

# Loving is Hard to Do

*By Christy Shepard*

The two commandments that sum up Christianity are: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself (Mat 22:34-40).” Many have rightly pointed out that without God to transform and enable us, it is utterly impossible for us to love Him as we ought. We can barely glimpse the majesty of God. And when we do, the inadequacy of our previous knowledge and adoration is painfully obvious. Many have also exhorted us to love one another. Yet despite our many failings, we often lack that same desperation of inadequacy that we feel towards the first commandment. The idea of loving fellow humans may seem less intimidating, therefore we mistakenly think it is more easily within our grasp. But is it?

Handicapped by deceitful hearts, it is very difficult for us to judge ourselves honestly and objectively. We need feedback from God and faithful friends in order to see ourselves more clearly. Then, too, we may have a faulty definition of love. If my definition differs from Scripture, then I may think I love when I do not. Our second highest priority on earth ought to be to love our neighbor as ourselves. If we do not love others, God is not in us (1 Jn 4:20). Genuine Christians are known by their love (Jn 13:34-35). My goal is not to bring condemnation but reevaluation. We need to understand godly love.

Defined in 1 Corinthians 13: **Love is patient and kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, and it is not proud. Love does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, and it is not easily angered. Love keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres. Love never fails.** As a 1970s’ hippie I was so impressed with this definition that, with single purpose, I tried to conform myself to it. After several months of struggle, I fell into a dark despair. No matter how hard I tried there was always some behavior, emotion, or thought that violated love. I was convinced that “Love is the Answer”, yet I could not attain it. My situation seemed hopeless. It was at this point that I surrendered my broken life to God.

The Lord uses imperfect people to fulfill His perfect plans. He does not expect us to love flawlessly. Love is formed in us not by a perfect performance but by a perfect person; Jesus Christ through His Holy Spirit. He gives us a new spirit that softens our hard hearts; a new spirit that continually seeks after Him, that yearns for righteousness, and that loves the truth. Because of this spirit we will learn to grieve when we are unloving and we will strive to repent. We will learn to be compassionate and, as we become tenderhearted, we will care about others.

Since it is impossible to love without God, unbelievers cannot love. This is not to say that they cannot perform sacrificial acts of kindness. It is possible to die for others or to give away everything one has to the poor and still not have love (1 Cor 13:3). Therefore, godly love cannot be defined by an action. Rather, **it is a motivation of the heart, produced by believing the truth, which irresistibly expresses itself in an action** (Jas 2:14-25). For God so loved that He gave... The Gospel that “Christ saves sinners” is the power of God that produces godly love in those who actually believe it. With a deepening conviction of its truths, we begin to see things from God’s perspective and our motives become more like His. Godly love only exists where there is genuine faith. Our lack of love is a symptom of our unbelief.

This Gospel of Grace (unmerited favor) is the great leveler of mankind. Humans are equal in sin and equal in salvation. All have sinned and are without excuse. By nature no one does good or seeks God. We are dead in our sins. Yet Christ, out of His goodness and mercy, chose the cross in order to redeem us; paying the penalty our sins incurred. Before we asked, He saved us. No one earned His favor. Christ's salvation is a free gift. Therefore who can boast? And where is our pride? We are sinners saved by grace alone. What do we have that did not come from God?

These truths act as an antidote to our natural satanic inclination to think too highly of ourselves and not highly enough of those made in God's image. Our tendency is to classify people according to our personal standards. Some are viewed as desirable, others as undesirable. Still others are seen as inferior and not worth our time or attention. In order to treat others in an unloving manner, we must first devalue them in our minds. We must also forget our own miserable condition before Christ took pity on us. When we don't identify with and embrace our common humanity with others, our pride will undermine godly love (Jas 2: 8-9).

God is no respecter of persons. He does not see as we do. He alone judges the heart. He warns that the first will be last and the last will be first. By grace He gives abilities and giftings to people as He pleases. God uses the weak and the foolish to confound the worldly wise. Even a high position is not evidence of one's wisdom or worth. Our worth and wisdom come only from knowing Christ. Leaders are wise or foolish according to their relationship with God. True wisdom produces meekness and humility. It will also listen to and value others.

Christ saved us for eternal life. Knowing this life is but a passing vapor, we are to pursue those things which are not temporal but eternal. Our relationship with Christ is eternal as are the souls of mankind. God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. We are to proclaim His Gospel to others because we care about their souls. Many will perish in hell. The Gospel is God's only Good News for fallen humans. Because life is so short, we should also cherish people while they walk among us and not wait to appreciate them at their funerals. Eternal truths produce urgency in our hearts for the welfare of others. We are to speak these truths in love. If we speak them without love, our motives are wrong and it produces legalism and even condemnation. And if we speak comforts without these truths, it is not love at all. Only truth will protect our souls.

Eternal life is to know Jesus Christ. God's goal is a reconciliation through Christ that enables us to commune with Him. God wants us to know Him as He is and He wants us to open ourselves to His light. To commune means to talk together intimately. And to be intimate means pertaining to the inmost character of a thing; most private or personal. Jesus has called us His friends and therefore confides to us what He is about to do. He certainly does not tell us everything, but He communicates what pertains to us because He loves us (Jn 15:15). To communicate means to have a sympathetic or meaningful relationship.

Likewise, Christians are to commune with one another. Many of us profess in the Apostles Creed that we believe in the “communion of the saints,” but do we know what that means? Too often we seem content to remain recognizable strangers. Not only are we to strive together as one mind for the faith of the Gospel (Phil 1:27), but we are also to commune with one another in a similar way that we commune with God. Our relationships should grow in openness, honesty, and transparency; even willing to risk vulnerability. I believe that heaven will be like the Garden of Eden in that our souls will be naked before God and before one another and we will not be ashamed. This process of communing is a fundamental part of the Church. We, as a Body, are to know one another and to encourage every believer to full maturity in Christ.

It is natural to love those most like ourselves, but God loves those that are very different from Him. Even as His enemies, Christ loved us and died for us. We, too, are to love others who are not like us, including our enemies. Learning to love one another is something only God can work in us (1 Thes 3:12; 4:9-10). We need to understand that love is not the absence of conflict or differences, but is an overriding acceptance that speaks the truth. Our oneness with each other grows as our oneness with Christ grows. We must work at learning to communicate and to dialog with each other, and to search the Scriptures together. As we grow in understanding the Gospel, we will grow in our love of God and in our love for one another.

*“You are my brother, even though I hardly know you.  
You are my sister, even when I do not show you. You’re  
in my family. In Him you’re kin to me. Now you are one  
with me. Shall we learn to be friends?” – Ken Medina*