

Love

We now come to the main part of our study. Jesus told his followers that in making disciples of all nations, they were to teach them to observe all the instructions he himself had given to them. Our aim in this section will be to study Jesus' commands as found in the Gospels. The chapter headings in Part five should not be seen as a complete list; some instructions will have been covered already, and others will be included in Part six. But having said that, our aim is to cover most if not all of them somewhere in this book (See Index).

We begin with the call to love. Jesus taught that the requirements of the law could all be summed up in the commands to love God with all one's heart, soul and mind, and also to love one's neighbour as oneself (Matt 22:36-40). He taught that when confronted by cruel behaviour, his followers were not to resist or retaliate, but rather to turn the other cheek (Matt 5:38-48). Three times during the last supper, he told his disciples to love one another (John 13:34-35, 15:12 & 17). Their love would be the hallmark by which people would know that they were his disciples.

From all this, it would seem to be no exaggeration to say that love is the most important ingredient of all in the Christian life. Paul certainly thought so. He taught that without love, Christians were nothing (1 Cor 13). Peter and John also stressed the importance of love (1 Peter 1:22, 1 John 4:16).

This being so, and because Satan loves to destroy the work of God wherever he can, it follows that love will be an area we find difficult to act on. Theories on love abound, but as John put it, "Love should not be a matter of words or talk; it must be genuine, and show itself in action (1 John 3:18, NEB)." Because of the opposition, there will be nothing that we find harder to do than to love.

This is true to experience. Most of us, if we are honest, get along well enough with each other, provided that we keep other people at arm's length, or as long as there is no conflict. But the closer the relationship, the more conflict tends to arise, and the harder love seems to become. This can be seen in the tragic statistics of divorce.

Jesus told us not to divorce (Mark 10:1-12). We know this, and do not want to go that way. When couples marry, the last thing they want to do is hurt each other, but in all too many cases, they end up fighting. The problems and pressures against love can seem overwhelming at times.

Rather than going down the path of lamenting our failure to love, we will see what we can learn from the one who loved most. This is Jesus, of whom it has been written, "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man, someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:7-8)."

It is on the cross that we see the love of Jesus displayed most fully. He had always loved his disciples, but it was in his arrest, trial and execution that his love could be seen most clearly (John 13:1). Some of us have been so damaged by past hurts that we find it hard to know what love is, let alone know how to love other people. So let us look at Jesus on the cross, and learn from him.

We start with the conviction that when Jesus died on the cross, he did so as the perfect lamb of God, without blemish (John 1:29). In his death, he took the place of the sinner, in fulfilment of the prophetic sacrificial system that God had given Israel in the desert, centuries before (Lev 1:4). He died, so that I, the guilty one, might go free, and not have to bear the punishment of my sins. This transaction, of his death to win my freedom, is central to Scripture (Isa 3:4-6, Rom 3:23-25, Heb 2:14-17, 1 Peter 3:18).

I find the perfection of Jesus on the cross one of the most remarkable things of all about him. When we consider what had been done to him, it is startling that he was not filled with anger, rage and bitterness at the treatment he had received. His friends had slept when he asked them to watch and pray, and had all deserted him at his hour of need.

Even Peter who had boasted of his loyalty 'til death us do part' let him down. The trial had been a travesty of justice. Jesus' prophetic gift, one of his most valuable contributions to human history, by which he had brought the words of God to people, had been vilified (Matt 26:67-68). The acts of

love and compassion that he had performed, in healing people and releasing them from oppression, had been totally rejected (Matt 27:42). And to make it worse, the people who had done all this to him, were those he had longed to gather under his wing, the religious leaders of the day (Matt 27:41-43). And what is more, they had even pretended while they were doing it, that their deeds were motivated by concern for God (John 11:47-50)!

Such treatment would have had a crippling effect on most people. It is bad enough to be savagely attacked by strangers or people that hate you, but to receive this treatment from people who should have been your friends is ten times worse. Judas, his betrayer, was one of his mates (Ps 41:9). Yet Jesus was not overcome with a spirit of revenge; quite the reverse.

On top of all this, the pain of death by crucifixion is extreme. Jesus was not given easy circumstances in which to come to terms with the deep rejection he had just received.

Clearly, to be able to die as the spotless lamb of God, He must have forgiven those who hurt him, from the heart. Moreover, the depth of that forgiveness is astounding; the wounds he had received were very deep, in body and spirit, yet no trace of bitterness can be found in the words he spoke while hanging on the cross.

In the marriage service, couples promise to each other, "All that I am I give to you; all that I have I share with you." Jesus did this to humanity. He gave himself with no strings attached. Even in extreme rejection, he never withdrew his gift of himself to us.

There is a risk in opening oneself in love to another, which is that your spouse can choose to abuse that trust. This is extremely painful. It is so hard to have fallen in love with a person, and married them, only to experience rejection and hurt in due time. In fact, difficulties in marriage are a great test of love.

Jesus showed the depth of his love for people on the cross, in that even though we chose to treat him as we did, he still loved us. He gave himself completely to the human race, and shared everything he had with us (Mark 4:33-34, John 15:15). Our response was to hurt him savagely, and still he loved us, right to the end (1 Cor 13:8). We see, then, that love calls for faithfulness. This is so in any relationship.

We have mentioned marriage as one example, but the same applies with relationships between parent and child, or employer and employee. The understanding of love that Jesus demonstrates is that no matter what the other person does, you keep on loving to the end, and continue to show your love.

Few of us cope well with being hurt by other people. However, in fact, it is only when the other person is treating you badly that you have the opportunity to demonstrate love of this kind. In the good times, the same level of opportunity does not arise. It is in the bad times that we can show our love most.

We discussed the emphasis Jesus placed on forgiveness in Chapter six. As we think about Jesus on the cross, we now learn that forgiveness is a vital ingredient of love. Conditional love, which often masquerades as love, is not love at all. In true love, there are no strings attached, and no limits to forgiveness.

We may feel that love of this kind is beyond us. My own experience is that despite my best intentions, I can fail to forgive those who hurt me. My life then begins to be characterised by bitterness, anger, pain, self-pity and the like. Such things are the opposite of what God wants for us. We saw earlier that perfect love drives out fear (1 John 4:18). I have discovered that my failure to forgive tends to reverse this process; fear of being hurt again can begin to restrict my life.

We saw that love, joy and peace are fruits of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22). Unforgiveness stunts the growth of these qualities in our lives. Indeed, in chapter ten, we will discuss whether persistent bitterness suggests the presence of an evil spirit. Such attitudes are not what we were created for. So one of the challenges believers face, in attempting to carry out Jesus' command to love, is that we need to learn to release people, by abandoning our hurt feelings, and acting generously towards them. This process may prove far from easy in practice.

All this is not to say that we are to pretend that everything is fine when it is not. Many times in the Old Testament, God expressed his anger against his people in no uncertain terms (eg. Ezek

22:17-22). God punished his people when they were unfaithful to him, although he never wiped his hands of them, as we have seen. In fact, his faithfulness again outlasts ours. Jesus taught that divorce was permissible where there was unfaithfulness (Matt 5:32). However, in Hosea, Israel is compared to an adulterous wife, who is then taken back by her husband (Hos 3). God forgives even his people's unfaithfulness to him.

When believers are angry with someone, Paul encourages them to acknowledge their anger, but not to allow it to lead them into sin. Rather, they are to deal with that anger by nightfall (Eph 4:26). In other words, Christians are not to attempt not to get angry. God does not call for that, and does not do it himself. Rather, disciples are to see to it that their anger does not give the devil his opportunity (v27), but that they respond to those who hurt them with forgiveness.

This process is not easy, but it is essential for the Christian. If we do not forgive, we cannot love, and so we fall foul of the number one requirement for Christian living. Some of us have been deeply hurt in childhood. Satan's purpose behind whatever actions took place was that we end up controlled by bitterness and resentment for what happened. In contrast, the Christian way is to see in these experiences an opportunity to copy the Father and the Son, and forgive those who hurt us. In this we share in the sufferings of Jesus, and so become filled with love, through the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:3-5).

Once again, all this may seem too demanding. Few of us have met people who behave in this way. So given that God calls for heart-felt love, how can damaged people begin to go about doing it?

An expert in Israel's law once asked Jesus a question like this. Lawyers are not noted for their love. In fact, his question was an attempt to justify himself, but Jesus treated it as a genuine desire to know how to love. He responded with the well-known parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

We don't need to rehearse its contents in detail here. The point of the story is that two religious people who might have been expected to have got involved with the beaten-up man, did not, but a foreigner did stop to help. He had every reason to prevent his doing so. Samaritans and Jews did not associate (John 4:9). The robbers might still be about, so it was safest to speed on. The Samaritan had plans for the day and did not want them disrupted. Even though the Jew was badly injured, the Samaritan's help might still be rejected out of racial hostility. The Jew might turn out to be a nuisance once he was better. In short, there were any number of excuses to hand.

Love in this instance led to the Samaritan taking all these risks over a complete stranger, and allowing his plans to be disrupted at cost to himself. From this, we learn that love involves action. It appears that if I want to check the level of my own love barometer, I can ask practical questions like these; how do I cope with interruptions when I am busy? Am I pleased when those close to me demand my attention (Matt 19:13-15)? To what extent do I put myself out for others who are in trouble? How much has love for others cost me?

In other words, love is put to the test when my personal agenda and the call of love conflict. Genuine love meets the test. "Love is strong as death, its jealousy (or ardour) unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away (S of Songs 8:6-7)." How easily is my love extinguished?

Failure at this point is not cause for guilt and despair. Rather, the Bible seems to present love as a matter of our choice. It is up to us to respond to the promptings of the Spirit of Jesus by loving actions. He was rich, but became poor for our sake (2 Cor 8:9), so that we might be inspired to do the same.

Maybe the more we bask in the love the Father has for us, the more we will be filled with that same love for others. Such warm feelings should lead to action. Can we be prepared to risk rejection by opening ourselves up to others, by refusing to live in the dark with each other (1 John 1:6), and by being generous with our time? The Father did not wash his hands of the difficulties in his relationship with the human race (Gen 9:11), but persisted in doing something about it.

Copying this behaviour may be a good place to start. The feelings may or not be there to begin with, but whether they are or not, a decision can be made to take action.

God's love has been described as being as long, wide and deep as the ocean, and his faithfulness as reaching right up to the skies (Ps 57:10, Eph 3:18). We have glimpsed in this chapter that its scope is immense. Indeed, Psalm 136 tells us twenty-six times that God's love endures for ever. This statement sets us a good target for our own love. Let us aim to persevere in love, even towards those who hate us. This is difficult, but how good it is that we have the promise of the Holy Spirit's presence to help us.