

The Secret of Loving God and Others

(1 John 4:19)

By Steven Shepard

Jesus loves you! There is no deeper or more powerful truth than this - that Jesus loves you! There is a well known story about Dr. Karl Barth which I read on the internet in an article by an Anglican rector Ed Hird who writes, "Dr. Karl Barth was one of the most brilliant and complex intellectuals of the twentieth century. He wrote volume after massive volume on the meaning of life and faith. A reporter once asked Dr. Barth if he could summarize what he had said in all those volumes. Dr. Barth thought for a moment and then said: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

The New King James says, "We love Him because He first loved us." "We love" could refer to our love for Jesus, or our love for one another. Either way, both are true. Both our love for the Lord and our love for others is the result of Jesus loving us first. To the same degree that we are assured of Jesus' love, we will truly love Jesus and love others. His love is the cause of our love. Without Jesus loving us first, we would never love Him or truly love our fellow man.

The unconverted person is completely incapable of real love. This is because man is by nature sinful, self-seeking, and insecure. Romans 8:7 says, "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so." Love is the essence of God's law. Therefore, the unconverted person cannot love, because he cannot keep God's law which is love. Therefore if a person is to love there must be a fundamental change which takes place in his very nature. Before we can love, we must first be loved by God, drawn to God by love, and through His mercy given life. We must be born again. Then we can say, "We love because He first loved us."

Love is a hard word to define. The dictionary defines love as, "A deep, tender, ineffable feeling of affection and solicitude toward a person, such as that arising from kinship, recognition of attractive qualities, or a sense of underlying oneness." But real love is far more than that. If I would attempt a feeble definition, I would say that love means "to give oneself for the best interests of another without concern for what is received in return and regardless of the cost." Yet this also falls short of what love is. The Scriptures say that God is love. His essence is love. Love is not just doing certain outward acts. 1 Corinthians 13 says that we can give all we possess to the poor and surrender our bodies to the flames, and yet not have love. Not only must the act be right, but the attitude and motivation behind the act must be right. True love – whether toward God or one another - is something that has its origin in God alone; and is manifest to us and through us by the Holy Spirit alone.

We can do all the "Christian" things. We can try with all our might to follow everything we think the Bible teaches. We can try to serve others. We can be honest hard workers. We can praise the Lord always, rejoice always, pray without ceasing, preach the Gospel to every creature, study to show ourselves approved, attend church, tithe, keep to a certain practice on the Lord's Day, and yet, have it all mean nothing because it does not come out of a heart of love. It is not born of the Spirit. God is not pleased by external religion. He is not pleased merely by our

trying to love Him. God is pleased when we actually do love Him from the heart. And this is only possible through an inward work of the Holy Spirit, which comes through faith.

To love Jesus and to love others in this way is unspeakably important. 1 John says, "Whoever does not love does not know God." (4: 18) Our love may not be strong. It may not be unwavering; but without love, we are not Christians. Genuine love for God and man is the mark and the sure evidence of our conversion. 1 John 3:14 says, "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death." 1 John (3:18-19) goes on to say that, "let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence." Love in the end is the essence of all that God is after in our character and the essence of all that the Christian life means. 1 Timothy 1:5 says, "The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." Love is not just an aspect of the Christian life; it is the entirety of the Christian life – to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind; and to love our neighbor as yourself.

When it says that He first loved us, it is talking about the special love of Jesus for His people. God loves all people. Psalm 145:9 says, "The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made." Yet God has a special and particular love for His own people. Isaiah 62:5b gives us a picture of this kind of love. It says, "As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you." Zehpaniah 3:17 says, "The LORD your God is with you, He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, He will quiet you with his love, He will rejoice over you with singing." God has an infinite love for His people. What a picture these scriptures give of almighty God delighting, rejoicing and even singing over His people!

This love of Jesus has the power to heal us inwardly, make us secure, and give us great confidence as people. But what if we are not convinced of that love? Scripture (Rom 10:17) says that "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." The Holy Spirit is able to convince us more and more of Jesus' love as we hear what the Word of God says about Jesus' love.

How does Jesus love us? Let me count the ways. Actually, I can't count all the ways; but I would like to consider four ways that He loves us. First, Jesus loves us with a sacrificial love, second, with an unconditional love, third, with an eternal love, and fourth, with a powerful love.

First, Jesus loves us with a **sacrificial love**. The Greek verb "loved" refers to a fixed point in the past. This refers back to the cross. 1 John 4:10 says, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." The word "atoning sacrifice" is actually propitiation; which means a price paid to satisfy God' judgment. The movie the Passion depicts pretty accurately the physical sufferings of Jesus, as much as a movie can; but what it cannot do is depict the spiritual agony of Jesus on the cross. He bore our sins. He took God's wrath for us; so that we would not be condemned, so that we would not die spiritually, but rather be justified and resurrected to eternal life.

Second, Jesus loves us with an **unconditional love**. This means that we did not have to do anything to make Him love us. The reason for His love does not reside in us, but in Him. His love for us is completely undeserved. All we have to offer Him is our sins. Scripture (Eph2:1)

says you were, “dead in your transgressions and sins.” Ephesians 2:3 says that “we were by nature objects of wrath.” In other words, because of our sin nature, we all deserved an eternity in hell. And yet Ephesians (2:4-5) goes on to say, “Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved.”

Third, Jesus loves us with an **eternal love**. Jesus love has no beginning and no end. Jeremiah 31:3 says, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness.” In Hebrew everlasting refers to a vanishing point in time. In other words, it refers to eternity where there is no time. Such is God’s love for us. God loves us with an eternal love. It is not a momentary impulse. His love toward us has its origin in eternity past and will continue to eternity future. God’s love is from everlasting to everlasting. It is irrevocably and irreversibly given to His covenant people. Ephesians 1:4 says, “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.” Romans 8:29 says, “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.” When it says that God foreknew us it means that God foreknew us personally; in other words that He loved us from all eternity.

Finally, Jesus loves us with a **powerful love**. It is a love which accomplishes what it sets out to do. It perseveres and never lets go, until its purpose is achieved. And what is that purpose? His purpose is for us to be conformed into His likeness and be with Him for all eternity. Phillipians 1:6 says, “Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” Our salvation does not depend upon our own works or the strength of our wills. If it did, none of us would be saved. None of us would persevere. Our salvation depends instead upon the powerful, unstoppable, and all conquering love of Jesus. Faithful is He who calls you who also will do it!

How does this make you feel that Jesus loves you? How does it make you feel that you are loved with a perfect love, a love that is sacrificial, unconditional, eternal, and all powerful? How does it make you feel that Jesus loved you while you were still His enemy, while you were yet dead in trespasses and sins? How does it make you feel that Jesus died as your substitute? This love of Jesus should fill us with peace and joy. It should give us confidence and security. The more we are assured of Jesus love for us, the more we will be motivated to love Him back with our whole heart and to love all people.

Do you love Jesus today? Does His love for you make you fall in love with Him? Does His love make you want to obey Him and serve Him with all your heart? I encourage you to meditate on Jesus’ love which was poured out for you at Calvary. Believe in it. Rest in it. Rely upon it with all your heart until that same love is poured out in fullness in and through your own life.