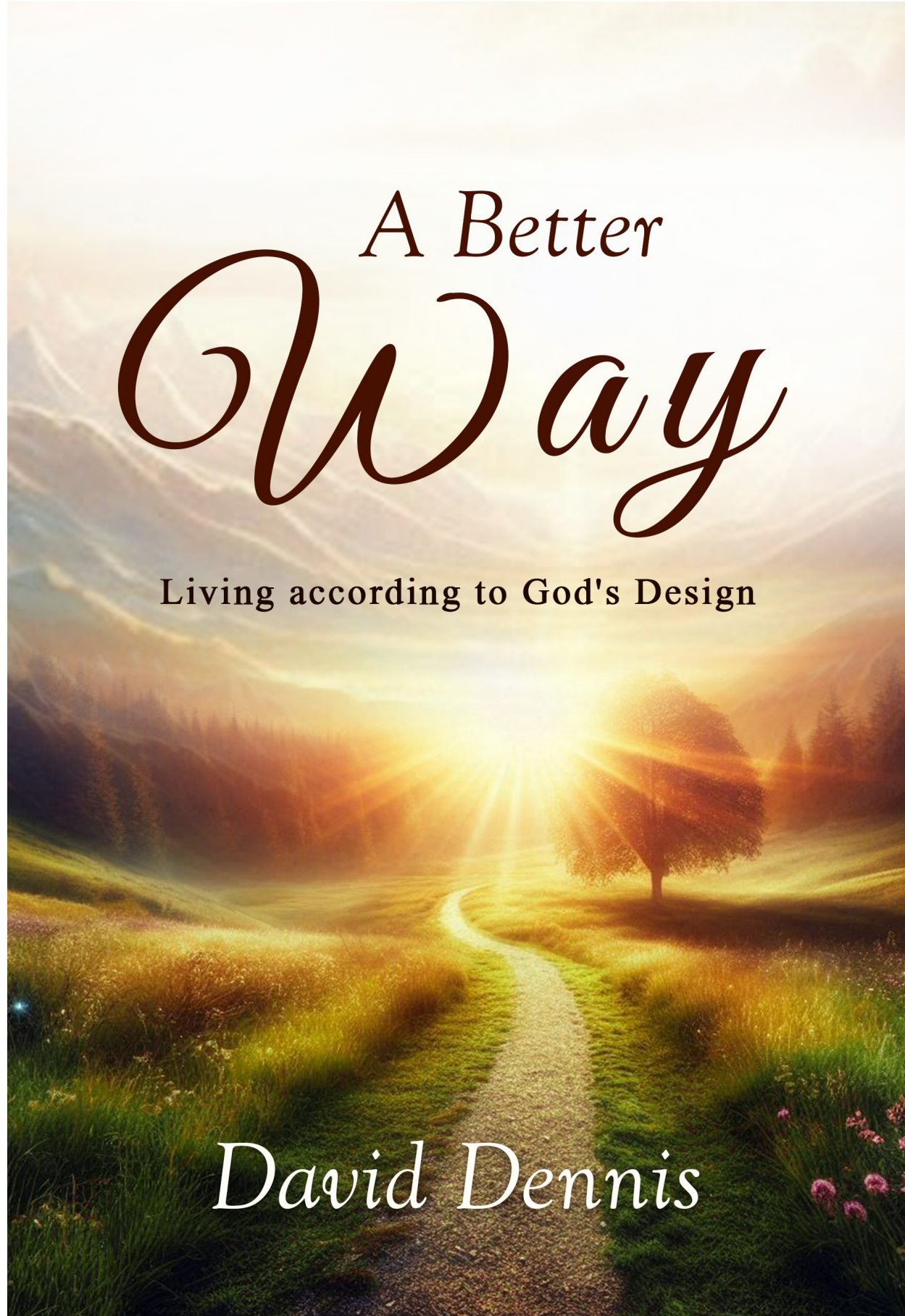




A Better *Way*

Living according to God's Design

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Introduction

Rediscovering God's Plan for Living

In Mathew chapter 23, Jesus sharply criticized the scribes and Pharisees for their failure as religious leaders. There were several things he accused them of. I am only mentioning one here. In verses 23-24, He said, *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have left undone the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faith. But you ought to have done these, and not to have left the other undone. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat, and swallow a camel!”* Jesus is saying that they were so concerned with the small details that they did not notice the more important (weightier) matters.

He illustrates that they made sure to tithe even their spices but neglected the teaching of and practicing of justice, mercy, and faith. They would cough and gag when swallowing a tiny gnat (in their concern about tithing spices) but would swallow a camel (any of the more important matters) without even noticing.

Today, many Christians, like the Pharisees, swallow the biggest camels. We are very concerned with things that are relatively unimportant, arguing about our worship music, our mode of baptism and communion, our church governments, and even which Bible translations to use. The list of things we argue over seems endless. But we are overlooking the most important thing.

Having been a Christian for over 50 years, I've witnessed countless new ideas emerge, often heralded as revolutionary for Christian living, spawning denominations and movements. But they seem to have one thing in common: a previously undiscovered key to the Christian life.

It's not my intention to discuss these ideas; some of them might have merit but are probably not as important as their proponents suggest. I might disagree with others, yet I don't want readers of different theological backgrounds to feel attacked and stop reading. Instead, my hope is that Christians from all walks of

faith can hear what I have to say and make life-changing decisions to the practice of their faith.

While browsing through the “Christian Living” books one day, I noticed many of these ideas on display. I wondered, “If there is really a ‘key’ to Christian living, why doesn’t God make it more obvious? Why would it be hidden in a text that only theologians can figure out? Why didn’t God lay it out clearly and say, ‘Thus says the Lord, this is how you should live to please Me?’”

Then, one day, while reading the Bible, I realized that God had done just that. He made it the clearest teaching of the Bible. It is so straightforward that no Bible-believing Christian could disagree with it. Perhaps it’s so simple that no one takes the time to understand it. It is spoken of so often that no one disagrees with it. You don’t have to read a specific book of the Bible to find it or even a modern interpretation to understand it. When people read it, they think, “Yes, I know that,” and continue reading to find something they don’t know already.

Here’s what I mean: Suppose you’re reading the Bible and you come to this verse: “*Watch! Stand firm in the faith! Be courageous! Be strong! Let all that you do be done in love.*” (1 Corinthians 16:13-14)

Often, when we read a verse like this, we barely pause to give it a second thought. Of course, we should be watchful, stand firm, be courageous, and be strong. Certainly, all that we do should be done with love. There’s nothing new here.

But wait! What did we miss? **Everything we do should be done with love!** Is that even possible? Is that a goal in my life? Is that something that I have ever heard sermons about? Would I glean this from this verse? Is it something I have tried to achieve in my life?

The main point in this book is that God’s desire for us to love others is so easily understood that we completely overlook what it should mean to us. It’s the camel that we swallow. But it is so important to God that He repeats it over and over again.

Here’s another example from the introduction to 1 Thessalonians:

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the assembly of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God

our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We always give thanks to God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers, remembering without ceasing your work of faith and labor of love and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, before our God and Father. (1 Thessalonians 1:1-3 NIV)

Three things stand out about the Thessalonians to Paul: their work of faith, their labor of love, and their patience of hope in Jesus. If Paul rejoices in these things about the Thessalonians, should they be goals in our lives? Especially “labor of love.” Do you and I personally have a “labor of love?” Should we strive for that? Yet, too often, we just let these things slip past us without giving them a second thought.

In Philippians 1:9, Paul prays *“that your love may abound yet more and more.”* Is this important for every believer?

The purpose of this book is to remind believers about what truly matters: the most important commandments in the Bible, though often the most overlooked. I’m talking about the commandments to love.

Did God make it obvious? Is it often found in the Bible? Here is a list of sixteen different passages from sixteen different books of the New Testament, written by seven different authors:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you, that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.” (Matthew 5:43-45)

One of the scribes came, and heard them questioning together. Knowing that he had answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the greatest of all?” Jesus answered, “The greatest is, ‘Hear, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment. The second is like this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” The scribe said to him, “Truly, teacher, you have said well that he is one, and there is none other but he, and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all

the strength, and to love his neighbor as himself, is more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.” (Mark 12:28-34)

“But I tell you who hear: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you. To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer also the other; and from him who takes away your cloak, don’t withhold your coat also. Give to everyone who asks you, and don’t ask him who takes away your goods to give them back again. As you would like people to do to you, do exactly so to them. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive back as much. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing back; and your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind toward the unthankful and evil. Therefore be merciful, even as your Father is also merciful.” (Luke 6:27-36)

“This is my commandment, that you love one another, even as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:12-13)

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not give false testimony,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other commandments there are, are all summed up in this saying, namely, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love doesn’t harm a neighbor. Love therefore is the fulfillment of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)

For you, brothers, were called for freedom. Only don’t use your freedom for gain to the flesh, but through love be servants to one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, in this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Galatians 5:13-14)

Be therefore imitators of God, as beloved children. Walk in love, even as Christ also loved you, and gave himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling fragrance. (Ephesians 5:1-2)

Put on therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, a heart of compassion, kindness, lowliness, humility, and perseverance; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, if any man has a complaint against any; even as Christ forgave you, so you also do. Above all these things, walk in love, which is the bond of perfection. (Colossians 3:12-14)

But concerning brotherly love, you have no need that one write to you. For you yourselves are taught by God to love one another. (1 Thessalonians 4:9)

Hold the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 1:13)

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering; for he who promised is faithful. Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good works. (Hebrews 10:23-24)

However, if you fulfill the royal law, according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well. (James 2:8)

And above all things be earnest in your love among yourselves, for love covers a multitude of sins. (1 Peter 4:8)

Yes, and for this very cause adding on your part all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence; and in moral excellence, knowledge; and in knowledge, self-control; and in self-control patience; and in patience godliness; and in godliness brotherly affection; and in brotherly affection, love. (2 Peter 1:5-7)

No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God remains in us, and his love has been perfected in us. (1 John 4:12)

Now I beg you, dear lady, not as though I wrote to you a new commandment, but that which we had from the beginning, that we love one another. This is love, that we should walk according to his

commandments. This is the commandment, even as you heard from the beginning, that you should walk in it. (2 John 1:5-6)

“I know your works, and your toil and perseverance, and that you can’t tolerate evil men, and have tested those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and found them false. You have perseverance and have endured for my name’s sake, and have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you left your first love.” (Revelations 2:2-4)

Though the list is by no means exhaustive, I’ve only chosen one passage from each book, omitting those I’ve already mentioned. Yet, these passages are characteristics that we all have read about many times without even thinking twice about. We know and understand it, so we just move on without giving it a second glance.

But if God said something this many times, maybe it’s time we pay attention.

In Matthew 22:36-40, the story is told of a lawyer who asked Jesus a very compelling question:

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?” Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. A second likewise is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.”

“The Law and the Prophets” was a term used to describe all the sacred writings of Jesus’ time: What we now call the Old Testament. Jesus was saying that the entire Old Testament hangs on these two commandments.

Also, be aware that on the night before He was crucified, Jesus added another: *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, just like I have loved you; that you also love one another.”* (John 13:34)

Here, then, are the three great commandments: Love the Lord with all your heart, love your neighbor as yourself, and love each other as Christ loves you. It is based on these three that I write this book about what I call *“the mandate to love.”*

You might be thinking to yourself at this point, *“This is nothing new. I know it all quite well.”*

And I am not supposing that my readers do not know it. But it is my conviction that we have forgotten the importance of the mandate, the reason for the mandate, and, especially, the practical application of the mandate. So, if you’ll bear with me, I’d like to spend a little time talking about the greatest of commandments, and the true (and often overlooked) key to Christian living.

Chapter 1

Beyond A Spiritual Gift.

In a study of God's mandate to love, it is good to start with a Biblical definition of love. I chose to use the chapter that is commonly called "*The Love Chapter*" for that definition.

Sandwiched between two chapters in 1 Corinthians about miraculous spiritual gifts of the Holy Spirit, 1 Corinthians 13 teaches us about the importance of love, the meaning of love, and the everlasting nature of love. But first, let's explore the context.

1 Corinthians 12:7-11 lists nine different Manifestations of the Holy Spirit: the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, different kinds of tongues, and the interpretation of tongues. Take note, however, that it tells us quite plainly that the purpose of each one is "for the profit of all." This is followed by the teaching that all of God's people have different gifts, but we are, truly, only one body with different parts:

For as the body is one, and has many members, and all the members of the body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free; and were all given to drink into one Spirit.

For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot would say, "Because I'm not the hand, I'm not part of the body," it is not therefore not part of the body. If the ear would say, "Because I'm not the eye, I'm not part of the body," it's not therefore not part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the smelling be? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body, just as he desired. If they were all one member, where would the body be? But now they are many members, but one body. The eye can't tell the hand, "I have no need for you," or again the head to the feet, "I have no need for you." No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are

necessary. Those parts of the body which we think to be less honorable, on those we bestow more abundant honor; and our unpresentable parts have more abundant propriety; whereas our presentable parts have no such need. But God composed the body together, giving more abundant honor to the inferior part, that there should be no division in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. When one member suffers, all the members suffer with it. Or when one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. (1 Corinthians 12:12-27)

The point is that many gifts are given, but they are all intended to be used in service of each other. No person is more important, and no person is insignificant.

The Love Chapter is then introduced in 1 Corinthians 12:31 (NKJV) with the words: *“And yet I show you a more excellent way.”* More excellent than what? More excellent than all the gifts mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12. The chapter begins by comparing spiritual gifts to love and finding that they are utterly useless without love.

Before I comment more on this, please read 1 Corinthians 13 in full:

1 Corinthians 13

If I speak with the languages of men and of angels, but don't have love, I have become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but don't have love, I am nothing. If I dole out all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but don't have love, it profits me nothing.

Love is patient and is kind; love doesn't envy. Love doesn't brag, is not proud, doesn't behave itself inappropriately, doesn't seek its own way, is not provoked, takes no account of evil; doesn't rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will be done away with. Where there are various languages, they will cease. Where

there is knowledge, it will be done away with. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when that which is complete has come, then that which is partial will be done away with. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I felt as a child, I thought as a child. Now that I have become a man, I have put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, even as I was also fully known. But now faith, hope, and love remain—these three. The greatest of these is love.

I have always thought that it would be an amusing and effective (although also annoying) way to begin a live teaching session on this passage, by bringing a cymbal. I have been around musical instruments for most my life, and I know the difference between an expensive cymbal and a cheap one. For my purposes, I would get the cheapest I could find: A loud clanging cymbal. Without uttering a word to my audience, I would begin banging as loud as I could on that cymbal with the back side of the drumstick. I would bang on the cymbal with absolutely no rhythm at all until my audience was losing patience with the racket I was making. Then I would read this verse from 1 Corinthians 13:1 (NIV): *“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.”* Then, I could do a mic drop, walk out of the room, and feel like I made a point that no one would forget.

On the other hand, that might not be a very polite way to get my point across, so maybe I shouldn't be quite so loud or so long. Maybe I should leave out the mic drop and the early exit, and spend a little time explaining my point.

Regardless, I hope that, even without the cymbal, I have made my point to you: Miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit are meaningless and useless without love.

In fact, the context of this chapter clearly shows us the importance of love over spiritual gifts. Paul specifically mentions four of them by name (tongues, prophecy, knowledge, and faith to work miracles), which he says are meaningless without love. He even says that remarkable good works (like giving all I own to feed the poor) are meaningless without love.

The chapter then proceeds to define what love truly is. Remember, we already discussed that all of the commandments were summed up in the commandment to love.

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love suffers long. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7 NKJV)

Ephesians 4:1-2 (NKJV) says, *“I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love.”* Here, “longsuffering” means two things. One, when we love, we will continue to love, no matter how long it takes. The second is that love will continue unfaltering, no matter how many disappointments it faces.

Love is kind. It seeks only the best for the one loved, and never wants them to hurt unless that will help in the long run.

It does not parade itself, and is not puffed up. It is certainly not too proud to stoop low to help the one who is loved. Jesus is the One through whom the universe is created, but he did not think so highly of Himself that he refused to humble Himself and die for sinners who didn’t come close to deserving His sacrifice.

Love is never rude. A rude person is annoying to those around. Those who love know that rudeness might hinder lovingkindness.

It does not prioritize self-interest (nor is it self-seeking) but always cares more about the well-being of others. 1 Corinthians 10:24 says, *“Let no one seek his own, but each one his neighbor’s good.”*

Love is not provoked (or is not easily angered). Jesus was sometimes angry during His earthly ministry, but that was always reserved for those who were hurting someone He loved. For instance, when He overturned the money changers table in the temple, He was angry that they were turning God’s house into a den of thieves. (These “thieves” were taking money from people who came to God’s house to worship Him.) Another example can be found in Matthew 23:14, where he pronounces many judgments like this one: *“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you shut up the Kingdom of Heaven against men; for you don’t enter in yourselves, neither do you allow those who are entering in to enter.”*

Love, however, is not easily angered. It is patient and longsuffering.

Back to 1 Corinthians 13, I especially want to emphasize the last phrase in this description: love “*bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*”

I believe that when it says that “love bears all things” and “endures all things,” they mean the same thing. Love will put up with anything and still continue loving. It will keep on loving no matter what abuse comes its way.

Let me illustrate with an example: Imagine a woman loves her husband, but he begins beating her regularly. I am not saying that the loving wife will endure the beating and allow herself to be in danger. I am saying that her love will continue to endure even in the face of that abuse. It does not mean that she will not leave him to protect herself, especially if there are others (maybe children) who also need protection. But it means she will always love him (even if she leaves him) and hope for what is best for him.

“Love believes all things” and “hopes all things” are two ways of saying the same thing: Love always hopes for the best for others. If you love someone, and they utterly fail your expectations, you will continue to hope for the best situation for that person.

This chapter offers an intense definition of love. It should be our owner’s manual on how to live a Christian life.

Of all the things we can do in this world, only faith, hope, and love will last. But the greatest of these is love.

Chapter 2

The Last Supper's Legacy

Jesus' most intense teaching on love comes from what I call "that fateful night." This was the night before His crucifixion. The book of John dedicates 5 chapters to this night, beginning with chapter 13. Here, Jesus demonstrates His love to His disciples. And discusses His expectations of them concerning their love.

"The Last Supper" is one of the most remarkable stories in the Bible. In the book of John, the account of that night begins with this verse: *"Now before the feast of the Passover, Jesus, knowing that his time had come that he would depart from this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."* (John 13:1)

Jesus began this event by washing the feet of all His disciples, even Judas. In a culture where people walked miles a day outdoors in sandals on dirty streets, foot washing was common in most households, but it was always done by the lowest of servants, or if a household had no servants, then the duty fell to the youngest and most insignificant family member. Jesus turned this tradition completely upside down when he insisted that he do it for them.

Upon finishing, Jesus had these words for them:

"Do you know what I have done to you? You call me, 'Teacher' and 'Lord.' You say so correctly, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Most certainly I tell you, a servant is not greater than his lord, neither one who is sent greater than he who sent him." (John 13:12-16)

Jesus had taught on this subject before. In Matthew 23:11, He said, “*He who is greatest among you will be your servant.*” Yet here, He did more than teach it. He demonstrated it clearly in a way that could never be forgotten. A leader among God’s people functions as a loving servant.

After Judas had left, Jesus began a discussion with his disciples. One of the first things he said was this:

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

These two verses are overflowing with meaning. The first is Jesus’s new commandment: to love one another. He not only commands us to love each other but also tells us how much to love each other: “*as I have loved you.*” Don’t overlook this because it is so easy to understand. We are commanded by Jesus Himself to love each other as much as He loves us. How much is that?

Later that evening, He would add (in John 15:13), “*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.*” Jesus laid down His life for us; therefore, there is no greater love than the love Jesus has for us.

And that is how much we are commanded to love each other.

Are we really commanded to die for one another? It has happened. In the Nazi era, those who risked their lives to help Jews showed true love to them. Also, missionaries who go to dangerous or faraway places to live so that they can tell people about Christ give up their lives for others.

But we are not usually commanded to die for one another. We are commanded to love each other enough that we would be willing to die for each other. If we love each other that much, how much more should we be willing to give of our time, money, and spiritual gifts to others?

It’s in the context of this command that Jesus makes this statement in John 14:21: “*One who has my commandments and keeps them, that person is one who loves me. One who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him, and will reveal myself to him.*” There are two parts to notice in this statement. The first is that we show we love Jesus by keeping his

commandments. He who has them and keeps them is the one that loves Him. The other part is that the one who keeps them (and loves Him) will be loved by God and by Jesus, and Jesus will be revealed to them.

The same two thoughts are repeated in John 14:23: *“If a man loves me, he will keep my word. My Father will love him, and we will come to him, and make our home with him.”* Then, it is stated as a negative in John 14:24: *“He who doesn’t love me doesn’t keep my words.”*

In the next section in John 15:9-14, Jesus discusses three exactly equal amounts of love.

“Even as the Father has loved me, I also have loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love; even as I have kept my Father’s commandments, and remain in his love. I have spoken these things to you, that my joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be made full.

This is my commandment, that you love one another, even as I have loved you.

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends, if you do whatever I command you.”
(John 15:9-14)

So, let’s look at this. Jesus said, *“As the Father has loved Me, I also have loved you.”* That is a love beyond understanding. How much does God love Jesus? How much does Jesus love us? Those two questions have the same answer. There is no greater love, as he tells us, *“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”* Jesus laid down His life for us, so there is no greater love than His love for us.

Be sure then that we understand how much love we are talking about: the love that God has for Jesus, the love that Jesus has for us, the love that would lay its life down for another.

Then comes the kicker: Jesus said, *“This is my commandment, that you love one another, even as I have loved you.”* Did you get that? As much as God loves Jesus, as much as Jesus loves us, so much that would compel one to lay his life down for another: That is how much Jesus commands us to love one another: as much as I love you.

And then, just in case anyone missed it, Jesus repeats it one more time in John 15:17: *“I command these things to you, that you may love one another.”*

After these discussions, Jesus prays for his disciples in John 17, not only for them *“but for those also who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that you sent me.”* (John 17:20-21)

Chapter 3

God's Love for the Weak and Its Implications

Since we are commanded to love like God the Father loves and to love like Jesus loves, then it's important for us to understand the heart of God.

There is a theme that runs throughout the Old Testament and into the New Testament that needs to be recognized here. It is stated clearly in one verse, Psalm 68:5: *"A father of the fatherless, and a defender of the widows, is God in his holy habitation."* God identifies so much with the orphan to the extent of calling Himself "Father to the fatherless." He identified so much with the widow that he states that He is "the defender of the widow." "The stranger, the orphan, and the widow" is a strong theme throughout the Bible. The terms are used together to signify anyone who is poor or helpless. God jealously loves them, and is contemptuous of anyone who oppresses them. Read the following passages to see what I mean.

"You shall not wrong an alien, neither shall you oppress him, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not take advantage of any widow or fatherless child. If you take advantage of them at all, and they cry at all to me, I will surely hear their cry; and my wrath will grow hot, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless." (Exodus 22:21-24)

"For Yahweh your God, he is God of gods, and Lord of lords, the great God, the mighty, and the awesome, who doesn't respect persons, nor takes reward. He does execute justice for the fatherless and widow, and loves the foreigner, in giving him food and clothing. Therefore love the foreigner; for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt." (Deuteronomy 10:17-19)

"You shall not deprive the foreigner, or the fatherless of justice, nor take a widow's clothing in pledge; but you shall remember that you were

a bondservant in Egypt, and Yahweh your God redeemed you there: therefore I command you to do this thing.

When you reap your harvest in your field, and have forgot a sheaf in the field, you shall not go again to get it: it shall be for the foreigner, for the fatherless, and for the widow; that Yahweh your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive tree, you shall not go over the boughs again: it shall be for the foreigner, for the fatherless, and for the widow.

When you harvest your vineyard, you shall not glean it after yourselves: it shall be for the foreigner, for the fatherless, and for the widow.” (Deuteronomy 24:17-21)

“Cursed is the one who perverts the justice due the stranger, the fatherless, and widow.” (Deuteronomy 27:19 (NKJV))

Defend the weak, the poor, and the fatherless. Maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy. Deliver them out of the hand of the wicked. (Psalm 82:3-4)

Yahweh preserves the foreigners. He upholds the fatherless and widow, but the way of the wicked he turns upside down. (Psalm 146:9)

“Wash yourselves, make yourself clean. Put away the evil of your doings from before my eyes. Cease to do evil. Learn to do well. Seek justice. Relieve the oppressed. Judge the fatherless. Plead for the widow.” (Isaiah 1:16-17)

“Woe to those who decree unrighteous decrees, and to the writers who write oppressive decrees; to deprive the needy from justice, and to rob the poor among my people of their rights, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey!” (Isaiah 10:1-2)

“For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings; if you thoroughly execute justice between a man and his neighbor; if you don’t oppress the foreigner, the fatherless, and the widow, and don’t shed innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your own hurt then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, from of old even forevermore.” (Jeremiah 7:5-7)

Thus says Yahweh: “Execute justice and righteousness, and deliver him who is robbed out of the hand of the oppressor: and do no wrong, do no violence, to the foreigner, the fatherless, nor the widow; neither shed innocent blood in this place. For if you do this thing indeed, then shall there enter in by the gates of this house kings sitting on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, he, and his servants, and his people. But if you will not hear these words, I swear by myself, says Yahweh, that this house shall become a desolation.” (Jeremiah 22:3-5)

Thus has Yahweh of Armies spoken, saying, “Execute true judgment, and show kindness and compassion every man to his brother. Don’t oppress the widow, nor the fatherless, the foreigner, nor the poor; and let none of you devise evil against his brother in your heart.” (Zechariah 7:9-10)

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows’ houses, and as a pretense you make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation.” (Matthew 23:13)

Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this: to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. (James 1:27)

God fiercely loves the helpless, the poor, and the weak. It is His heart, His very nature. And it is a part of His plan for His people to be like Him in this way.

One last thing needs to be said about God’s care for the helpless. If it wasn’t for that, we would all be in great trouble. Romans 5:6-8 says, *“For while we were yet weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man. Yet perhaps for a righteous person someone would even dare to die. But God commends his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”*

It is the nature of God to care for the helpless, and that is why he cares for us. That is also why he expects us to care for others.

Chapter 4

What it means to know God

During the days of Jeremiah, King Josiah, the last righteous king who ruled over Judah before it was conquered by Babylon, died. In 2 Chronicles 35:25, Jeremiah himself lamented over the death of this good king. After a short reign of only three months, Josiah's son, Jehoahaz, was deposed as king, and Jehoiakim, another of Josiah's sons, was made king. 2 Chronicles 36:5-6 says that *"Jehoiakim was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. And he did evil in the sight of the LORD his God. Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up against him, and bound him in bronze fetters to carry him off to Babylon."*

It is during the reign of Jehoiakim that Jeremiah recorded these astonishing words of God written to Jehoiakim:

"Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his countrymen work for nothing, not paying them for their labor. He says, 'I will build myself a great palace with spacious upper rooms.' So he makes large windows in it, panels it with cedar and decorates it in red." "Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar? Did not your father [Josiah] have food and drink? He did what was right and just, so all went well with him. He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. **Is that not what it means to know me?" declares the Lord.** [My emphasis] (Jeremiah 22:13-16 NIV)

The astonishing part is what is implied by the question asked at the end of God's declaration: Is that not what it means to know me? To state this another way, God is saying that defending the cause of the poor and needy is what it means to know Him.

This is stated clearly in 1 John 4:7-8: *“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God, and knows God. He who doesn’t love doesn’t know God, for God is love.”*

It is stated positively, *“Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God,”* and negatively, *“He who does not love doesn’t know God.”* The book of 1 John has a lot to say on this subject, and we will look into it in the next chapter.

Now, I want to make something perfectly clear here: I am not suggesting that we earn our salvation through acts of love. Salvation comes only by the grace of God, through faith—a gift from God that no one can earn (which I will discuss in much detail in the next chapter). But once a person has been regenerated in this way, then they should begin to show the fruit of the Spirit of God living in them.

Chapter 5

How to Know a Christian

How do you recognize a true believer of Jesus Christ? Depending on who you ask and in what spirit you ask it, you will get a lot of different answers. Some answers might be doctrinal: It is someone who believes in a specific set of doctrines. Some might be Biblical: someone who believes the Bible in a certain way. Others might be reactionary: It is someone who waves a Bible and wants people to act like them.

However, Jesus gave a very different and distinct answer:

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:35)

Let me say it again in a different way. **According to Jesus, the defining factor in recognizing His disciples is that they are people who love each other.**

This is far from the case today, and it shows that we are far from the ideal of Christianity as Jesus saw it.

There are also other passages where the Bible indicates this. There is much in the book of 1 John that talks about the commandment to love one another. John begins this discussion by stating that this is not a new commandment but one they were already given:

Brothers, I write no new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which you heard from the beginning. Again, I write a new commandment to you, which is true in him and in you; because the darkness is passing away, and the true light already shines. He who says he is in the light and hates his brother, is in the darkness even until now. He who loves his brother remains in the light, and there is no occasion for stumbling in

him. But he who hates his brother is in the darkness, and walks in the darkness, and doesn't know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes. (1 John 2:7-11)

This is the first of several passages that seem very simplistic: He who hates his brother is in darkness. He who loves his brother is in light. Observe this in the following verses:

In this the children of God are revealed, and the children of the devil. Whoever doesn't do righteousness is not of God, neither is he who doesn't love his brother. For this is the message which you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. (1 John 3:10-11)

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. He who doesn't love his brother remains in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life remaining in him. (1 John 3:14-15)

By this we know love, because he laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. (1 John 3:16)

This is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another, even as he commanded. (1 John 3:23)

We love him, because he first loved us. If a man says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who doesn't love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? This commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should also love his brother. (1 John 4:19-21)

Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God. Whoever loves the Father also loves the child who is born of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. His commandments are not grievous. (1 John 5:1-3)

1 John is a book that is easy to understand in theory but very difficult to understand in practice. It seems to repeatedly say that the ability to love is a test of the believer. As I said earlier, 1 John 4:7-8 says, "*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God, and knows*

God. He who doesn't love doesn't know God, for God is love." So a formula is given: He who does not love does not know God.

Will it really be about who loves and who does not when Jesus returns to judge the world? Read this:

"But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. Before him all the nations will be gathered, and he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

Then the King will tell those on his right hand, 'Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry, and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me drink. I was a stranger, and you took me in. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you visited me. I was in prison, and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you; or thirsty, and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger, and take you in; or naked, and clothe you? When did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to you?' The King will answer them, 'Most certainly I tell you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

Then he will say also to those on the left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you didn't give me food to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink; I was a stranger, and you didn't take me in; naked, and you didn't clothe me; sick, and in prison, and you didn't visit me.' Then they will also answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and didn't help you?' Then he will answer them, saying, 'Most certainly I tell you, inasmuch as you didn't do it to one of the least of these, you didn't do it to me.' These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Matthew 24:31-46)

Chapter 6

On *Agape* and *Phileo*

There has been much written and taught about the difference between the Greek words *agape* and *phileo*, the two words translated as *love* in the New Testament. The two words have different shades of meaning, and people have taught extensively on the subject, so I thought it important that I should address it briefly.

The meaning of *agape* (noun) or *agapao* (verb)

Agape love is best defined in the passage we discussed before that we call the love chapter:

Love [*agape*] is patient and is kind; love doesn't envy. Love doesn't brag, is not proud, doesn't behave itself inappropriately, doesn't seek its own way, is not provoked, takes no account of evil; doesn't rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. (1 Corinthians 13:4-8)

It is also the word that is used by Jesus for love during that fateful night in John 13 through 17. The key passage there is this:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love [*agape*] one another, just like I have loved you; that you also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35)

I discussed these passages earlier. Right now, I just want to say that we are to love [*agape*] our neighbors and even our enemies. We always look for what's best for the other person. This use of this word does not require feelings or emotions. It has less to do with how we feel about others and more to do with how we treat others. This is illustrated in the story of the good Samaritan:

Behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested him, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." He said to him, "You have answered correctly. Do this, and you will live." But he, desiring to justify himself, asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus answered, "A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who both stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. By chance a certain priest was going down that way. When he saw him, he passed by on the other side. In the same way a Levite also, when he came to the place, and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he traveled, came where he was. When he saw him, he was moved with compassion, came to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. He set him on his own animal, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, and gave them to the host, and said to him, 'Take care of him. Whatever you spend beyond that, I will repay you when I return.' Now which of these three do you think seemed to be a neighbor to him who fell among the robbers?" He said, "He who showed mercy on him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:25-37)

You see that there is no emotion or affection that the Samaritan could have for a stranger he has never met. There is only a willingness to do what is right for him.

The same is reflected in this passage, spoken by Jesus:

But love [*agape*] your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing back; and your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind toward the unthankful and evil. (Matthew 6:35)

So, *agape* love is love in action and not necessarily love in emotion.

I do want to make one thing clear. Contrary to common teaching, *agape* is not always used for perfect or godly love. This is clearly seen in the following passages:

And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved [*agape*] darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. (John 3:19)

Nevertheless even of the rulers many believed in him, but because of the Pharisees they didn't confess it, so that they wouldn't be put out of the synagogue, for they loved [*agape*] men's praise more than God's praise. (John 12:42-43)

In these two quotes, there is no godly love at all; only selfish love. Yet, they are still describe by the word *agape*.

The Meaning of *Phileo*

In *W. E. Vines's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, we are told that “*Phileo* is to be distinguished from *agapao* in this, that *phileo* more nearly represents tender affection.” It is used in commands to love husbands, wives, children, and parents. It has often been interpreted as brotherly love, and it definitely includes that, but it also includes love where positive emotion takes place. This could include love of family, close friendship, and often fellow believers—not just brotherly love, but affectionate love. It is used in the following passages:

But when the kindness of God our Savior and his love [*phileo*] toward mankind appeared, not by works of righteousness, which we did ourselves, but according to his mercy, he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:4-5)

Finally, be all like-minded, compassionate, loving [*phileo*] as brothers, tenderhearted, courteous. (1 Peter 3:8)

Some authors have tried to say that *phileo* is inferior to *agape*. This seems unlikely because our heavenly Father is described as loving the disciples and His own son using that term:

For the Father himself loves [*phileo*] you, because you have loved [*phileo*] me, and have believed that I came forth from God. (John 16:27)

For the Father has affection [*phileo*] for the Son, and shows him all things that he himself does. (John 5:20)

It is interesting to compare passages in which we see both words used together:

Let love [*agape*] be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love [*phileo*], in honor giving preference to one another. (Romans 12:9-10 NKJV)

But concerning brotherly love [*phileo*], you have no need that one write to you. For you yourselves are taught by God to love [*agape*] one another. For indeed you do it toward all the brothers who are in all Macedonia. But we exhort you, brothers, that you abound more and more. (1 Thessalonians 4:9-10)

Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love [*phileo*] of the brethren, love [*agape*] one another fervently with a pure heart. (1 Peter 1:22)

Concerning our love for God:

Jesus said to him, “You shall love [*agape*] the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” (Matthew 22:37)

If any man doesn’t love [*phileo*] the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed. Come, Lord! (1 Corinthians 16:22)

It is my opinion that the words are nearly synonymous, the difference being that *phileo* can include emotion or affection, and *agape* need not. We are to love [*agape*] our enemies and our neighbors. We are to love [*phileo*] fellow believers and our family members.

But the over reaching point is still that believers are commanded to love.

Chapter 7

Love in Action

So what does love look like? How do we recognize it when we see it?

In 1 John 3:18, John pleads with his audience: “My little children, let’s not love in word only, neither with the tongue only, but in deed and truth.” Our love is not just a matter of what we say but of deeds. The NIV says, “with actions and in truth.” The love of a believer is seen through their actions. It is not a matter of “I love everybody.” It is a matter of “What can I do for people to demonstrate love?” This verse is preceded by this question: “*But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and closes his heart of compassion against him, how does the love of God remain in him?*” (1 John 3:17) **Biblical love is expressed in our actions.**

Consider these passages, that talk about good works or good deeds:

“You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its flavor, with what will it be salted? It is then good for nothing, but to be cast out and trodden under the feet of men.

You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill can’t be hidden. Neither do you light a lamp, and put it under a measuring basket, but on a stand; and it shines to all who are in the house. Even so, let your light shine before men; that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:13-16)

Beloved, I beg you as foreigners and pilgrims, to abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; having good behavior among the nations, so in that of which they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they see, glorify God in the day of visitation. (1 Peter 2:11-12)

Charge those who are rich in this present world that they not be haughty, nor have their hope set on the uncertainty of riches, but on the living God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy; that they do good, that they be rich in good works, that they be ready to distribute, willing to communicate; laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold of eternal life. (1 Timothy 6:17-19)

Let us not be weary in doing good, for we will reap in due season, if we don't give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let's do what is good toward all men, and especially toward those who are of the household of the faith. (Galatians 6:9-10)

This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm **constantly**, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men. [my emphasis] (Titus 3:8 NKJV)

Don't overlook the fact that Paul, in the last passage, emphasized that he wanted to affirm this statement "constantly." He implies it is so important that he wants to say it over and over: *"Those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works."*

The nature of these works varies depending on individual gifts. The passage above from 1 Timothy exhorts the rich to be ready to give and willing to share. Not everybody has the ability to do this. But we can look for ways that we can serve one another in love. No one in the body of Christ is unable to find a way to love. At the very least, we can pray for others. (And if you truly believe in prayer, then praying for others is quite significant.)

Peter talks about using our personal gifts to serve others:

As each has received a gift, employ it in serving one another, as good managers of the grace of God in its various forms. If anyone speaks, let it be as it were the very words of God. If anyone serves, let it be as of the strength which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. (1 Peter 4:10-11)

Paul says much the same thing and lists examples:

For even as we have many members in one body, and all the members don't have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts differing according to the grace that was given to us, if prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of our faith; or service, let us give ourselves to service; or he who teaches, to his teaching; or he who exhorts, to his exhorting: he who gives, let him do it with liberality; he who rules, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. (Romans 12:4-8)

I do not believe this is an exhaustive list. I think Paul pulled out a few examples in order to say that whatever we are able to do, we should do it with whole hearts in love for each other.

Remember that Jesus said, *"Whoever gives one of these little ones just a cup of cold water to drink in the name of a disciple, most certainly I tell you he will in no way lose his reward."* (Matthew 10:42)

No deed is too small, and remember that the God who knows the number of the hairs on your head will remember every large thing and every small thing done in love.

Chapter 8

Grace, Faith, and Good Works

Ever since Martin Luther began teaching his interpretation of the Bible, there has been much discussion about the relationship between grace, faith, and good works. It is my hope that wherever you stand in your opinion on these matters, you will see that love is still the command of God and the will of Jesus Christ for his people.

But I want to touch briefly on this subject because I do not want anyone to suppose that I am trying to teach in any way that we are saved through actions of love.

Ephesians 2:8-10 says: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before that we would walk in them.”*

I want to bring your attention to two crucial points: The first point is that we are saved by the grace (forgiveness, favor, and gift) of God. There is absolutely nothing we can do to earn this gift or even to deserve it.

The second point tells us why we cannot earn salvation by good works. We were *“created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before that we would walk in them.”* I believe that “before” means that before Adam and Eve ever sinned, they were created for good works, and it was expected that they should walk in them. There is no redeeming merit given to us for doing good works, because that’s what God intended that we do all along. When Adam sinned, and through him, we all became sinners—a greater remedy is required than just going back to doing what we should have been doing anyway. That remedy is the atonement purchased for us by the grace of God when Jesus

died for our sins. We do not deserve that, nor could we ever earn it. It is something that he chose to do for us. And by this work, we are renewed in the image of God, and so we are able to go back to doing what God originally intended us to do.

Galatians 5:6-7 (NIV) states: *“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. **The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.**” [my emphasis]*

We are saved by grace through faith. **And our faith is expressed through love.**

This is why James teaches the following:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that--and shudder. You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God's friend.

You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. (James 2:14-26 NIV)

John wrote something similar in 1 John 3:17, where he asked, *“But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and closes his heart of compassion against him, how does the love of God remain in him?”* We are saved by God’s grace through faith. **And faith is expressed through love.**

Chapter 9

Practical Application of Love

As in many things in life, loving is something that we need to learn how to do. A new mother loves her child with all her heart, but she has much to learn about how to discipline and train her child in love.

In the same way, love is a learning experience. We do not all love in the same way. It has already been said that we have different gifts and different abilities, so our methods of loving one another will vary from person to person.

One person might have plenty of money, and the ability to give to the needy would be easier for that person than for the person living in poverty. In the same way, an outgoing person would find it easy to talk to strangers, and share love that way. A shy person could find that very difficult.

Each of us must find our own way to obey the command to love.

In addition to that, it is possible to make mistakes in how we show love. We might give money to a beggar who uses the money to buy alcohol and get drunk. Or we might open our home to strangers, only to get robbed and vandalized. (I have seen both of these things happen.)

We are required to love, but it doesn't mean we can't learn to be wise in how we do it.

But even if people take advantage of us, we are still required to show love.

Now, I want to clearly emphasize that God loves the effort, even if we are not always wise. We might look at the results, but God looks at the heart. If the desire to care for someone comes from a pure heart, then we have nothing to be ashamed of.

It is with the experience of showing love to others that we will begin to be good at it. And a maturing Christian should be gaining much experience.

But as in anything else, the Word of God is our best guide in learning to love. Here is some practical advice from several sections of God's Word.

“But I tell you who hear: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you. To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer also the other; and from him who takes away your cloak, don't withhold your coat also. Give to everyone who asks you, and don't ask him who takes away your goods to give them back again. As you would like people to do to you, do exactly so to them. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive back as much. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing back; and your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind toward the unthankful and evil. Therefore be merciful, even as your Father is also merciful.” (Luke 6:27-36)

Bless those who persecute you; bless, and don't curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind one toward another. Don't set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Don't be wise in your own conceits. Repay no one evil for evil. Respect what is honorable in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as it is up to you, be at peace with all men. Don't seek revenge yourselves, beloved, but give place to God's wrath. For it is written, “Vengeance belongs to me; I will repay, says the Lord.” Therefore “If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in doing so, you will heap coals of fire on his head.” Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:14-21)

Therefore, putting away falsehood, speak truth each one with his neighbor. For we are members of one another. “Be angry, and don't sin.” Don't let the sun go down on your wrath, neither give place to the devil. Let him who stole steal no more; but rather let him labor, working with his hands the thing that is good, that he may have something to give to him who has need. Let no corrupt speech proceed out of your mouth, but

such as is good for building up as the need may be, that it may give grace to those who hear. Don't grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, outcry, and slander, be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, just as God also in Christ forgave you. (Colossians 3:25-32)

When you make a dinner or a supper, don't call your friends, nor your brothers, nor your kinsmen, nor rich neighbors, or perhaps they might also return the favor, and pay you back. But when you make a feast, ask the poor, the maimed, the lame, or the blind; and you will be blessed, because they don't have the resources to repay you. For you will be repaid in the resurrection of the righteous. (Luke 14:12-14)

Charge those who are rich in this present world that they not be haughty, nor have their hope set on the uncertainty of riches, but on the living God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy; that they do good, that they be rich in good works, that they be ready to distribute, willing to communicate; laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold of eternal life. (1 Timothy 6:17-19)

Let brotherly love continue. Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for in doing so, some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in bonds, as bound with them; and those who are ill-treated, since you are also in the body. (Hebrews 13:1-3)

Today, I urge all my readers to make a decision: commit to finding ways to show love to others. With your unique gifts and abilities, can you develop a plan to make this a daily practice?

Conclusion

A Higher Calling

I believe that I have shown from the Bible God's overwhelming desire for Christians to love Him, everyone—including their enemies—and each other as Christ loves us. It is, as I have said, one of the clearest and most often repeated messages in the Bible.

I hope readers understand that it should become the primary focus of our lives: to love God with all our hearts, to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to love each other as Christ loved us. This should be the definition of Christian living.

Critics might argue, "Christianity has existed for two thousand years, and no one has ever seen the kind of love that you are talking about. Even the early Christians were often caught up in disagreements."

I have to admit that these observations are true, but it's clear that God has set an ideal that's difficult to achieve. Listen to these words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you, that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? If you only greet your friends, what more do you do than others? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? **Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.**" [My emphasis] (Matthew 5:43-48)

Jesus' command to his listeners was to be perfect, as the heavenly Father is perfect. So, yes, God does hold up an ideal that is difficult to obtain. But that does not mean that it should not be our goal. Can anyone argue with the following statement: **Our goal as believers should be to be Christlike in everything we do.**

Also, do not miss the fact that the statement of Jesus, "*Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect,*" is given in the context of a discussion about love. The point is that the heavenly Father loves all, so He desires that you should love all.

There is one last thought I want to get across before concluding. It is simply this: As the coming of the lord draws nearer, our need to love others becomes more urgent:

Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. [my emphasis] (Romans 13:8-12)

Again, the context of these words involves a discussion about our need to love. We are commanded to "*do this [love], knowing the time . . . for our salvation is nearer than when we first believed*". It is the same in the letter to the Hebrews:

"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering; for he who promised is faithful. Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good works, not forsaking our own assembling together, as the custom of some is, but exhorting one another; **and so much the more, as you see the Day approaching.**" [my emphasis] (Hebrews 10:23-25)

We should follow God's Word, but we should do it so much the more as we see the return of Jesus Christ approach. The closer we get to the day that Jesus returns, the more critical it is to love as Jesus commands us.

It is my sincere hope that I can obey the instructions in this passage. I hope that we can "*Spur one another on toward love and good deeds,*" that we can love one another "*all the more as you see the Day approaching.*"

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Heavenly Father, we praise you that you are indeed a God of love. We thank you that your very nature is to be loving, and that it is true that God is love.

We thank You for loving us this way. You loved us enough to send Your only begotten son, Jesus, to die for us so that we can be redeemed from the curse of death. This is so wonderful, and so we praise you for your loving nature.

We stand amazed that You created us in Your image. You designed us to to love. We praise you that you renew us in your image so that we are able to love.

We praise you, Lord, that you have called us to love, so that we can give of ourselves, even as you do. We pray, Lord, that you would help us to live up to this calling.

Moreover, Lord, we praise You for adopting us into the family of God and that all our brothers and sisters are called to love us (and us them) the way You love us. It is truly a privilege to be part of such a family, Lord.

It is more wonderful than we can imagine that you would choose such a life for us, and we humbly praise you with all of our hearts.

Amen.

*Love like the Father loves!
Love like the Savior loves!
The Child of God is known, by their love.
Forget all the pain you bear,
Forgive every wound and care.
To be a child of God, you must love!*

(David Dennis)