverted personalities (we are both nerds). We just act according to our conscience, helping some people and not helping others. We let go of some things in order to do others (for instance we don't get to watch much TV). But it is not all duty and sacrifice either, because we feel tremendously blessed and even when we make financial mistakes God seems to out-bless our silliness.

Yes, there are times when we are tired, irritable and imperfect. We are not any more attractive, holy or sanctified than anyone else. We are just living out what we believe God wants us to do. We are completely and utterly unexceptional and ordinary. Yet I believe that, because of the wonderful grace of God, we are able to live out a loving Christian lifestyle. We can meet the challenges of love because God helps us.

I say this not to shame you but rather to challenge you and to inform you that it can be done; even in a big fast city, even on a budget, even by two very boring people and even in the midst of the challenges of ministry. You just have to obey the Holy Spirit and let agape love into your life and gradually tune selfishness out of your actions and reactions. It isn't some kind of complicated philosophy, paradigm or revolution. It feels more like sanctified common sense in daily living. Now go out and try it!

(John 13:17 - If you know these things blessed are you if you do them!)

Appendix A: Verses About Loving One Another And About Brotherly Love

(John 13:34) A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

(John 13:35) By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

(John 15:12) This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

(John 15:17) These things I command you, that you may love one another.

(Romans 12:10) Be warmly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor preferring one another;

(Romans 13:8) Owe nothing to no one, except to love one another, for he who loves one another has fulfilled the law.

(Galatians 5:13) For you, brothers were called to freedom; only do not use freedom for an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

(Ephesians 4:2) with all humility and meekness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love,

(1 Thessalonians 3:12) And may the Lord make you to increase and abound in love toward one another and toward all *men*, as indeed we also do toward you,

(1 Thessalonians 4:9) Now concerning brotherly love you have no need *for me* to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another.

(2 Thessalonians 1:3) We are obligated to give thanks to God always for you, brothers, *and* rightfully so, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all increases towards one another,

(Hebrews 10:24) And let us consider one another for the stirring up of love and of good works,

(1 Peter 1:22) Since you have purified your souls by obedience to the truth through the Spirit in sincere love for the brothers, love one another fervently from a pure heart,

(1 Peter 4:8) And above all things have fervent love for one another, because "love will cover a multitude of sins."

(1 Peter 5:14) Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace to you all who are in Christ Jesus. Amen.

(1 John 3:11) Because this is the message which you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another,

(1 John 3:23) And this is His commandment: that we should believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and should love one another, just as He gave commandment.

(1 John 4:7) Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; and everyone that loves has been born of God and knows God.

(1 John 4:11) Beloved, if in this way God loved us, indeed we ought to love one another.

(1 John 4:12) No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us.

(2 John 1:5) And now I ask you, lady, not as writing a new commandment to you, but one which we have had from the beginning: that we love one another.

BROTHERLY LOVE

(Romans 12:10) in brotherly love to one another, loving fervently, having led one another in honor.

(Romans 14:15) But if your brother is grieved with *your* food, you no longer walk according to love. Do not with your food destroy him for whom Christ died.

(Romans 15:30) But I exhort you, brothers, for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ and for the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in *your* prayers to God for me,

(1 Corinthians 15:58) So that, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not without fruit in the Lord.

(2 Corinthians 13:11) Finally, brothers, rejoice. Perfect yourselves; encourage yourselves; mind the same thing; be at peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.

(Galatians 5:13) For, brothers, you were called to liberty. Only do not *use* the liberty for *an* opening to the flesh, but by love serve one another.

(Ephesians 6:21) But, so that you also may know my affairs *and* how I do, Tychicus, a beloved brother and faithful minister in *the* Lord, shall make known to you all things,

(Ephesians 6:23) Peace to the brothers, and love with faith, from God *the* Father and *the* Lord Jesus Christ.

(Philippians 4:1) Therefore, my brothers, ones loved and longed for, my joy and crown, stand fast in this way in *the* Lord, beloved ones.

(Philippians 4:8) Finally, my brothers, whatever things are true, whatever things *are* honest, whatever *things are* right, whatever *things are* pure, whatever *things are* lovely, whatever *things are* of good report; if *there is* any virtue and if *there is* any praise, think on these things.

(Colossians 4:7) Tychicus, the beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow-servant in *the* Lord, will make known to you all things about me.

(Colossians 4:9) along with Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is *one* of you. They shall make known to you all things here.

(1 Thessalonians 1:4) knowing, beloved brothers, your election of God.

(1 Thessalonians 4:9) But regarding brotherly love, you do not need that I write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another.

(2 Thessalonians 1:3) We are bound to thank God always for you, my brothers, as it is right, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of each one of you abounds toward one another;

(2 Thessalonians 2:13) But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brothers beloved of the Lord, because God has from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of *the* Spirit and belief of *the* truth,

(1 Timothy 6:2) And those who have believing masters, let them not despise *them* because they are brothers. But rather let them serve, because they are faithful and beloved, those of the good service receiving in return. Teach and exhort these things.

(Philemon 1:1) Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy *our* brother, to Philemon the beloved and fellow laborer,

(Philemon 1:7) For we have great joy and consolation over your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.

(Philemon 1:16) not now as a slave, but beyond a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in *the* flesh and in *the* Lord.

(Hebrews 13:1) Let brotherly love continue.

(James 1:16) Do not err, my beloved brothers.

(James 1:19) Therefore, my beloved brothers, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.

(James 2:5) Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He has promised to those who love Him?

(1 Peter 1:22) Purifying your souls in the obedience of the truth through the Spirit to unfeigned love of the brothers, love one another fervently out of a pure heart,

(1 Peter 2:17) Honor all. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.

(2 Peter 1:7) and *with* godliness, brotherly kindness, and *with* brotherly kindness, love.

(2 Peter 3:15) And think of the long-suffering of our Lord *as* salvation (as our beloved brother Paul also has written to you according to the wisdom given to him

(1 John 2:10) He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no offense in him.

(1 John 3:10) In this the children of God are revealed, and the children of the Devil: everyone not practicing righteousness is not of God, also he who does not love his brother.

(1 John 3:14) We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brothers. He who does not love *his* brother abides in death.

(1 John 3:16) By this we have known the love *of God*, because He laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down *our* lives for the brothers.

(1 John 3:17) But whoever has this world's goods and sees his brother having need, and shuts up his bowels from him, how does the love of God dwell in him?

(1 John 4:20) If anyone says, I love God, and hates his brother, he is a liar. For if he does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?

(1 John 4:21) And we have this commandment from Him, that he who loves God should love his brother also.

(3 John 1:5) Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you work for the brothers and for strangers,

Appendix B - How To Donate

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