

Love One Another

Of all the “one-anothering” commands, none is better known than the simple command to love one another. And that is as it should be, for love is the essence of who God is, the essence of what Christianity is all about. When Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment he answered to love God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength and then quickly added that the second greatest command is like the first, to love your neighbor as yourself. The apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians and tells them that even if they were to have every gift of the Spirit, if they didn’t have love they had nothing. Love heads every list of Christian virtues, every list of spiritual fruits. It is the greatest command, the greatest virtue. So it’s not surprising God’s people are called to love one another. We all know the command. But do we really understand what it means to love?

I think people assume that love is easy to understand, easy to do. A lot of our popular songs seem to suggest so. The Beatles assured us, “All you need is Love” as if Love was easily accessible. Another popular song in the ‘50s asked, “Why do fools fall in love?” suggesting that, well, even a fool can love. The truth is, to love is the hardest thing God asks us to do; the hardest thing he could ask us to do. And yet we tend to think love is something everyone does easily.

Years ago I heard Ellmore speak at a Bible lectureship on the subject the marks of the church. Ellmore said those marks are faith, hope and love. After his

talk a preacher came up to him upset that he didn't speak on the distinctive teachings and practices of the true church (that would be us) that separate us from all the other churches. "Ellmore, every church has faith, hope and love." The assumption seemed to be that faith, hope and love is easy, simple, basic. Every believer has that. I suspect the very opposite is true. What's easy is having different opinions and different practices. What is hard, really hard is finding faith, hanging on to hope and learning to love. Faith is the direction of our lives, the path we choose to follow. There are many to choose from. It is hardly an easy choice. Hope is the motivation of our lives, what keeps us going. It is hardly easy to put one's hope in the unseen. Love is the ultimate destination of our lives. It is where by faith, we hope to be when our journey is done and our spiritual transformation is finally complete. But the road to love is long and to get there is a life-long journey. Along the way we are so easily distracted, mis-directed by counterfeit ideas of love. Ideas that make love seem, simple, natural, second nature to us. Those kinds of love are really just different kinds of selfishness, ways to love oneself.

We often think of love in romantic terms. But God's love is when you want the other's person's good; romantic love is when you just want the other person. We learn the limits of romantic love when we get married. Romance may get us married but it is not enough to keep us married.

Mark Twain once said, *“Love seems the swiftest, but it is the slowest of all growths. No man or woman really knows what perfect love is until they have been married a quarter of a century.”* It is the same with our love for God. The marks of the church are faith, hope and love, but they are markings we must grow into; they become bolder and more clear with time. As Paul said to the Corinthians, *And we all... are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory* (2 Cor 3:18). I like the Revised Standard Version’s translation of this passage better. “We are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another.” So, love does not come easily to us, it comes to us in degrees, like burns. A first degree burn is only superficial. A second degree burn affects more of the skin. A third degree burn penetrates every layer of the skin, no part of it escapes. We may start our spiritual walk with only a first degree love; but we seek to finish with a third degree love, the image of Christ penetrating into every layer of our being, his glory burning brightly within us. It is this process that John the apostle talks about when he says, *Brothers, now we are the children of God and what we will be has not been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him* (1 Jn 3:2). John teaches us that our transformation into beings of love, beings like Christ, is not a quick fix; it is a life-time process. And John ought to know, he was, after all, the apostle of love.

Of all the writers of scripture, no one taught more about love than John. He mentions the word 45 times in his first letter. That averages out to once every 2 verses. The first letter to Corinthians, even with its great love chapter, *1 Cor 13*, mentions love only 21 times. In fact, *Philippians, Ephesians, Galatians* and *Colossians* all together mention the word love only 41 times. *Romans*, four times longer than *1st John*, mentions love only half as much as John, 21 times. It is from John we get almost all the love one another commands.

This is the message you heard from the beginning: love one another (1Jn 3:11). And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us (1 Jn 3:23). Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another (1 Jn 4:11). No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us (1Jn 4:12).

So what does the apostle of love teach us about the nature of love? First of all, and probably most important of all, John makes it clear that love must come from God not from us. *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:10). We love because he first loved us (1John 4:19).* Our very ability to love is possible only because we have been loved. For God love is active; he can initiate it from himself. But for us love must be reactive; we can love in response to first being loved. This is why the Church must be a one-anothering people. Ideally, to grow up in the church is to

grow up in a community of people who live and love in response to God's love.

Without a community of love around us, our own ability to love is disabled.

Knowing how our own love is dependent upon being loved by others, should make us even more compassionate to those who have grown up without love and thus find it hard to love. This is why we are commanded to love even those who hate us. This is why we should be able to walk the second mile, turn the other cheek. Because we know the one who has not been loved, who has not known love, is not able to love. But that should not be true for us. We in the Church have known great love. John says, *How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! (1 Jn 3:1). This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 Jn 4:10)*

John also teaches that love is more than a feeling; it is action, behavior. We often talk about love as a feeling that overwhelms us. "I couldn't help myself, I was in love." I have "fallen" in love; I'm "love struck." This is not the love John is talking about. Love that is a response to God's love expresses itself in a certain way of living, whether we feel like living that way or not. Jesus didn't feel like dying on a cross. None of us feel like taking up our own cross and denying ourselves. The love that is a response to God's love for us expresses itself in obedience to God. Jesus put it this way. *Whoever has my commands and keeps*

them is the one who love me (Jn 14:21). John echoed Jesus' word when he wrote, *But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him (1Jn 2:5). This is love for God: to obey his commands (1Jn 5:3).*

Not perfectly of course, but increasingly. God's love should change us; change our desires, our goals, our passions, help us to turn away from the passions of the world. As God's love in us increases, ideally our love for the things of this world decreases. John instructs us, *Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him (1 John 2:15).*

John tells us that God's love is not just vertical; it's horizontal. We must not fool ourselves into thinking that we love God, if we don't love people. As the resident philosopher of the Peanuts cartoon, Linus, once said, "I love mankind, it's people I can't stand!" But love that comes from God doesn't work that way. The measure of our love for God is our behavior around people. It is like the old TV sets: there is a vertical and a horizontal control. It won't work to adjust either one alone, both have to be adjusted or picture is distorted. The two can't be separated. *If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen (1 John 4:20). Everyone who loves the father loves his child as well (1 John 5:1).*

This is another reason God gave us the Church, because we cannot truly love God without living together and loving one another. You can't say I love God but I

don't love the Church for the Church, however imperfect, are the children of God, indeed the Church is the very presence of God in this world. You may think you can love God without loving the Church, but you are actually loving yourself. So is there someone here you are having a hard time loving? Our difficulty in loving another person does not so much measure that person's un-loveliness as it measures the limit of our own love for God. How do I know I love God? John's answer is pretty simple. Do you love your brother?

And not just our "brother" in church. Jesus was clear that our love for him is demonstrated in our love for others, our neighbors, especially the *least of these* around us. How do we know we love others. John is also very clear about that. When it comes to love, "talk is cheap." What are you doing? N. E. Rhoades use to say, "Never pray for what you're not working for or work for what you are not praying for." It is the same with love. Don't say you love someone if you have no actions to show it. John says, *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. We ought to lay down our lives for our brothers* (1 John 3:16). *If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?* (1 John 3:17). *Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth* (1 John 3:18).

Finally, John says love for others and a desire to do what is right that is our best way to truly know who are the children of God. In John's day there were so

called “enlightened Christians” who had left the church in Ephesus, searching for a better way to know God. They emphasized visions, secret ceremonies and philosophy over righteous living and loving other people. They weren’t concerned about how they lived their lives, or how their lives affected others. They were too busy “knowing God” to worry much about their sin and how their sin hurt others. John is alluding to these so-called Christians when he says, *This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother (1 Jn 3:10). Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love (1 Jn 4:7,8).*

And finally, John tells us one of the blessings that will come to us as we learn to love each other and God more is that we are no longer afraid of God . *In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love (1 John 4:17,18).* Why is there no fear in love? Because love is not produced in us as a result of our imperfect efforts to please God; love is the response in us as a result of receiving God’s perfect grace. We love because he first loved us.

There is one popular song title that gets it I think, “Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places.” If we want to look for love, there is only one place, the amazing grace of God. And if we would find the grace of God, there is only one place to look, the cross, the place where God’s grace meets our sin. It is the vision of the cross and that vision only that can inspire within us the love of God. For it is at the cross where we see most clearly that love. No one has ever expressed more truly or more beautifully the relationship between seeing the grace of God and then being transformed by that vision than has our dear brother Watts.

*When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the prince of glory died;
My richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride.
Forbid it Lord that I should boast save in the death of Christ my Lord.
All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to his blood.
His dying crimson like a robe, spreads o’er his body on the tree.
Then am I dead to all the globe and all the globe is dead to me.
Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.*

Oh dear Lord, may we as your Church help one another see more and more how great is the love you have lavished on us. May our response to that amazing love and grace be to live lives increasingly obedient to your commands, increasingly able to love others not merely with words but in our actions and in so doing, come to know you, to no longer fear you, only long to be near you.