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How to Do  
What's Most Important

by Dr. Victoria Isaac



**LOVE...**

**MADE POSSIBLE**

**HOW TO  
DO WHAT'S  
MOST IMPORTANT**

**BY DR. VICTORIA ISAAC**

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## PROLOGUE

“And 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.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Mark 12:30-31 ESV

If Jesus said that loving Him and loving our neighbor is most important, we must give our undivided attention to precisely what that means and how to do it. "Love Made Possible - How to Do What's Important" is a deep examination of God's Word to better understand from a thoroughly biblical perspective what loving God and our neighbor really means and how we can move

forward to fulfill the Love Commandments with our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Dr. Victoria Isaac developed the "Love Made Possible... How to Do What's Most Important" book/workbook and corresponding "Biblical Priorities" Christian discipleship course. The course is available online at the Fully Equipped Bible Institute.

[www.fullyequippedbibleinstitute.org](http://www.fullyequippedbibleinstitute.org)





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“And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Matthew 22:37-40 ESV

# 1.

## FIRST THINGS FIRST

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**J**esus said it. That means I need to pay attention to it. And so do you. Red-letter Jesus is a big deal. And... when Jesus says, “This is the most important,” and, “If you do this, you will have fulfilled all of the other Commandments and Laws,” it calls for an ALL STOP. Slam on the breaks. Stop everything. Figure out exactly what Jesus is saying, why He is saying it, and what we should do about it!

That is precisely what we will do - take a deep dive into Scripture and then strategize life application. Are you with me? Let's begin. Did you know that in Matthew 22:37-40 Jesus was actually quoting Scripture? He was! Jesus was quoting Moses, who was teaching the children of Israel how God wanted them to live when they finally crossed into the Promised Land.

Let's look back at this Scripture to understand the Love Commandments in a historical context. In Deuteronomy chapter 5, Moses reminds the children of Israel of the Ten Commandments God gave them. The purpose of Moses' teaching was to equip them to be faithful to the calling and blessings God had given them as His chosen people. Moses said to the Israelites:

“Hear, O 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 might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 ESV

There is great emphasis on the importance of listening to the message. “Hear, O Israel”.... This is the “Shema Yisrael” - a section of the Torah that serves as the centerpiece for the morning

and evening prayer services of the Jewish people<sup>1</sup>. In Deuteronomy 6:4, the Hebrew word is “shama,” and it means “to hear.” It also means to obey and take action.<sup>2</sup> The Shema Prayer is an affirmation that God alone is the one true God we should love with all our being. It is so important that the Shema is recited daily by devout Jews worldwide. The Hebrew word for love in this passage is “ahab.” In context, it means human love for God.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus emphasized the importance of the Shema when He quoted. The Pharisaic lawyer heard the Sadducees attempting to argue with Jesus and decided to come in for the win with the question, “What is the greatest commandment of all?”:

“One of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the most important of all?”

“Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and

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<sup>1</sup>Chabad (n.d.). *The Shema*. Chabad.org. [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/705353/jewish/The-Shema.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/705353/jewish/The-Shema.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Brown, Driver, Briggs, & Gesenius (n.d.). Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/kjv/shama.html>

<sup>3</sup> Brown, Driver, Briggs, & Gesenius (n.d.). Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/kjv/ahab.html>

with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” And the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.”

Mark 12:28-34 ESV

When translating the Shema from the Old Testament Hebrew into the New Testament Greek, the word for love used in this passage is “agapao,” “meaning to welcome, to entertain, to be fond of, to love dearly.”<sup>4</sup> In both the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament, it is clear that our Creator desires a loving relationship with His creation. Nothing should be more crucial than prioritizing what He said, enabling us to fulfill all

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Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/agapao.html>

that God requires of His creation.

In Deuteronomy, the Love Commandment was initially recorded in chapter six and is repeated in chapter eleven. This time, the commandment is paired with the promise of God's blessing for the obedient and a curse for the disobedient. The commandment's importance is emphasized again, as is the need for constant reminders of the Scripture and the necessity of teaching it to our children.

“And if you will indeed obey my commandments that I command you today, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. And he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you shall eat and be full. Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them; then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain, and the land will yield no fruit, and you will perish quickly off the good land that the Lord is giving

you. You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth.”

Deuteronomy 11:13-21 ESV

The context of Moses’ instruction is crucial. The children of Israel, numbering well over two million men, women, and children, were delivered from slavery in Egypt by God’s mighty hand. Once rescued from Pharaoh, it took over 40 years to travel what should have been a direct route of only 250 miles. Could the God who led them through the sea by parting the waters have delivered them directly into the Promised Land? Of course He could!

Yet, thousands of Israelites died in the desert. The ground opened up, swallowing entire families. They complained about

food and water. The Israelites clamored for the creation of idols, even while they witnessed thunder, lightning, and clouds covering Mount Sinai, while Moses met directly with God Himself. Miracle after miracle, and yet, even after receiving the Ten Commandments written by the very hand of God, when they received an unfavorable report of how fierce the enemies were between them and the Promised Land, they responded in fear instead of faith.

How often do we have the same response? God has done so very much for us - redeeming us with the life of His only Son, offering forgiveness for our sins daily, filling us with His Holy Spirit to empower us to become all He has called us to be - His grace - undeserved, unearned favor as children of the most High King, ruling and reigning with Him in eternity! Yet how quickly we forget who He is and all He has done and continues to do, and we shrink back from fully loving and trusting Him.

The descendants of Abraham, God's chosen people, were beaten down by slavery. Many had forgotten their God-given identity and calling. God had good things to give His children and a wonderful future planned for them, with a land overflowing with milk and honey. All He asked was that they love and obey Him. Did

the Israelites understand this command to love and still choose their own path, rejecting God's plans and promises? What were they missing? What are we missing?

## **LOVE REQUIRES KNOWING WHO GOD IS, UNDERSTANDING THAT HE IS WORTHY OF LOVE, AND DETERMINING THAT YOU CAN TRUST HIM.**

For forty years, the Israelites' clothes did not wear out, their sandals did not give way, and they did not die of starvation or perish from thirst. God faithfully provided, even though He knew the weakness of their hearts. Despite miraculous deliverance from Egypt, divine providence in the desert, and then the move into the overflowing bounty of the Promised Land, His children quickly became self-absorbed, self-focused, and disobedient. Instead of owning their God-given identity as His chosen people entrusted with a mission to be a light to the world, the majority chose self-imposed darkness of their own design.

God did not permit Moses to take the final steps of the journey from the desert into the Promised Land. Sovereignly, through faith, Moses gave instructions to God's people for their future. In God's loving omniscience, Moses was inspired in Deuteronomy chapter 30 to instruct the Israelites, detailing what would happen when they turned away and the steps they should take to return after they were unfaithful to the commandment to love the Lord with their heart and soul and might. It wasn't an "if" but a "when." How quickly the children of Israel forgot God's wonderful deliverance, provision, and blessing of the Promised Land. We can judge their unfaithfulness or be honest about our own, choosing to learn from their trials and tribulations instead of repeating their mistakes.

Jesus reiterated these most important Love Commandments to the Israelites, who were once again enslaved - under oppressive Roman rule and burdened down by hypocritical religious rulers who valued power and prestige above loving and serving God and His people. Loving God and loving people seems so simple, yet since the Garden, God's crowning creation - mankind - has continued to mess it up. How is it that we struggle

so often to love an all-loving, all-wise, all-powerful God Who only wants our best?

Adam and Eve had it all. They had unhindered access to God. He gave them the most beautiful place on earth to live. The perfect jobs - ruling over God's good creation. God gave them absolutely everything with only one exception, not to eat from one single tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 12:15-17). There was plenty of food. They didn't sin because they were desperately hungry. They sinned because they valued something above loving and obeying their Creator.

Did God know they would sin? Yes. You have to wonder why God would create them anyway, knowing it would cost the life of His only Son to ransom back His creation. So why did He create them, knowing their choices and the choices of the rest of humanity for centuries to come?

**THE ANSWER IS... LOVE.  
IT IS SO POWERFUL.  
HE LOVES US SO MUCH  
THAT HE CHOSE TO GIVE US  
FREE WILL  
SO THAT WE WOULD CHOOSE  
TO LOVE HIM.**















...made possible

“And God spoke all these words, saying,  
“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the  
land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

You shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or  
any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or  
that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water  
under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or  
serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous

God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the  
children to the third and the fourth generation of  
those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to  
thousands of those who love me and keep my  
commandments. You shall not take the name of the  
Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him  
guiltless who takes his name in vain. Remember the

Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall  
labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a  
Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do  
any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your  
male servant, or your female servant, or your  
livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates.  
For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the  
sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the  
seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath  
day and made it holy.”

Exodus 20:1-17 ESV

# 2.

## FOUR COMMANDMENTS

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In a time when nations worshipped a plethora of gods to address a variety of human needs, the uniqueness of one and only one personal God was utterly unbelievable. Only one true God, Creator of the universe - how could it be possible? The one true God who spoke the sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, and all living beings into existence with His words?

In God's foreknowledge of mankind, in forty-two generations from the lineage of Adam, it would become necessary for God Himself to become a man and die to save His creation. The love of God, the lengths He goes to redeem us!

Adam was created personally by God's own Hands. God called Abraham from a pagan nation because of his faith. He became the father of God's chosen people, the Israelites. Then, very specifically directed through the offspring of Isaac, his son

Jacob, His son Judah, then forward to King David, King Josiah, Joseph, the husband of Mary, the mother of the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ was born to redeem us from our sin.<sup>5</sup> Is there any other God like this?

How amazing that this all-powerful, all-knowing God is so intimately aware of each human being on the planet. He knew us before we were born, gifted us uniquely, and has a purpose for us to fulfill while on this earth. The days, hours, and minutes of our lives and every hair on our heads are numbered.

Even more remarkable is that this all-powerful God wants so much to be in a loving relationship with us. He promises us blessing upon blessing if we love and faithfully obey Him. He provides a path for cleansing and forgiveness of sin when we are not faithful to obey, so we can remain in right relationship with Him. He gifts us what we need to fulfill commands and calling. Wow—WHO loves like that? And WHAT kind of love is this?

**HE COULD CREATE ANYTHING,  
DO ANYTHING,**

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 1:1-17

# **AND YET DESIRES TO BE IN AN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP WITH EACH OF US.**

It's true. So true that the first four of the Ten Commandments are specific instructions about how to love Him and the blessings that follow if we are faithful in love.

Have you ever viewed loving God as faithfulness to Him, with blessings that follow? Let's closely examine the first four Commandments to gain insights into loving God with our hearts, souls, minds, and strength.

The first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me," is prefaced with a reminder of God's deliverance from slavery. After His mighty deliverance from a pagan nation, God commanded the children of Israel not to worship the gods they were familiar with in Egypt and the surrounding nations. This command was to protect the Israelites from diluting their faith.

It is important to note that the Hebrew names of God beautifully illustrate His character and nature. In Exodus 20:1,

“God” is the Hebrew word “Elohim.” It is the same Hebrew word used in Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” Genesis 1:1 (ESV). Moses used the name Elohim in delivering the Ten Commandments to the Israelites in Deuteronomy chapter six.

“Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the rules that the LORD your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it, that you may fear the LORD your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long.”

Deuteronomy 6:1-2 ESV

In the commandments, the name Elohim is used in reference to God. This name of God is ordinarily translated “God” and expresses His Majesty and Almighty Being.<sup>6</sup> It is a plural of the word “majesty” to reference the existence of the Trinity and is used most often in the Old Testament to refer to the one true God of Israel. When used of God and not idols, it is often accompanied

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<sup>6</sup> Orr, James, M.A., D.D. General Editor. (1915). International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. “Entry for 'GOD, NAMES OF'”

by the article “ha,” meaning “the.” Thus, Ha-Elohim could be translated as The God or The Majesty. When the word “elohiym” is used in the plural sense (not Ha-Elohim), as in verse three of Exodus chapter twenty, it refers to idols and not the one true God of Israel.<sup>7</sup>

In Exodus 20, verse two, God reveals the personal nature of His desired relationship, “I am the Lord your God.” The Hebrew word Yahweh, “I Am,” is used for God and is the personal name God revealed to Moses in Exodus chapter three.

Our God existed before the world began - He is uncreated and matchless in splendor. The Hebrew names of God provide beautiful descriptions of the personal, magnificent nature of our loving God.

Examining the first commandment to have no other gods before the one true God, it is abundantly clear that the Israelites were not the only people with trouble worshipping the one true God. Unfortunately, today in the U.S., the majority of those who identify as evangelical Christians are actually religious syncretists instead of biblical worldview Christians. In 2021, only 6% of U.S.

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4 Brown, Driver, Briggs, & Gesenius (n.d.). Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/kjv/elohiym.html>

Christians met the definition of holding a biblical worldview, defined as:

“Absolute moral truths exist; that such truth is defined by the Bible; and firm belief in six specific religious views.

Those views were that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life; God is the all-powerful and all-knowing Creator of the universe and He stills rules it today; salvation is a gift from God and cannot be earned; Satan is real; a Christian has a responsibility to share their faith in Christ with other people; and the Bible is accurate in all of its teachings.”<sup>8</sup>

Only SIX percent! What has happened to the Christian Church in the U.S.? What deception has eroded the Truths of God’s Word? To answer the deception question, we must examine the counterfeit beliefs that have replaced a biblical worldview.

What is syncretism? It is a blending of different belief systems and occurs when external beliefs are injected into an existing belief system.

An excellent historical example of how syncretism occurs is the Roman Catholic Church in South America. The missionaries

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<sup>8</sup> Barna, G. A. (2003, December 3). A Biblical Worldview Has a Radical Impact on a Person’s Life. <https://www.barna.com/research/a-biblical-worldview-has-a-radical-effect-on-a-persons-life/>

went there with good intent, but the South American indigenous culture was the worship of the gods of water, earth, and air. The two belief systems blended. This type of blending occurred similarly in Haiti, where the African slave trade, Catholic missionaries, and native Haitian cultures began blending around the 19th century into what is now known as Catholic Christian-Voudo.

We see how this can occur. Let's now examine the current syncretistic blending in the United States. What exactly is the syncretist belief system of approximately 61% of the U.S. evangelicals? According to recent research from the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University,

“Specifically, there was no predominant worldview embraced by American adults from among the seven worldviews measured—Biblical Theism (a biblical worldview), Secular Humanism, Postmodernism, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, Nihilism, Marxism (along with its

offshoot, Critical Theory) and Eastern Mysticism (also known as “New Age”).”<sup>9</sup>

According to this study, the big winner among the worldviews measured was “none of the above.” Instead, the new study found that nearly nine out of 10 American adults (88%) embrace an impure, unrecognizable worldview that blends ideas from these multiple perspectives—a worldview that Barna calls syncretism.

“Syncretism is a cut-and-paste approach to making sense of life,” explained Barna, CRC Director of Research and author of AWWI 2021. “Rather than developing an internally consistent and philosophically coherent perspective, Americans embrace points of view or actions that feel comfortable or most convenient. Those beliefs and behaviors are often inconsistent, or even contradictory, but few Americans seemed troubled by that.”<sup>10</sup>

Let’s return to the first commandment which states that no

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<sup>9</sup> CRC Staff (2021, April 13). *Vast Majority of Americans Stitch Together Patchwork Worldview of Conflicting Beliefs, Making “Syncretism” Top Worldview Among U.S. Adults*. Retrieved August 20, 2024, from <https://www.arizonachristian.edu/2021/04/13/vast-majority-of-americans-stitch-together-patchwork-worldview-of-conflicting-beliefs-making-syncretism-top-worldview-among-u-s-adults/>

<sup>10</sup> CRC Staff (2021, April 13). *Vast Majority of Americans Stitch Together Patchwork Worldview of Conflicting Beliefs, Making “Syncretism” Top Worldview Among U.S. Adults*. Retrieved August 20, 2024, from <https://www.arizonachristian.edu/2021/04/13/vast-majority-of-americans-stitch-together-patchwork-worldview-of-conflicting-beliefs-making-syncretism-top-worldview-among-u-s-adults/>

other gods should exist before the one true God. In modern first-world countries, bowing down to serve other gods is a matter of priority and attention. For example, managing our time and finances are key indicators and determining factors of our priorities. Sadly, according to recent research from George Barna, Director at the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, “unexpectedly large minorities of U.S. evangelical church attenders reject the biblical nature and character of God (24%) and worship spirits other than the God of the Bible (26%). A whopping 15% admit they occasionally cast spells on others.”<sup>11</sup>

The second commandment is, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image...” Most modern-day Christians do not struggle to resist the urge to carve images of gods to worship, so the concept might seem unfamiliar. If we examine this more closely, what might we uncover? In modern day life, there are still statues, including Buddha, being worshipped and are readily visible in everyday life. For example, have you ever walked into a Vietnamese restaurant or nail salon and seen a statue of Buddha

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<sup>11</sup> Retrieved Arizona Christian University Cultural Research Center: [https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wpBarna, G., Dr \(2024, August 6\). American Worldview Inventory 2024 \(Release #4\) New Research Reveals the Limitations of Christian Evangelicalism in American Society. Retrieved August 20, 2024, from https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/CRC-Release-AWVI-4-Aug-6-2024-Fourth-Draft.pdf](https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wpBarna, G., Dr (2024, August 6). American Worldview Inventory 2024 (Release #4) New Research Reveals the Limitations of Christian Evangelicalism in American Society. Retrieved August 20, 2024, from https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/CRC-Release-AWVI-4-Aug-6-2024-Fourth-Draft.pdf)

with offerings of flowers and fruit around it? Have you seen “baby Buddhas” for sale as home decor?

At the risk of ruffling many feathers, statues of the Virgin Mary are strewn with flowers and surrounded by candles that the devout light while praying to her. On the website “Good Catholic,” all good Catholics are recommended to have a Mary statue. During May, the “month of Mary,” Catholics are encouraged to adorn their statues with flowers and candles and to pray to her. A medal is to be worn, and extraordinary graces are promised to those who do. Scapulars, or miniature versions of a nun’s habit, should be worn. They come with a promise that those who die while wearing the scapular will not go to hell. Specific prayers to Mary are to be repeated in praise of her. The Pope encouraged Catholics to pray diligently to Mary in May, known as the “Month of Mary.<sup>12</sup> Do we find any instruction in Scripture regarding praying to the mother of Jesus? Or is there any indication that she has the power not granted to other human beings to hear and answer our prayers? Is this an example of syncretism, commonly woven into the fabric of everyday life?

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<sup>12</sup>Filz, G., O.P. (2023, April 19). *Nine Ways to Celebrate the Month of Mary*. The Good Catholic. Retrieved August 20, 2024, from <https://www.goodcatholic.com/nine-ways-to-celebrate-the-month-of-mary/>

For many Christians, however, idols don't come in the form of statues that we bring offerings to. Having no other gods before the one true God can be anything we trust in, surrender to, or give more time and attention to than loving the one true God.

Our money can become an idol. Many Christians struggle with tithing. Tithing is an act of worship, returning to God the "first fruits" that recognize Him as the Provider. According to Barna Research, only a tiny percentage of American churchgoers actually tithe.

According to this research, only 12% of "born-again" Christians actually tithe. Ironically, five years of research have also illustrated that the financial well-being of tithers significantly exceeds that of non-tithers, regardless of income levels. Research has also identified a direct correlation between tithing, regular Bible reading, and increased financial health.<sup>13</sup> More clearly stated, there is a direct correlation between putting God first, loving Him enough to obey Him, and His blessing on the lives of His faithful children.

God's Word frequently repeats the principle of loving

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<sup>13</sup> Evangelical Free Church of America. From <https://www.EFCA.org>

God first, which is tied to His blessing on the lives of those who love Him enough to obey Him, as stated in the verses of the first four Commandments. In Exodus 20:6, God Himself reiterates the promise of “steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain,” Exodus 10:7 (ESV) states the third commandment. At first glance, we quickly assume that we should not use swear words with God’s name included.

While true, it has a much deeper meaning for the believer. The word “vain” in Hebrew is “shav,” meaning empty, falsehood, worthless, or to no good purpose.<sup>14</sup> God’s name represents WHO He is, not a name like yours or mine. Scripture describes the power of the name of God, and to use His name lightly is to disrespect His power, might, holiness, and ultimate authority.

The Psalmist tells us that God’s name is majestic, as we discovered from the Hebrew word “Elohim.” “O Lord, our Lord,

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<sup>14</sup> Brown, Driver, Briggs, & Gesenius (n.d.). Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/kjv/shav.html>

how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Ps. 8:1a). He also tells us that glory is due to the very name of God - this is respect, adoration, and worship. “Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name,” (Ps. 29:2a).

Jesus taught us that God’s Name is holy in the Lord’s Prayer. The first petition of the Lord’s Prayer is “Hallowed be your name,” (Matt. 6:9). In Acts 4:12, the apostles understand the power of the name of Jesus - that “there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved,” (Acts 4:12). The Apostle Paul reassures the church in Rome of the power of the name of the Lord Jesus - “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom. 10:13). In the closing moments of history, the sovereignty and power of the name of Jesus will be evident to all when, “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10–11).

God’s name is definitely not a swear word. It is not a casual conversation - the name of God speaks life into existence, and at the end of human history, every being - both in Heaven and on

earth - will confess His name as Lord and Savior.

The fourth commandment of honoring the Sabbath originated with Creation, where in Genesis 2:2, we see God resting, “And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done,” (ESV). The Hebrew word for rest in this passage is “shabath,” which means to cease, and to desist from labor.<sup>15</sup> The command to the Israelites to rest on the Sabbath was for their good, as Exodus 23:12 makes clear, “Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman, and the alien, may be refreshed,” (ESV).

While the Law of Moses no longer binds the Christian, the Creator knows best how His created beings function. The Jewish people observed the Sabbath from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. The New Testament records the early Church meeting on Sunday, the first day of the week, in celebration of the day of Christ’s resurrection. The Apostle Paul instructs against legalism regarding a particular day of Sabbath-keeping:

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<sup>15</sup> Brown, Driver, Briggs, & Gesenius (n.d.). Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/kjv/shabath.html>

“Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.”

Colossians 2:16-17 ESV

Jesus taught that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). The author of Hebrews identifies the Sabbath rest we are to enter into:

“So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.”

Hebrews 4:9-11

Jesus is our way into the Sabbath rest, our access to eternal life. There is no substitution. While we are still here on this earth, the Sabbath rest is an invitation for spiritual and physical renewal. Rest and renewal are vital to optimal functioning, as our Father knew when He made us.

The call to gather and worship together is an invitation of

renewal still urgently needed today, as expressed by the author of Hebrews:

“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

Hebrews 10:24 ESV

For many, work or recreation has spilled over into time that could belong to God in prayer, worship, learning from God’s Word, encouraging one another, and refraining from work. Consider the popular phrase, “Sunday Funday,” and just how far away it is from dedicating the Sabbath to the One Who created it.

Many of us don’t commit our time to worship God because we must work to maintain our desired lifestyle. Or, we work so many hours that we want Sundays to be “fun days” where we focus on personal enjoyment instead of honoring the Sabbath as a day of rest and worship. When we feed our worldly desires instead of spiritual priorities, the need for the soul to be fed and the body to be rested goes unmet. When our souls and bodies are depleted, looking for alternate solutions to cope with the stress of living in a

fallen world becomes easier. We self-medicate in many different ways, making ourselves more vulnerable to adopting the syncretistic approach discussed earlier, where we blend our beliefs and behaviors into a lifestyle that is most comfortable for us personally, free from the call of Christ to love and obey Him by taking up our cross to follow after Him as His disciples.

In closing for this chapter, lest you assume that the content of the first four Commandments doesn't apply because we are no longer under the Law, the Apostle Paul reminds us of why we should love God wholeheartedly and demonstrate it through how we live. In Romans 6:17-18 (ESV), Paul tells us that we have been delivered from slavery and now belong to our Deliverer.

“But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.”

The Lord Jesus reminds us that He came to fulfill the Law through love and that the greatest Commandment to love God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength is not Old Testament law; it is the fulfillment of the Covenant relationship. If God is gracious

enough to give us instructions on how to love Him wholeheartedly, we need to embrace His instructions wholeheartedly, expressing our love for Him through our obedience to His Word.











love

...made possible

“And 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.”

Mark 12:30 ESV

# 3.

## HEART AND SOUL

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In Deuteronomy 6:5 and the Gospels of Mark and Luke, heart, soul, mind, and strength are the words used for how we should love God. This chapter will deeply examine what loving God with our hearts and soul means.

When Jesus described what is most important, it was part of a discussion with a Pharisee trying to trip Him up, catch Him in false teaching, and make Him look unlearned in front of the large crowds gathered to hear His teaching.

Wisely, Jesus quotes from Moses' writings in the Book of Deuteronomy and brings the Law of Love forward into the New Covenant with enhanced emphasis: "If you do these two things..." Remember that there were approximately 613 laws recorded in the Old Testament that the Jewish people were to live by, and Jesus is whittling it all down to two things! The Pharisees, Sadducees, and

the Jewish people who desperately strove to uphold the Law of Moses would have been in shock - absolutely astonished that someone would even suggest such a thing!

Jesus said loving God is the first and greatest commandment, so we will explore what He meant by conducting a deeper study of His words. There are several kinds of love identified in Scripture through the use of various Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament) words. In order to better understand the greatest commandment, we must know what type of love God commands us to give Him. In recording Jesus' words, "You shall love the Lord your God" (Mark 12:30), Mark used the Greek word "agapao" (ἀγαπάω)<sup>16</sup> for our English counterpart word love. According to Strong's Concordance<sup>17</sup>, the word means love of persons - to welcome, entertain, be fond of, and love dearly!

The meaning of the word agapao tells us that God wants His Creation (you and I) to be in a relationship with Him! It is not the same as worshipping from a distance in a formal response to a commandment. The commandment is to welcome, entertain, and

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<sup>16</sup>Thayer and Smith. "Greek Lexicon entry for Agapao": <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/agapao.html>

<sup>17</sup> Thayer and Smith. "Greek Lexicon entry for Agapao": <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/agapao.html>

dearly love God Himself! What could that possibly mean for mere mortals like ourselves?

The definitions 'to be fond of' and 'to love dearly' stand in stark contrast to the Jewish people's response when God's glory descended on Mount Sinai. In Exodus 20:18-20, the people trembled in fear and begged that God speak through Moses instead of directly to them. Yet, we are invited to an intimate, loving relationship of unhindered access to God the Father because of the loving sacrifice made by His only Son.

“Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.”

Moses told the people, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.”

There was undoubtedly no entertaining going on in Exodus 20! But we are invited into fellowship with God Himself. It's time to start adding to our biblical understanding of how we love God

dearly, entertaining Him daily with welcoming hearts.

We will repeat the same process of Scriptural examination, looking at the word heart in Mark 12:30 in its original Greek language. The Greek word used for heart here is “kardia.”<sup>18</sup> According to Strong’s Concordance, its meaning is far more expansive than the organ that pumps the blood to our body, at the center of keeping the body alive. The word also denotes the center of spiritual life and can refer to the soul or mind. “Kardia” can apply to the will, character, and the soul, complete with emotions, desires, and passions.

We continue to construct a thorough understanding of how we should love God (agapeo) with our heart (kardia) by embracing the full definition of agapeo and kardia together. Together, the definitions instruct us that we are to love God dearly by welcoming Him into the center of our being, loving Him more dearly than our own desires and passions.

Loving God with our heart includes choosing - the choice to love God. We choose to love Him when it is not easy and our emotions do not align with what we know is true about who God

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<sup>18</sup> Thayer and Smith. "Greek Lexicon entry for Kardia":<https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/kardia.html>

is. We choose to love God when we do not sense His Presence, when our prayers are not answered in the manner we had hoped for, and when we are in the midst of deep trials.

Loving God with our hearts includes surrendering our emotions, desires, and passions. Surrender occurs when we recognize God is the source of all true life. God knew us before we were born, He knit us together in our mother's womb, and He knows the plans He has for us. Just as the prophet Jeremiah prophesied over the Israelites in exile, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope," Jeremiah 19:11 (ESV), God holds our futures as well as His beloved children. His plans and purposes for our lives are far better than anything we could contrive on our own. We can rest in His good plans for our lives and allow our will and character to be formed around our deep love for Him.

The picture becomes even more beautiful when we add the next word - soul. Jesus instructs us to love God with our souls. The Greek word for soul is "psuche." According to Strong's

Concordance<sup>19</sup>, the word soul refers to the breath of life, the vital force that animates the body, the moral being designed for everlasting life that can attain eternal life undissolvable by death. Pause and create a mental image of your soul - your eternal being.

## **THE CREATOR, IN HIS ALMIGHTY WISDOM GIFTED ETERNAL LIFE TO HUMAN BEINGS FOR THE PURPOSE OF BEING IN LOVING FELLOWSHIP WITH HIM.**

Putting the picture together creates a big WOW! We are given our souls for the purpose of loving God! Understanding that the God of the universe wants to be in a relationship with us, that He desires our deep love for Him to govern our priorities (entertain Him first), our desires (surrendered), and be the center of our eternal moral being brings tears of joy to the worshipping believer.

This is not “love me because I say so.” It’s much more like,

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<sup>19</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/psuche.html>

“My dearly beloved, I desire that you are in a relationship with me above all else. Let us cherish our fellowship, letting nothing interrupt our love for each other. Put this love first, at the center of all you do.” Even more amazing is that this same God, the Creator of the universe, will be intimately present in our minds and hearts, speaking to us, strengthening, calming, comforting, and giving wisdom.... All of this if we, His created, will “entertain” Him first!

How do we fellowship with Almighty God? The prophet Isaiah tells us that God created us to worship Him, “...the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise,” Isaiah 43:21 (ESV). The Hebrew word for praise in this passage is “t@hillah," (not a typo!), and in this context, means praise, adoration, and thanksgiving paid to God.<sup>20</sup>

In Psalm 22, the Psalm of the Suffering Servant, the Messiah speaks through the prophetic psalm of King David. In the midst of the Messiah’s cry out to God as One who is abandoned, He declares, “But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel,” Psalm 22:3 (KJV). With absolute confidence in His

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<sup>20</sup> Brown, Driver, Briggs, & Gesenius (n.d.). Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/kjv/T@hillah.html>

Father, the Messiah proclaims that God dwells in the midst of His people's praise. In the ESV, instead of the word inhabit, the word is "enthroned" - God is enthroned on the praises of His people - sitting in the midst of them!

We can fellowship with the Almighty through our worship, giving thanks to Him no matter the difficulty or challenge, telling Him we love Him, adoring Him for Who He is - all powerful, all knowing, unchanging, ever present, always faithful, and loving unconditionally.

We also fellowship with Him through His Word, which the author of Hebrews tells us is much more than a Book, that God's Word is alive:

"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

Hebrews 4:12 ESV

In Timothy's second epistle, he affirms the miraculous nature of the Word of God:

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”

2 Timothy 3:16-17 ESV

Jesus affirms that His Words are spirit and life, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life,” John 6:63 (ESV). When we are prayerfully studying God’s Word, the Holy Spirit is present to plant God’s Word into our hearts and souls, revealing the deep meaning and full treasure that is held within the passages of Scripture that we study. God can speak to us in these times of dedicated study.

Prayer is another means of fellowshiping with God. King David viewed prayer as two-way conversation with God, “I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me; hear my words,” Psalm 17:6 (ESV). The prophet Isaiah is instructed through a word from the Lord to go to King Hezekiah, affirming that He heard Hezekiah’s prayer, and providing an answer to it - again, two-way communication with God:

“Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah: "Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Behold, I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and will defend this city.”

Isaiah 38:4-6 ESV

And James, the brother of the Lord, describes two-way communication with God through prayer:

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.”

James 1:5-8 ESV

Worship, study of God’s Word, and prayer are all ways we love God with our heart and soul, fellowshiping with Him, loving Him so dearly that we desire the time with Him and refuse to let

anything get in the way of what is most important - loving our Creator!

The loving heart of God still longs for His creation's redemption. If the world that rejects the unconditional love of God, denies His existence, questions His justice, blames Him for the evil that exists could only know the truth about WHO our God is and what He desires from His Creation! If only we, those who call Him our God, and fellowship with Him through the saving grace of Jesus could fully grasp this miraculous gift!

“...so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

Ephesians 3:17-19 ESV



















...made possible

In reply, Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.

So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’ “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

Luke 10:30-37

# 4.

## MIND AND STRENGTH

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**T**his chapter focuses on loving the Lord our God with our mind and our strength. While Jesus shares the most paramount Laws of Love in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, each author describes a slightly different perspective from which we can gain further insights.

In the case of Luke, Jesus is asked by an expert in the Law what He must do to gain eternal life. Jesus responds that the path to inheriting eternal life is through loving God and neighbor.

“And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, 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?” And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as

yourself.” And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

Luke 10:25-28 ESV

The conversation continues between Jesus and the Pharisee as he attempts to justify his behavior, “And who is my neighbor?” he asks Jesus. Jesus answered him with a parable, famously called the Parable of the Good Samaritan. He tells the story of a man who was robbed, beaten, and left half dead on the side of the road. A priest, the most religious in Israel, in keeping the Law, saw him and walked by on the other side of the road. Next, a Levite (Levites are the priestly tribe) saw him and walked by on the other side of the road.

Finally, a Samaritan man, despised and considered unclean, saw the man, bandaged him, put him on his own donkey (meaning the Samaritan now had to walk), took him to an inn, and cared for the badly hurt man throughout the night.

The next day, when the Samaritan left, he gave the innkeeper money to continue to attend to the stranger's needs (most likely a Jewish man who, by default, hated him). Going the extra mile, the Samaritan promised the innkeeper to pay him

whatever it cost to care for the wounded man until he was ready to travel. Binding the wounds, paying the debt, and nursing an enemy back to wholeness is precisely the gift Jesus gave us through His death on the cross. And all while we were separated from Him, dead in sin - this is the perfect example of unconditional love.

After Jesus told the story, he asked the Pharisee which of the men in the story had shown mercy. The Pharisee correctly replied that the Samaritan was the merciful one. Jesus told him to go and do likewise.

The word mercy in Luke 10:37 is the Greek word “eleos.” In context, eleos means “kindness or goodwill toward the miserable and the afflicted, joined with a desire to help them.”<sup>21</sup> Mercy is the act of loving those from whom we can gain nothing loving because we are called to, not necessarily because we want to.

The parable of the Good Samaritan powerfully reveals whether the true love of God is at the center of a person’s being. Our love of God moves us to think how God thinks and then to act obediently, faithful to represent the loving character of God. People

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<sup>21</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/eleos.html>

may have titles or positions, be faithful tithers, religious church attendees, and claim to have a relationship with God. However, the truth is illustrated by how loving their thoughts and actions are towards those that we would not naturally choose to love.

Loving God with all our minds goes to the core of our being —how we think— which determines how we act. The word mind in Luke 10:25-28 is translated from the Greek word “dianoia,” pronounced “dee—an’-oy-ah.”<sup>22</sup> It refers to the mind as the faculty of understanding, feeling, and desiring, as well as our thoughts, whether good or bad. In this context, loving God with our minds requires choosing what we allow our thoughts to dwell on and what thoughts we refuse to entertain.

The Apostle Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 10:5 that we are to “destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.” (ESV). Loving God means choosing to think biblically. We do this by refusing to entertain sinful thoughts that do not align with God’s Word that develop into sinful attitudes and manifest as sinful actions. To do this, we must be students of God’s Word,

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<sup>22</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/dianoia.html>

memorizing it to counteract the fiery darts the enemy throws our way and the sinful thoughts our old nature conjures up to tempt us.

Every day, a fallen, anti-God world confronts us with ungodly imagery, language, perspectives and actions. In the workplace, the marketplace, schools, leisure activities, and now even in churches, deceptive philosophies and ungodly behavior abounds. We are called to be in this world but not of it. The relentless barrage of ungodly imagery, values, and people can constantly wear on us, either desensitizing us to sin or creating a fierce battle that wages inside our minds.

The Apostle Paul instructs the church in Rome to “not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your *mind*.” (Rom. 12:2). Believers must engage in actively honoring God with their thoughts. He admonishes the church in Philippi regarding their thinking:

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

Philippians 4:8 ESV

**THE MORE CONFORMED  
TO THE WORD OF GOD  
OUR THINKING IS,  
THE DEEPER OUR LOVE  
FOR GOD WILL GROW.**

Our thoughts are not always loving. Jesus knew this was the case, and Matthew records His warning about how we should view others.

"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."

Matthew 7:1-5 ESV

The Apostle John, who referred to himself in the Gospel he authored as “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” connected the dots between the necessity of loving one’s neighbor and the commandment to love God in his first epistle.

“If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.”

1 John 4:20 ESV

Loving God with our mind includes careful governance of our thoughts. Taking every thought captive, not dwelling on temptations, and unloving thoughts towards others is crucial to maintaining a mind that pleases God. Replacing wrong thinking by dwelling on whatever is true, honorable, just, lovely, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise will maintain a mind sensitive to God’s voice and His promptings so that we might love Him in both what we think and what we do.

Loving God with all of our strength is also a huge deal. The Greek word for strength is “ischus,” which means ability, force, and might.<sup>23</sup> In this context, loving God with our strength also involves

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<sup>23</sup>Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/ischus.html>

choosing. To love God with our strength means putting our love for Him into action, illustrating that we love Him by actively obeying Him in our behavior and purposefully engaging in His plans for our lives.

Our choice to love God with all our strength begins when we open our eyes in the morning. Do we choose to put Him first by surrendering our day to Him, seeking Him in prayer and through His Word, or do we cherish a bit more sleep or time online catching up on what's happened while we were asleep?

Our choices illustrate whether we are using all our strength to love and serve Him. Jesus said in John 14:15, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Our obedience requires choosing God with all of our might. We are promised that God will strengthen us and give us the ability to turn to Him in times of temptation. Thankfully, God desires our best efforts but pairs them with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to give us victory in our choices. Just as Jesus defeated Satan's temptations with the Word of God, we are given the same armor.

We must be strong in the Lord, not merely in our own strength. The Apostle Paul teaches the church in Ephesus how to

do this, and it applies to us today:

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the

gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.”

Ephesians 6:10-20 ESV

Loving God with all our strength requires us to recognize that we need His strength to accomplish His will. The plans and purposes of God are eternal and come to pass through the work of His Holy Spirit. We are partners in His work, but as finite humans, we rely on His mighty power. The Apostle Paul described this empowerment of God in his letter to the church in Philippi, “For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure,” Philippians 2:13 (ESV).

We step out in faith, motivated by love to take action according to His plans and purposes, strengthened by the indwelling Holy Spirit, and empowered to fulfill God’s plans as He moves through us. We give Him our very best efforts, and by His grace, He fills the gap between our finite strength and His mighty power. It is a marvel that He desires to partner with us and use us for His purposes - He desires us to serve Him with all of our strength (ability, force, might), which will never be enough, and then He multiplies it into His sufficiency - just like the loaves and fishes. Love made possible!

















Love

...made possible

“And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Matthew 22:37-40 ESV

# 5.

## LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR

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**T**he second commandment of the two that Jesus stated all of the Law and the Prophets depend on is the command to love our neighbor as ourselves. At first glance, that might seem “doable” and not such a big deal until we dive deep into Scripture to fully understand the meaning of the Scripture and the biblical principle of loving one’s neighbor.

The word for love that Matthew used to most accurately capture Jesus’ words in Matthew 22:28 is “agapao.”<sup>24</sup> We are already familiar with this word because “agapao” is the same word that the Apostle Mark used to record this teaching of Jesus in Mark

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<sup>24</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/agapao.html>

12:30. Luke used the same word to record the teaching in Luke 10:27. The word *agapao* describes both the commandment to love God and to love one's neighbor. Because numerous Greek words for love have varying meanings, it is marvelous to see the consistency of meaning captured by the eyewitnesses of Jesus' teaching. It helps us grasp the intent of His teaching when we understand the kind of love God commands us to have towards Him and our neighbor.

If you recall, in context, Jesus is responding to questions from a lawyer or expert in the Jewish Law. The intent is to trip Jesus up, discrediting Him before His ever-growing crowd of followers. We discovered that Jesus answered the question by quoting the Law of Moses (Old Testament), and the same holds true regarding the teaching of loving one's neighbor. In Leviticus 19:18, the Lord is clear about the commandment to love one's neighbor, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD," (ESV).

In Leviticus, the Hebrew word for love is "ahab," pronounced

“aw-hab.”<sup>25</sup> The definition is very clearly human love, including the love of family, friends, and lovers. Ahab can also be used to describe the human love for God. It is relational and is interchangeable with the words beloved, lover, friend, or dearly loved.

The word for neighbor in Matthew 22:39 is “plesion,” pronounced “play-see’-on.”<sup>26</sup> It means a friend, a fellow citizen (of the Jewish nation), and, according to Jesus, any other man, irrespective of nation or religion, with whom we live or whom we have a chance to meet.

The word for neighbor in Leviticus 19:18 is “rea’<sup>27</sup>,” pronounced “ray’ah.” One’s neighbor is defined here as a friend, intimate friend, fellow citizen, and another person.

There is a difference in the meaning of “love your neighbor” between the command in Leviticus and the command of Jesus.

The word neighbor in Leviticus appears to be limited to those we

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<sup>25</sup>Brown, Driver, Briggs, & Gesenius (n.d.). Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/kjv/ahab>

<sup>26</sup>Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/plesion.html>

<sup>27</sup>Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/rea-3>

are in a relationship with or our fellow citizens. Because the word denotes affection, this makes sense in this passage. Note that the Old Testament does not teach hate for one's enemies but continues to call God's people to act justly. For example, in Exodus 23:4-5 (ESV),

“If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it with him.”

There is a charge to do justly, but the Old Testament does not expand the definition of neighbor to nations outside Israel or one's enemy.

By now, you should see the dilemma setting up here. Jesus already taught in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:43-48) that we should love our enemies. Remember the definition of “agapao” - to welcome, entertain, be fond of, and love dearly! The concept of loving one's enemies, taken literally, would be offensive to the Jewish religious leaders. Gentiles were considered unclean, in some instances calling them “dogs,” “unclean,” and the “uncircumcision.” The Jewish people were forbidden to eat with

Gentiles or enter their homes. One example of this is from John 18:18, where the Jewish leaders were working feverishly on the logistics of Jesus' execution but would not enter the headquarters of the Roman governor to prevent defilement before Passover.

“Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. It was early morning. They did not enter the governor's headquarters, so they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover.”

John 18:28 ESV

Despite all of his time with Jesus, Peter still held this cultural perspective when called to minister to the Gentiles until he received a divine revelation that he was not to call common anything God had made clean (Acts 10:10-15). He states his change of heart as he chooses to entertain and dine with Cornelius, a Roman centurion:

“And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.

Acts 10:28

With this deeply held religious conviction, you can understand why the Jewish lawyer questioned Jesus about the love of neighbor because His words would undo the entire system of remaining pure from the Jewish perspective, undefiled by contact with Gentiles. Jesus commands love of one's enemy—affection, fondness, welcome, and even entertaining, which is impossible under Jewish law. How could it be possible that Jesus was teaching the Jewish people to love and entertain Gentiles?

To the religious leaders, this was breaking the Law. In the heart of God, this is extending His mercy to the lost of the world.

Do we carry similar prejudices, considering some people unclean, unwelcome, and unworthy of our affection? Do we have labels in our minds for people based on what they look like? How they dress? How they talk? Their education or economic status? Do we wish we didn't have to associate with people of lesser stature? Isolate or insulate ourselves away from the "less valuable" of society?

Once a person has been labeled in our minds and hearts, do we act differently toward them? Less loving? Not as willing to invest time to be the hands and feet of Jesus?

# **JESUS IS CALLING US TO A HIGHER STANDARD, A MUCH MESSIER, LESS RELIGIOUS KIND OF LOVE.**

Luke the physician recorded Jesus teaching on loving one's enemy in Luke 6:32-36 (ESV):

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

In the above passage, the Greek word for enemy is “echthros.” It means hated, hateful, odious, hostile, opposing another, and to describe men at enmity with God by their sin or a man that is hostile in general. It also describes the devil - the most bitter enemy of divine government.<sup>28</sup>

The intent of Jesus in this passage is not that we love the devil, of course. But in this passage of Scripture, the Greek word for love is the same word Jesus used as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew 22:37-40 - “agapao” - for loving your neighbor. Loving the odious, the hateful, and the hostile is a severe challenge for all of us. How do we even remotely love those that the word enemy describes? And yet we are commanded to as one of only two Commandments that Jesus said if we fulfill, we would have fulfilled all that God desires of us.

Quite honestly, loving one’s enemies is just not humanly possible. We struggle enough with loving those we are in a relationship with. Think about how quickly angered we become from a friend’s post on social media that we find offensive. Just one click, and the person is blocked. Or we leave a room angry,

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<sup>28</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/echthros>

slamming the door behind us and refusing to converse for days on end.

So, if we struggle to love those we know are considered within the definition of loving our neighbor, how do we even begin to love our enemies? Would God have commanded us to do what is not humanly possible? The answer is yes.

God's Word tells us to resist the devil, and if we do, he will flee from us (James 4:7). Can you resist the devil on your own? How did Jesus resist the devil's temptations? He spoke God's Word! We are supplied with God's Word that we need to use - it serves as the sword of the Spirit against the enemy's onslaught (Ephesians 6:10-17).

The Apostle Paul reminds us of God's faithfulness to supply us with what is needed to obey Him in 1 Corinthians 10:13 (ESV):

“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”

If God is faithful to supply what we need regarding resisting

temptation, is He not faithful to supply what we need when it comes to love? According to 1 Corinthians chapters 12 and 13, love is a gift of the Spirit. The Apostle Paul discusses the gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians chapter 12 and goes on to describe love in 1 Corinthians chapter 13:13 as the greatest gift: “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love,” (ESV). God will supernaturally supply His love that enables us to love the most difficult people through the power of His indwelling Holy Spirit.

The Apostle Paul also describes love as a spiritual fruit born from yielding to the sovereign governance of the Holy Spirit. It is a byproduct of walking in obedience, as he explains in Galatians 5:22-25 (ESV):

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.”

The fruit of love grows as we intentionally choose to love

God and our neighbor in obedience to the will of God.

Is it a paradox that love is a gift, a fruit, and a choice? No, it is how the Kingdom operates. Consider faith - Scripture tells us it is impossible to please God without faith. The author of Hebrews puts it this way, “And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him,” Hebrews 11:6 (ESV). The Greek word for faith is “pistis.” In context, pistis refers to “the conviction that God exists and is the creator and ruler of all things, the provider and bestower of eternal salvation through Christ.”<sup>29</sup>

The author of Hebrews tells us in Hebrews 11:6 (ESV), “And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him.” In the context of Hebrews chapter eleven, there is a long list of acts of faith by heroes of the faith. Hebrews chapter 11 is known as the “faith chapter,” and provides powerful examples of faith expressed by obedient action.

In the Apostle Paul’s list of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, faith is included as a gift from God. Faith is also

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<sup>29</sup> Thayer and Smith. "Greek Lexicon entry for Pistis": <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/pistis.html>

described as a fruit of the Holy Spirit by the Apostle Paul in Galatians 5:22-23.

Using faith as an example, one can see a pattern emerging. Our faithful Father supernaturally gifts us with what we need to love, serve, and obey Him through the indwelling power of His Spirit. As we obey Him, spiritual fruit is born from yielding to God's will. Through His empowering and training, He equips us to fulfill all He requires, including the most difficult commandment to love our enemies. God makes the impossible possible! As we step out in obedience to His commandment to love our enemies, the miraculous takes place as the power of His Spirit works through us to love as He does. Love made possible!

Ironically, in some instances, loving our neighbor can be just as challenging or at times, more challenging than loving our enemy. We typically are not in a constant relationship with our enemies and don't have to interact on daily basis with them. But let's be honest - who do you take the greatest liberty in your behavior with? Who is it easiest to be rude to? Short-tempered? Selfish? Lazy?

If the answer is "your family," we must confess that these

are not loving behaviors towards those we say we love the most. Unfortunately, if we are honest, it is easiest to behave this way at home. Many of us are tired by the time we get home and just want to relax. We don't want the additional demands of meeting someone else's needs placed on us. Our guard comes down, and we want to be able to do what we want to do in our own homes. Additionally, we are more likely to act unloving when we are tired, hungry, or frustrated (think driving home in rush hour traffic).

It is from the same well that we must draw strength from to love our neighbor as ourselves - the empowering Presence of the Holy Spirit. The prophet Isaiah tells us in Isaiah 40:29-31 that when we seek Him, He will strengthen us and enable us to respond lovingly even when we do not feel loving.

“He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint” (ESV).

Jesus' expanded definition of loving one's neighbor is

challenging for all of us. It is helpful to remind ourselves of who we once were and how grateful that God extended His loving mercy to us.

“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience--among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved--and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus

for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Ephesians 2:1-10 ESV



Why was Jesus' teaching on loving one's neighbor so controversial to the teachers of the Law and the Jewish people? Use Scripture, including keywords, to support your position.

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How is it possible to love one's enemy?

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love

...made possible

“A new commandment I give to you,  
that you love one another:  
just as I have loved you,  
you also are to love one another.”

John 13:34 ESV

# 6.

## A NEW COMMANDMENT

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**G**od commands us to love not just those we know but also those we consider enemies and even those we don't know. But how can loving be more challenging than we've discussed? It's possible—Jesus is introducing a new commandment! “Love one another as I have loved you...” This is a profound and significant addition to our understanding of love.

Let's examine what Jesus is really saying here. The word “commandment” in Greek is “entole,” pronounced “en-tol-ay'.” In the Jewish context, commandment is a word of great importance. Jesus understood the authority of the word as it related to the Ten Commandments and the Law of Moses. It means an order to be obeyed due to the office held by the person giving the command. In other words, this new commandment is not a suggestion. It is

an order from our King, and it is a big deal.

Once again, if it is a big deal, we must look at it comprehensively to understand what we are commanded to do. What kind of love is Jesus talking about? It's the Greek word "agapao" again, meaning to love dearly, be fond of, entertain, etc. Jesus uses the word "agapao" three times in the same sentence.

It's the same Greek word as "love your neighbor as yourself," yet Jesus calls this a new commandment. He used the same word for love, but this new commandment is unique in every way.

## **IT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HOW WE LOVE OURSELVES AND HOW JESUS LOVES US.**

It is shocking if you think about it. Let's look at Jesus' example during His time on earth to understand what He asks us to do. Of course, the greatest example we have of this is, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" John 15:4 ESV. Jesus called the disciples His friends. He

laid His life down for them and us. Laying down one's life is the ultimate sacrifice, and comparatively, few of us find ourselves in a position where our death is necessary to save the life of another.

This could of course be true in the military, in an emergency, and perhaps even a medical scenario. Regardless, the meaning behind the passage is applicable. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer poignantly stated, “When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.” Bonhoeffer was familiar with this death to self, as he refused to succumb to Hitler’s version of Christianity, courageously stood in opposition to his mass extinction of the Jewish people, and Hitler had him hanged in a Nazi concentration camp as a result. Bonhoeffer's point made all the more relevant by his death, was that the first call a Christian needs to answer is death to self - death to the attachments of this world.<sup>30</sup>

Jesus defined loving Him as obedience, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” John 14:15 (ESV). And, you guessed it, the Greek word for love in this passage is “agapao,” the close friendship relationship God desires with us.

He calls those who love Him to keep His commandments

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<sup>30</sup> Perkins, C. (2023, September 26). *Count the Cost*. Retrieved August 20, 2024, from <https://thebonhoefferproject.com/weeklycolumn/cost>

and be His disciples, obediently denying ourselves and following Him regardless of the cost. “And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it,” Luke 9:23-24 ESV.

In Luke’s passage above, the Greek word for deny is very enlightening. It is “*aparneomai*.” It means “to forget one’s self, lose sight of one’s self and one’s own interests.”<sup>31</sup>

It is extremely humbling to examine our love for our Saviour through the lens of forgetting about ourselves and obeying despite the cost. It is additionally humbling to recognize that this is how we are to love others! Forgetting about ourselves and loving despite the cost goes entirely against the grain of our self-focused world. In our modern-day lives, this is definitely inconvenient, to say the least!

Loving others like Jesus loves us compared to how we love others is a startling, convicting contrast. To further illustrate the differences, we will examine Jesus’ relationship with Peter.

Remember Peter’s denial of Jesus when things got rough? Jesus

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<sup>31</sup>Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/aparneomai.html>

told Peter, “Get behind me, Satan!” or telling Peter that if he would not allow Jesus to wash his feet, Peter could have no part of Him? How could Peter’s thinking be so wrong after he had spent so much time so close to Jesus? Jesus already knew everything about Peter, every flaw, every impetuous response - yet He chose, called, loved, taught, forgave, and commissioned him to build His church. This stark contrast should inspire us to change our ways and love as Jesus did.

How is the way Jesus loves Peter different than how we love? Let’s look at some relational components of Jesus’ time with Peter. Jesus demonstrates unconditional love despite what He already knows about his upcoming betrayal. He is honest with Peter about his shortcomings and continues to teach him. That is patient love. Jesus doesn’t write off Peter because of his failure. To not write him off, Jesus had to forgive him for his betrayal during His darkest hours. Despite Peter’s flaws, Jesus saw the best in Peter and called him to build His church. This patient and forgiving love is what Jesus expects from us, offering reassurance and hope to others who are struggling.

How does this measure up to how we love ourselves? Oh

boy! We typically do not see ourselves objectively - most of us have blind spots in our areas of weakness, or we are aware of them but find ways to excuse our behaviors. We are prone to not being completely honest with ourselves, not calling our sin what it actually is - sin. We whitewash and convince ourselves of a different, more positive narrative about who we are and what we have done.

It's also very different when it comes to how we love others. Loving sacrificially, as Jesus does, is a daunting task. If someone is repeatedly obtuse, we can create distance, not wanting to go the long haul with someone who "just doesn't get it." If they are abrasive and obnoxious, we create distance. If someone betrays us, that is usually a nail in the friendship coffin. And, if the very same person has perpetrated all of this - just forget it. You are moving on to find a new friend. Right? Wrong - we now have this new commandment to love as Jesus does. Sacrificing, forgetting about ourselves, and regardless of the cost. Putting this into everyday practice seems impossible and impractical.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul penned the famous "love" verses to the Corinthian church. These verses

appear in weddings, fights with spouses, Sunday school, and church services worldwide. Why? Because they are the practical instructions for loving behavior.

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.”

1 Corinthians 13:1-8 ESV

The Greek word for love in this passage is “agape.” It means “brotherly love, affection, good will, love, and

benevolence.”<sup>32</sup> Paul describes what selfless, godly love is and what it is not.

Self-love is impatient, unkind, envious, boastful, arrogant, rude, insistent in its own way, irritable, resentful, rejoicing at wrongdoing, and lacking faith, hope, and love.

In Timothy’s second epistle, he described people who love themselves in this way:

“People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power.”

2 Timothy 3:2-5

James described self-love's end result: "For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice," James 3:16 (ESV).

The Apostle Paul warned sternly in his letter to the Philippians, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but

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<sup>32</sup>Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/agape.html>

with humility of mind, regard one another as more important than yourselves," Phil. 2:3 (NAS). The Greek word translated as selfishness is "erithia," and in context, it is "a desire to pull one's self forward, a partisan or fractious spirit."<sup>33</sup>

The word for conceit in the Greek is "kenodoxia." It means "groundless, self esteem, empty pride."<sup>34</sup> These two words together create a picture of someone who is self-focused, always looking for a way to put themselves forward to prove they are better than others.

Self-focused individuals can be quite confusing. This is why the Apostle Paul cautioned about those who possess spiritual gifts but lack love. Self-focused people often misuse their gifts. They do not use them to serve God's purposes but to seek recognition and admiration. This form of self-promotion can be deceptively subtle, often cloaked in the right religious terminology. These are the individuals Paul referred to as 'noisy gongs and clanging cymbals,' a metaphor for their self-promotion's jarring and disruptive effect on the community of faith.

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<sup>33</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/eritheia.html>

<sup>34</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/kenodoxia.html>

If we are honest, we all wrestle with self-love as part of our fallen nature. We desire pleasure, recognition, importance, power, or admiration. Pride is the root of self-love, and it can be powerfully deceptive. Pride can masquerade as insecurity, false humility, and even sacrificial Christian service or generous giving as long as others know it is taking place.

There are some key Scriptures to help untangle the confusing deception of self-love, as the Bible has plenty to say about selfishness. The Apostle John asked in his first epistle, "If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?" 1 John 3:17 (ESV).

The Apostle Paul was quite succinct in his instruction - "No one should seek their own good, but the good of others," 1 Cor. 10:24. And in his letter to the Romans, he reminds us of how Christ lived, saying:

"Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me."

Loving God enough to obey Him, to take up our cross and follow after Him, and to forget about ourselves in the process is what those who call Jesus Savior and Lord are called to do. Christ loves us selflessly, faithfully, and unconditionally. Loving one's neighbor as Christ loves us is both a high calling and significant challenge. Self love is entirely the opposite of loving others as Jesus has loved us, thus we must root out self love where ever God reveals it to us in our own lives.

To root out self-love, we must die to ourselves. What does that even mean, and how do we do it? Death to self implies death of the old nature with its impure motives, thoughts, and desires. It includes the concept of replacement - replacing the old habits and ways of thinking with a new way of thinking and acting pleasing to Christ.

The concept of death to self is inherent in the disciple of Christ's calling, as Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow after Him.

“Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For

whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?"

Matthew 16:24-26 ESV

The word deny in the above passage is translated from Greek, "aparneomai." It is a verb, meaning it requires action, and in this context, it means to deny - to affirm that one has no acquaintance or connection with someone, to forget one's self, lose sight of one's self and one's own interests."<sup>35</sup>

This call to deny oneself is shocking. Coupled with the instruction to take up one's cross, meaning embrace the suffering inherent in death to self, coupled with the concept of losing one's life for the sake of Christ, creates a very sobering reality of what Christ calls His followers to do. What is even more sobering is what Jesus identifies as the alternative - the man that chooses the world and, in the end, forfeits his soul - his eternal life with Christ!

Yet how many Christians have embraced this command of Christ to forget about their own life and embrace the plans and

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<sup>35</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/aparneomai>

purposes of God regardless of suffering and at the expense of losing the world? Perhaps this is more true of believers who suffer persecution for their faith in countries where Christianity is illegal. In the U.S., however, if the majority of evangelical Christians have abandoned a biblical worldview, likely, only a tiny minority of those who call themselves Christians would be willing to obey this command of Christ.

Sadly, it is not just about the eternal soul of the person who calls themselves a Christian. It is also about the abandonment of the person's call to Kingdom service, to be salt that prevents decay and light that dispels darkness in an increasingly dark world.

How can we impact the world if we are so enmeshed in it that we look and act no differently than those who do not profess faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior?

Death to self is not optional for the true disciple - one that sits at the feet of Jesus to learn from His teaching and then follows after Him to walk as He walked. Loving as Jesus does starts with death to the old self so that the new man can expand and grow in each of us, just as the Apostle Paul explains in his epistle to the church in Rome:

“So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”

Romans 8: 12-17 ESV















love

...made possible

“But now faith, hope, love,  
abide these three;  
but the greatest of these  
is love.”

1 Corinthians 13:13

# 7.

## THE GIFT OF LOVE

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**W**e have examined the impossible command Jesus gave us - to love others in the same way He loves us. This unconditional love of even our enemies is impossible for fallen mankind. The human impossibility of this love is why the world's history is plagued with hatred, horrific wars, and unthinkable massacres.

If you are reading this book, you are likely not contemplating a massacre. However, we all struggle with truly loving those who do not love us. Sometimes, we struggle with loving those who DO love us, and we certainly struggle with loving anyone the way Jesus does!

There is a good reason the New Testament is called the Good News! The Good News about God's commandments, including the new commandment to love as Jesus loves, is made

possible in and through our relationship with Christ.

The best news? Love is a gift! In fact, the Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13:13 that love is the greatest of all gifts. Why is it the greatest gift? Because it is eternal and most important, as illustrated by the teaching of Jesus regarding the most important commandments.

Along with faith and hope, love lasts forever. The other gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12, such as prophecy and tongues, are for life on this earth (1 Corinthians 13:8), but faith, hope, and love will remain.

Love is actually intrinsic to the character of God. The Apostle John articulated it this way in his first epistle, "Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love," 1 John 4:8 (ESV).

God's ways are absolutely amazing, so utterly expressive of His Fatherly love that He both requires and miraculously provides for His children at the same time. He is bestowing His very nature upon us through the Holy Spirit. Because of what He gives us, we can become more like Him. It is a beautiful picture of what earthly parenting should look like.

That resonates because Jesus tells us that the commands to love God and our neighbor are the greatest commandments, and without our Father's help, this would be impossible.

## **IT ONLY MAKES SENSE THAT WE ARE GIVEN THE GREATEST GIFT TO FULFILL THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT!**

In writing to the Corinthian church, Paul spends much time teaching the believers about spiritual gifts. We hear the term spiritual gifts frequently, but it is doubtful that we have grasped the full impact of what it actually means. In 1 Corinthians 12:1 (ESV), Paul begins to teach about the spiritual gifts. “Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed.” In this passage, the word “spiritual” in the Greek is “pneumatikos,” which means non-carnal or non-human, divinely supernatural, and regenerate.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/pneumatikos-2.html>

The word gift is “charisma,” pronounced “khar’-is-mah.” In this context, it means a divine endowment, a free gift, and a favor one receives without merit.<sup>37</sup> God gives the gift despite us being without merit - it is the very essence of the word grace, or "charis." In Greek, charis is a beautiful word that means "that which affords joy, pleasure, delight, of the merciful kindness of God by which God, exerting His holy influence upon souls, turns them to Christ, keeps, strengthens, increases them in the Christian faith, knowledge, affection, and kindles them to the exercise of the Christian virtues."<sup>38</sup>

As we delve deeper, we begin to grasp the true magnificence of what God, our Creator, has given us through His Son, Jesus Christ. We are called to love God with our entire being, not because He needs anything from us, but because He desires a loving relationship with us. The God of the universe, in His infinite love, wants us. We have not earned this relationship, but He offers it to us as a pure gift of His merciful kindness - His grace.

The Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Rome tells us that

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<sup>37</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/charisma.html>

<sup>38</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/charis.html>

God actually POURS his love into our hearts as a gift of the Holy Spirit! "... God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us," Romans 5:5b (ESV).

Pouring does not describe a trickle - the Greek word is "ekcheo," and it is a metaphor meaning to distribute largely.<sup>39</sup>

The Holy Spirit equips and empowers us to walk in love through the gift of love He so generously pours into us. The Apostle John describes our ability to love as a result of God first loving us, "We love because he first loved us," 1 John 4:19 (ESV). He goes on to describe the reality of not loving one's brother:

"If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother."

1 John 4:20-21 (ESV)

Jesus tells us He remains in the Father's love and commands us to do the same. He promises that if we abide in Him, he will give us what we need if we ask the Father in His Name. We are not left on our own to do the impossible. This

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<sup>39</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/ekcheo.html>

passage illustrates His promise to equip us to fulfill our calling to go and bear the fruits of love.

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another 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 what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another."

John 15:9-17 ESV

Jesus answers our prayers when we abide in Him, asking in His Name and according to His will to fulfill His purposes. This

passage of Scripture is not a promise to fulfill our whims or earthly desires, it is a promise to equip us with what is needed to fulfill our callings, to take up our cross and follow after Him, going into the world to make disciples of all nations.

There is an unbreakable link between loving God and loving our brother. If we are filled with God's love through the power of the Holy Spirit that abides in the soul of every believer, the proof of His love residing in us is seen in how well we love others. We receive the gift and then must take action on the gift we have received. In the same way that James tells us that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:17), so "love without loving" is also dead.

As we obediently respond lovingly to those around us, the fruit of love is born. Spiritual fruit grows and is healthy when the believer (the branch) is connected to the Vine (Jesus), walking in loving obedience to His commands. The Apostle John recorded the teaching of Jesus in this regard. Jesus told the disciples:

"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

John 15:5 ESV

We are not just blessed with God's love to fellowship with those equally blessed. Every believer is called to be a disciple and make disciples. We will not be an effective witness without love. Right after Jesus gives the new command to love as He loves, the Apostle John records him stating that love is the witness of our faith, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another," John 13:35 ESV.

The Great Commission, the final command Jesus gave to the disciples prior to being taken into Heaven, applies to us today. Many believers today are unaware of this responsibility, but that does not eliminate the truth of the calling.

“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

## Matthew 28:16-20 ESV

We need to live consistent lives of love as a witness to our loving God and His desire that mankind be redeemed. The Apostle Paul instructs the church in Ephesus 5:2 (ESV), “And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” In context, the Greek word for walk is “peripateó,” pronounced “per-ee-pat-eh’-o,” and refers to walking a full circle around.<sup>40</sup> Once again, we see the full circle illustrated - God’s love for us and His gift of love to us enables us to fully act in love to a world that is dying for the lack of genuine love of God.

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<sup>40</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/peripateo.html>















love

...made possible

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

# 8.

## THE EXPRESSION OF LOVE

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**T**he Holy Spirit has given Christ's followers the spiritual gift of love. This miraculous gift empowers us to fulfill the most important commandments—to love God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbor as Christ has loved us. The Apostle John describes the love God gives us (agapao) and our responsibility to love (agapao) others as a result:

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.”

1 John 4:7-8

Agapao is a verb - it describes how we are to love. In verse eight of this passage, where John states, “God is love,” the Greek

word for love is “agape.” Agape is a noun meaning brotherly love, affection, and good will. <sup>41</sup> Thus, we have a description of the nature of God, as God IS love.

We have all received gifts that we never use, or perhaps we even re-gifted them. The same can be true of spiritual gifts (not the re-gifting part!) - they are given to us to fulfill our God-given calling on earth. When we stand before God, the judgment of believers will be whether we faithfully stewarded the gifts He has given us, using them to fulfill His plans and purposes.

1 Corinthians 13 tells us that the most important gift is love, and without exercising this gift, all other gifts are made irrelevant. The Apostle Paul also teaches us how the gift should and should not be exercised.

We will examine how to faithfully exercise the gift of love in a manner that pleases God. Paul started the famous “love passage” by emphasizing that love is the most important gift, and then he began teaching what the gift of God’s love is and what it is not. His teaching provides a profound system of checks and balances for believers to help us steward the gift of love well.

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<sup>41</sup> Thayer and Smith. "Greek Lexicon entry for Agape." <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/agape.html>

The passage tells us that love is patient and kind. Paul uses the Greek word “agape” for love, pronounced “ag-ah’pay.” As mentioned previously, agape is a noun meaning brotherly love, affection, goodwill, love, and benevolence. The sentence could then read, “Brotherly love is patient and kind, showing goodwill, love, and benevolence.”<sup>42</sup>

The Greek word for patience is “makrothumeo.” It is pronounced “mak-roth-oo-meh’-o.” In the context of love, it means to be patient in bearing the offenses and injuries of others, to be mild, slow to anger, or to punish.<sup>43</sup>

To describe kindness, Paul used the Greek word “chresteuomai.” It is pronounced “khraste-yoo’-om-ahee.” It means to show oneself mild, to be kind, to use kindness.<sup>44</sup>

To expound on love being patient and kind, we can say that we show affection or love by not being abrasive and being patient and slow to anger at others’ wrongdoing. This love requires us not

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<sup>42</sup>Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/agape.html>

<sup>43</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/makrothumeo.html>

<sup>44</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/chresteuomai.html>

to be overly sensitive but secure in God's love so that the behavior of others does not stumble us into wrong behavior or attitudes ourselves.

Paul tells us that love does not envy. The Greek word for envy is "zeloo," pronounced "dzay-lo'-o." In the context of love, not envying means not desiring or pursuing what belongs to someone else.<sup>45</sup> Refusing to envy as a component of being loving means that we must control our thoughts, not desiring what does not belong to us. Love requires us to guard our thoughts and to refuse to go after something that is not rightfully ours. In practical application, this happens in a marital affair, where the desire is for an illicit relationship, and the pursuit breaks the marriage covenant.

Marital infidelity is not love, as some might describe it. In fact, it is the opposite, as it destroys a covenant made in the eyes of God and brings great pain to the spouse whose partner was wrongfully envied, pursued, and taken away.

We are all familiar with boasting and arrogance. Everyone knows someone who constantly wants too much attention and tries to get it by bragging about themselves. Bragging is the

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<sup>45</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/zeloo.html>

opposite of love, as the focus is self-centered instead of outwardly focused on actively loving others. The heart of boasting is the desire to elevate one's stature in the eyes of another, which is contrary to love. Paul used the Greek word "perpereuomai," pronounced "per-per-yoo'-om-ahee," and means to vaunt oneself.<sup>46</sup>

When someone boasts, it is often because they are arrogant and consider themselves better than others. The original Greek word, "phusioo," pronounced "foo-see-o'-o." In the context of love, or the antithesis of love, it means to be puffed up, bear one's self loftily, and be proud.<sup>47</sup>

The Apostle Paul reminds the church in Philippi, "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves," Philippians 2:3 (ESV).

Love is not rude. Paul used the Greek word "aschemoneo," pronounced "as-kay-mon-eh'-o." The word meaning is to act unbecomingly.<sup>48</sup> We are all familiar with acting unbecomingly. Any

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<sup>46</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/perpereuomai.html>

<sup>47</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/phusioo.html>

<sup>48</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/aschemoneo.html>

time we lose our temper with someone, refuse to be patient and kind, and use words to wound, we act unbecomingly. Acting unbecomingly is also the antithesis of loving others.

What we say, or not being rude with our speech, is a tremendous challenge. As James tells us:

“So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth comes blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.”

James 3:5-10 ESV

The Apostle Paul penned his detailed instructions regarding love to the church in Corinth. This church was a complete melting

pot of all types of people - rich, poor, slave, free, a multitude of nationalities, numerous former prostitutes, and pious, orthodox Jewish people who came to believe in Jesus. Those who had faithfully followed Jewish Law might consider the Gentiles "heathens." You might imagine how the extremely conservative Jewish women viewed the former Temple prostitutes. The former prostitutes would have stirred up a fuss as they were known for their beauty. Their heads were completely bald, while the Jewish women had their heads covered and wore floor-length garments.

The church in Corinth was in turmoil due to a lack of godly love. Paul addressed the human habit of regarding ourselves as better than others and called out these attitudes and behaviors as the antithesis of love.

Love does not seek its own way. The Greek word used is "zeteo," pronounced "dzay-teh-o." In context, it refers to seeking after, striving, requiring, and demanding something from someone.<sup>49</sup>

Most of us are guilty of insisting that our way is best and demanding what we want to take place (and sometimes immediately!). When we push our agenda on someone else, we are

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<sup>49</sup> Thayer and Smith. "Greek Lexicon entry for Zeteo": <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/zeteo.html>

being selfish, not considering the other person's needs while we insist that our own needs are met. This inward self-focus is unloving, and we are called to an outwardly focused, active love of others.

Love is not irritable or resentful. Paul chose the word “paroxuno” for irritable. It is pronounced “par-ox-oo’-no.” In the context of love, it means to scorn, despise, or be angry.<sup>50</sup>

The Greek word for resentful is “logizomai,” pronounced “log-id’-zom-ahee.” It is an interesting word choice, as it refers to measuring and judging or weighing up the reasons.<sup>51</sup>

The Apostle Paul paired irritable and resentful together well. How often do we do the math in our minds about how we were wronged, something is unfair, we are being taken advantage of, are left to do all the hard work, etc.? It is easy to be resentful when we experience an injustice by being taken advantage of. A natural follow-up response would be irritability. The treatment is not fair. The relationship is not as it should be; we will respond by being irritable. This is not a godly, loving response. Love bears all things,

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<sup>50</sup>Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/paroxuno.html>

<sup>51</sup>Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/logizomai.html>

hopes all things, and endures all things. Love calls us above how others treat us to a higher response..

**WE ARE CALLED TO EXERCISE  
THE GIFT OF LOVE DESPITE THE DIFFICULTY.  
WE EXERCISE THE GIFT TO PLEASE GOD.  
WE STEWARD HIS GIFT OF LOVE WHILE  
FULFILLING HIS MOST IMPORTANT  
COMMANDMENTS.**

Love does not rejoice with wrongdoing. The love for God compels believers to walk in God's Truth, refusing to engage in evil behavior. The words also imply not gloating when others sin, as the self-righteous might be tempted to do. Loving others means we want the best for them, and the best is that God's plans and purposes are fulfilled in the lives of those we are called to love and serve.

A genuinely loving person will pray for those who struggle, always praying for victory over sin and freedom in Christ Jesus.

We must resist the temptation to compare ourselves and feel better about ourselves because we have not committed “that” sin. God does not view man as we do; we are commanded not to judge. Jesus was very clear in His instructions:

“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?”

Matthew 7:1-3 ESV

With such a substantial description of what love is and what it is not, we can frame love in the context of pleasing God despite how others treat us. When we seek to please God above all else, we are empowered to rise above the circumstances. We are freed and able to step out into the miraculous movement of the Holy Spirit. Through us, He illustrates the love that knows the imperfect and still chooses to love. It is most fitting to close with the Apostle Paul's beautiful verse, “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” 1 Corinthians 13:13.



...made possible

## **SCRIPTURAL APPLICATION**

Identify Scriptures that further illustrate the biblical principle that love is the greatest gift and most important fruit. With each Scripture, include the Greek definition of the word love used in the passages you choose. Include your rationale for why love is the greatest gift and fruit.















...made possible

“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you,  
ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit  
and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved  
me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep  
my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept  
my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. These things I  
have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy  
may be full.” This is my commandment, that you love one another  
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 what I command you.”

John 15:7-14 ESV

# 9.

## LOVE AS OBEDIENCE

**J**udas had already left to betray Jesus. The eleven men remaining with Yeshua at the Passover meal needed preparation for the coming events - the betrayal, false trial, crucifixion, resurrection, and His ascension. The disciples needed to know they would stay closely connected to their Messiah. The "disciple whom Jesus loved" recorded Jesus instructing the disciples to abide in His loving friendship just before His death.

In chapter fifteen of John's Gospel, Jesus calls Himself the true vine and His Father the vinedresser. The Jewish people were very familiar with tending grapevines, and the analogy of the pruning process to produce greater fruit would be easily understood. Jesus states, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing," John 15:5 (ESV). The word abide used in this passage is "meno," and in context means "to

remain, abide, not to depart, to continue to be present, to remain as one, not to become another or different."<sup>52</sup>

To fulfill the calling each disciple received from Yeshua, His Words needed to remain in them, they needed to remain in love with Him, and they needed to do what He commanded them to do.

In John 15:7-14, the verb for love is "agapao," and the noun is "agape." We are familiar with the definitions of these Greek words that describe loving God and one another dearly, welcoming and entertaining Him and those we are called to love.

Despite what those who want to dilute God's Word would say, the word command in John 15:15 in Greek is "entellomai," meaning "to order or command to be done."<sup>53</sup> It is not "to suggest, to propose" - it is to command something to be done. The word commandment is equally compelling. In Greek, the word "entole" is a noun and means "an order, a command, a charge. As a commandment, it means a prescribed rule in accordance with

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<sup>52</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/meno.html>

<sup>53</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/entellomai.html>

with which a thing is done.”<sup>54</sup>

It is important to note that Jesus identified obedience to Him as a critical component required of those He is in close relationship with. He is exercising His authority over the lives of those who follow Him. Jesus also describes bearing fruit as a means of identifying those who are His disciples. As we know from previous discussions, fruit is the result of obedience.

From this passage, we can see the relationship between the love of God and obedience to His commands. The Apostle John reiterates this teaching of Yeshua from his Gospel forward into his first epistle:

“Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.”

1 John 2:4-6 ESV

These are a few examples in 1 John between loving God

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<sup>54</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/entole.html>

and obeying Him. Why did the Apostle John emphasize this so heavily in his epistle? False teaching was already on the rise. Gnosticism was a substantial threat, with false teachers worming their way into the churches, teaching dualism - the belief that all matter is evil and only that which is spiritual is good. This teaching led to questioning the sinless nature of Christ, as He came in a human body. It also led to the belief that sinful behavior with the body was inconsequential, as only spiritual matters were of consequence.

The Apostle John reinforces the basics of the Christian faith and the necessity of obeying Jesus' Commandments to remain in close, intimate fellowship with Him. Why is this important for us today? Recall the statistics in chapter two regarding the alarming rise in false teaching embraced in the evangelical church today. In the U.S., approximately 6% embrace a biblical worldview defined by the belief that "absolute moral truth exists and that the Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches."<sup>55</sup>

Just as Jesus admonished us to abide in His Words, If we

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<sup>55</sup> Retrieved Arizona Christian University Cultural Research Center: [https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wpBarna, G., Dr \(2024, August 6\). American Worldview Inventory 2024 \(Release #4\) New Research Reveals the Limitations of Christian Evangelicalism in American Society. Retrieved August 20, 2024, from https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/CRC-Release-AWVI-4-Aug-6-2024-Fourth-Draft.pdf](https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wpBarna, G., Dr (2024, August 6). American Worldview Inventory 2024 (Release #4) New Research Reveals the Limitations of Christian Evangelicalism in American Society. Retrieved August 20, 2024, from https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/CRC-Release-AWVI-4-Aug-6-2024-Fourth-Draft.pdf)

do not hold God's Word in utmost reverence as a miraculous gift to us, we will find friendship with Jesus in decay and ourselves going astray. This is not just a first-century church problem with Gnosticism. It is a very urgent problem in the Church today. We must hold fast to God's Word and its' authority over our lives. His Word has the power to keep us spiritually healthy and prune off anything in us that does not bear fruit.

“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

Hebrews 4:12 ESV

Many believers today hear the Word but do not obey it. There is a substantial difference between people who say they believe and those who illustrate their belief through their obedience to Christ. James, the brother of Jesus, addressed the issue of hearing and not obeying very directly,

“But be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the Word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural

face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.”

James 1:22-24 ESV

How does hearing the Word and not obeying it become easy for those who call themselves Christians? Just as the Apostle John addressed false teaching that was damaging the Church, we can point the finger at false teaching today that has done tremendous damage to the Church. What is this false teaching? In a nutshell? Cheap grace. The term cheap grace was coined by German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book "The Cost of Discipleship," as mentioned previously. His definition of cheap grace is as follows:

"The preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ."<sup>56</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was willing to die rather than support what Hitler was doing to the Jewish people. Because of his opposition to Hitler, he died by hanging in a concentration camp

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<sup>56</sup>Schansburg, D. (2024, January 22). *The Costs of Discipleship and Non-Discipleship*. Christian Standard. <https://christianstandard.com/2024/01/the-costs-of-discipleship-and-non-discipleship/>

just as World War II was ending.

Fast forward to the 1980s and 1990s when “carnal Christianity” was becoming popular. The doctrine of carnal Christianity teaches that as long as someone professes Christ as their Savior, they are saved and have no responsibility to obey the commands of Jesus or the call to holiness in Scripture. Carnal Christianity is a sort of dualism of its own - one can have salvation without the call to take up one’s cross to follow Jesus. In essence, one can have a Savior but doesn’t have to have a Lord and salvation without sanctification.

Is it true that God’s grace covers all of our sins? What does the Apostle John tell us in his epistle? “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness,” 1 John 1:9 (ESV). Inherent in forgiveness for sin is the recognition of sin and seeking forgiveness for our transgression from our loving, faithful Father. Repentance involves turning away from wrongdoing and replacing sinful behavior with righteous behavior.

There is no new sin under the sun. The Apostle Paul tackled the cheap grace topic in his letter to the Romans and defines what

biblical grace is:

“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin

therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.”

Romans 6:1-14 ESV

Despite fads and popular trends, believers cannot afford to detach from the truths and moral authority of the Bible. The current "deconstruction" movement continues to grow globally. In his book, "Deconstructing Evangelicalism," Jamin Hubner defines deconstruction as it pertains to evangelical Christianity. He writes, "Deconstruction simply refers to the process of questioning one's own beliefs (that were once considered unquestionable) due to new experiences, reading widely, engaging in conversations with "the other," and interacting in a world that is now more connected and exposed to religious diversity than ever before.”(Bloom, 2023).<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Bloom, J. (2023, October 6). *What Does Deconstruction Even Mean?* Retrieved August 20, 2024, from <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-does-deconstruction-even-mean>

While Hubner does not reject Christianity altogether, he simply packages it into something more palatable, claiming new knowledge from experience, education, and science has shed fresh light and accusing evangelicals in general of distorting the Christian faith. Does this sound like the role of faith, the moral authority of Scripture, and the inerrancy of God's Word have been discarded by you? Is it any wonder that only 6% of professing evangelicals actually hold a biblical worldview?

There are also a significant number of former evangelicals whose purpose is to deconstruct Christianity altogether, and this is the most common use of the phrase deconstruction on places like social media. In addition to the movement to deconstruct the Christian faith, these people now refer to their "deconversion" from the faith or rejection of their conversion to Christianity. Deconstruction of one's faith is a process, and deconversion is the end result. Often, the person in this process has been wounded in some way by the Church - the Church acting in unloving, unbiblical ways.

Is there reason to be concerned about this movement? Yes - it is picking up global steam. Currently, there are almost half a

million posts with the hashtag deconstruction on Instagram. You might say the topic is "trending."

The deconstruction movement is global, complete with conferences, gurus, therapists, and books. There is always someone hoping to make a buck while dismantling someone's faith. In most instances, the deconstruction movement has little to do with the Truth of God's Word as understood in historical, linguistic, and cultural contexts. It has everything to do with the underlying desire to adjust the Truth to fit cultural or personal agendas when the authority of God's Word impinges on a woman's right to an abortion, God's design for biblical marriage, same-sex relationships, political perspectives with ungodly agendas, etc.

Every believer should challenge their personal beliefs in the light of God's Word - examining God's Word carefully, as stated above - in historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts. This contextual examination eliminates "cherry-picking" Scripture to support our personal positions. If God's Word disagrees with our personal beliefs, we need to change, as our Savior is unchanging. We would not want Him to be any other way but firm, unmovable,

and unshakable - not swayed by the whims of man.

# **JESUS CHRIST IS THE SAME YESTERDAY AND TODAY AND FOREVER. HEBREWS 13:8 ESV**

Clearly, there is no new sin under the sun. Gnosticism, dualism, cheap grace, deconstruction, deconversion - the intent at the heart of these movements is to deceive. God is unchanging. His Word is divinely inspired and holds moral authority over those who love Him. The Apostle Paul tells us that the gifts and call God gives us don't change, "For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable," Romans 11:29 ESV.

What are we gifted with through the Holy Spirit? The love of God, by which we are empowered to love Him and love others. How is our love evidenced? By our obedience to His commands. No matter how deceptive the fads, we are called to remain steadfast in love, faith, and obedience as the Apostle Paul

instructs the church in Ephesus:

“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

Ephesians 4:11-16



















love

...made possible

“Now there was a day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, and there came a messenger to Job and said, “The oxen were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them, <sup>1</sup>and the Sabeans fell upon them and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you.” While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, “The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them, and I alone have escaped to tell you.” While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, “The Chaldeans formed three groups and made a raid on the camels and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you.” While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, “Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, and behold, a great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people, and they are dead, and I alone have escaped to tell you.” Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.”

Job 1:13-22 ESV

# 10.

## FAITHFUL LOVE

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**W**hat happens when we believe we are doing everything right, yet thing after thing goes wrong? Has God forgotten about us? Stopped answering our prayers? Is He choosing to be uninvolved in the day-to-day difficulties of our lives?

Most of us have been through those times and seasons where one thing after another keeps going wrong, with problems piling on top of problems. It's disheartening and can be absolutely exhausting. The temptation to grumble is ever-present. We want to find a way to place blame, whether on God or someone else, or just quit believing. After all, if God really loved you, why would He have let something like this happen in the first place?

What we tell ourselves about the character of God and how we respond to the truth of WHO God is in these difficult

circumstances and seasons is crucial to faithfully withstanding the storm and continuing in unwavering love for God.

## **Biblical Foundations**

Why do bad things happen to believers? Aren't we supposed to be His children? Don't we have protection from the devil? Are we being punished? Or tested for our faith? If it is testing, what possible good could come from such a terrible trial? To weather the storms and remain faithful, we must understand what God's Word tells us about believers experiencing difficulties.

Do believers face difficulties, even when walking in right relationship with God? Let's look to Jesus' instructions to His disciples, all of whom died as martyrs except the Apostle John. In Matthew Chapter 22, Jesus began to prepare the disciples for what they would face after His crucifixion and resurrection. He said, "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world," (John 16:33 ESV).

What about Jesus? Did Jesus do everything right and still suffer persecution, pain, and ultimate death at the hands of evil

men? Yes, so we know that it is possible to experience suffering that is not the result of sinful behavior. His teaching on tribulation prepared His disciples to experience difficulties as His disciples, actively living out their faith and calling in a fallen world.

## **What About Job?**

An unnamed author penned the Book of Job under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He described Job as a righteous man, blameless and upright, who feared God and turned away from evil (Job 1:1). Unspeakable tragedy struck. In a single day, Job went from a very wealthy man with sons and daughters to an impoverished man who experienced the unimaginably excruciating pain of losing all of his children.

The author records Job on the worst day of his life, during his greatest tragedy. Job's response to the cataclysmic disaster was to fall on the ground and worship, saying, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord," (Job 1:21 ESV).

How did this terrible tragedy befall a righteous man who feared God? Why did God allow such devastation to befall a righteous man who turned away from evil? Scripture tells us that Satan went before the Lord to gain permission to test Job, and God permitted him to test Job's faith.

Few of us have experienced tragedy and testing at this depth. Fewer of us have fallen on the ground in worship when disaster strikes. And still, fewer of us recognize the Lord as sovereign, able to give and take away according to His plans, and accept circumstances filtered through His hands with a surrendered, trusting heart. Our temptation is to be angry at God or find our way out of the trial to ease our suffering because we lack the understanding that neither man's anger nor man's independence can achieve the righteous purposes of God's plans.

When Job remained faithful, Satan determined to intensify the onslaught, attacking him with horrible sores from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. He sat in a pile of ashes, scraping his sores with a piece of broken pottery (Job 2:7-8). Many of us have suffered physical illness and understand how weak we can become while experiencing the agony that illness can cause. At

this low point, even Job's wife turned against him, taunting him about maintaining his integrity amid his suffering. She advised Job to "curse God and die," (Job 2:2 ESV).

Then Job's friends piled persecution on top of pain, unable to comprehend that such utter devastation had befallen an innocent man. They insisted that his suffering resulted from unrighteous behavior and urged him to repent. Job called them worthless physicians and miserable comforters, unable to be used to minister consolation and healing from his terrible tragedy. Job was indeed left alone. He cursed the day he was born, but he never cursed God. He was determined to cling to righteousness and refused to succumb to faithlessness.

He remained faithful though none stood beside him, clinging to the righteousness of God, knowing that there were no answers to the tragedy outside of his faith. In his pain, he asked where God was, yet upheld His sovereign right to rule.

Amid all this cataclysmic suffering, even though he wished he was dead, Job made a powerful statement, "For I know my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will stand upon the earth," (Job

19:25 ESV). He knew that in the end, his God would make everything right.

Job pleaded his case before God, defending his righteousness as any of us would. Scripture tells us that the Lord answered Job, challenging him regarding his understanding of His Sovereignty. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements - surely you know!” (Job 38:4-5 ESV). For two chapters, God challenges Job, illustrating that He knows all and that Job’s perspective is very finite.

After God speaks, Job responds wisely, “Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further,” Job 40:3-5 (ESV).

The Lord then continues His challenge to Job regarding His sovereignty, and Job repents of questioning God amid his suffering:

“I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted. Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge? Therefore I have uttered what I did not

understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me.' I have heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You; therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

Job 42:2-6 ESV

After Job's repentance, God restored his fortunes and blessed him with seven sons and three beautiful daughters. The faith and faithfulness of Job stand as a testament to us today of the necessity of trusting WHO God is, unswervingly relying upon His unconditional love and goodness, and understanding that His ways are not our ways and His thoughts, not our thoughts.

When we understand WHO God is and love Him because of WHO He is and not what He does, we can remain faithful during the storms. Recognition of His omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence causes us to cling to God as His children, knowing that He is still in control despite the storms and that He will work all things for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purposes (Romans 8:28).

**“I count everything as loss  
because of the surpassing  
worth of knowing  
Christ Jesus my Lord.”  
The Apostle Peter**

Stephen was the first martyr, refusing to compromise the truth of the Gospel to appease the Jewish authorities. He fearlessly called them to account for the murder of the Messiah, enraging them. While being stoned to death, Stephen saw Jesus and declared, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56 ESV). Stephen loved Jesus enough to endure suffering and death because he knew Jesus personally as the Messiah, and his faith in a better world to come was unshakable to his final breath and entrance into eternity.

When the teachings of Jesus became difficult to accept, and the crowds began to turn away in unbelief, the Apostle Peter knew that there was nowhere else to turn except to the Messiah.

“So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”

John 6:67-69 ESV

The word “know” in the above passage comes from the Greek word “ginosko” and indicates a deep understanding and even intimacy, as the word “know” was used as a Jewish idiom for sexual intercourse between a man and a woman.<sup>58</sup>

Peter had no doubt about His Messiah and that there is nowhere else to turn for eternal truth and eternal life. His proclamation of faith was not a casual statement, but a profound expression of his intimate relationship with His Savior. Peter's faith far more than just belief, but a strong commitment to living out his faith that triumphed over all other earthly claims. History records that Peter was crucified upside down, a testament to his unworthiness to be crucified in the same manner as his Messiah.

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<sup>58</sup> Thayer, & Smith (n.d.). New Testament Greek Lexicon - King James Version. Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/ginosko.html>

Contrary to the modern mindset of first-world countries, in his first epistle, the Apostle Peter discusses suffering and trials as blessings that we should give glory to God. This perspective on suffering is a far cry from the majority of us irreverently challenging the fairness of God and, in the process, illustrating our ignorance of Who He is.

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And “If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?” Therefore

let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.”

1 Peter 4:12-19 ESV

In Peter's last letter, he reminds the believers who were suffering persecution to remain steadfast in the midst of their trials:

“But don't overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved and the earth and the works that are done it will be exposed.”

2 Peter 3:9-10 ESV

In Paul's writing to the church in Philippi, he first identifies all he had from an earthly perspective - describing himself as a Hebrew of the Hebrews, a Pharisee, and blameless in keeping the Law. In the cultural context, he is telling his readers that he was a person of significant importance, worthy of great respect among

the Jews. Then, he counts it all as nothing, helping us to put our worldly value system and the hardships of this present life into proper perspective today:

“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith--that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

Philippians 3:7-11 ESV

Again, we find the Greek word "ginosko," where Paul says, “that I may know Him,” meaning an intimate knowledge and relationship with His Savior. Everything else becomes meaningless to Paul, having willingly suffered the loss of everything. He had successfully shifted his value system from that of the world to that

of the heavenly Kingdom of God. As followers of Christ, we must also embrace this "shifting" of citizenship, refusing to value worldly accomplishments and treasures above the King and His eternal Kingdom.

Church tradition records that Paul was beheaded in Rome, refusing to compromise his faith in His Lord to save his earthly life. After persevering through being stoned, beaten, shipwrecked, imprisoned, impoverished, and continuously persecuted, in what theologians believe is his final letter to the churches at the end of his earthly life, the Apostle Paul puts his impending death at the hands of the Romans in perspective:

"For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing." This promise of a crown of righteousness from the Lord is a powerful motivation for all who endure in their faith.

The word loved in the above passage is the Greek word agapao. As referenced previously, it means love of persons - to welcome, entertain, be fond of, and love dearly. Those who love Jesus dearly will faithfully finish their earthly races, and Jesus will lovingly usher them into eternity with Him with a "Well done, good and faithful servant!".

As followers of Christ, we can only endure suffering and hardship through this deep, profound knowing - ginosko - an intimate, loving relationship born from loving fellowship with our Savior.

The Apostle John died quietly, not martyred like the other apostles. He referred to himself as "the one whom Jesus loved." Jesus called John and his brother James "Sons of Thunder." Jesus rebuked John for wanting to call down fire from heaven to consume people for not welcoming them (Luke 9:54). John was blessed to be one of the three apostles who witnessed Jesus transfigured on the mountain. Following Jesus transformed John from a rough, brash fisherman who wanted to call down fire to a disciple known for his teaching on loving God and others.

John authored the Gospel of John, three epistles, and the Book of Revelation. The Gospel of John focuses on the love of God for mankind and His plan to redeem man back to Himself through the costly death of His only Son.

Despite not being martyred, did John experience the suffering that Jesus told us we could expect as His disciples, as recorded in John's Gospel? "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world," John 16:33 (ESV).

Tradition holds that John survived boiling in oil as God divinely intervened. Persecutors also forced John to drink poison, but again, God intervened, and no harm came to him. He was exiled to the island of Patmos, a destination for criminals and political prisoners, to work the mines there. There were no provisions for the daily needs of the Patmos inmates. Most likely, John relied church in Ephesus sent provisions to ensure his survival. It was definitely not sunbathing on a Greek island for a holiday!

The Apostle John wrote the Epistle of First John sometime between 95 and 110 AD. Having experienced the heavy grief that

came as a result of the gruesome martyrdom of his beloved brothers in Christ, John remained undeterred and continued to preach and teach fearlessly about love:

“So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.”

1 John 4:16-18 ESV

Scripture records the Apostle James was the first to lose his life, beheaded at the hand of King Herod (Acts 12:2). Church tradition records Peter as being crucified upside-down in Rome, fulfilling the prophecy of Jesus recorded in John’s Gospel (21:18). How John must have grieved witnessing the fulfillment of the prophecy, yet confident that God’s sovereign plan was at work. Matthew was put to death by the sword while ministering in Ethiopia. James, the brother of Jesus (not officially an apostle but

a leader of the church in Jerusalem), refused to deny his faith in the Messiah and so was thrown from the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem. He survived the fall of over 100 feet, only to be beaten to death with clubs.

Bartholomew (Nathanael) died in Armenia (present-day Turkey) by being flayed to death with a whip. In Greece, the Apostle Andrew was brutally whipped and tied to an X-shaped cross for crucifixion. Tradition recounts him preaching the Gospel fervently for the two days he remained alive on the cross.

The Apostle Thomas moved from being the “doubter” to the missionary in India, where a spear killed him. Matthias, the replacement for Judas, was stoned and then beheaded. As mentioned previously, the Apostle Paul was tortured and then beheaded in Rome at the hands of the evil emperor, Nero.

What did all of these courageous men know that they were willing to die for? They KNEW (ginosko) Jesus the Messiah, or they never would have given up their earthly ambitions for a life filled with suffering and pain. They KNEW Jesus intimately and loved Him deeply, ultimately surrendering their earthly lives for His Kingdom purposes. Knowing Him, they loved Him more than

anything this world can offer and even more than life itself.

How do we learn to love God that way? More than this world and more than life itself? The same way the disciples did. They fellowshiped with Him, listened to Him, obeyed His teachings, worshipped Him, prayed to Him, and faithfully served Him. As they did, their faith grew, their understanding of who He is grew, and ultimately, they surrendered everything to Him, knowing that, as the Apostle John recorded Jesus saying, “Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”











love

...made possible

“And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Matthew 23:37-40 ESV

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**D**r. Victoria Isaac is called to Christian education and is passionate about Christian discipleship training. She is the President of the Fully Equipped Bible Institute, a non-profit university dedicated to equipping and discipling Christian leaders worldwide, regardless of geographic or financial hurdles.



Dr. Isaac has been an adjunct professor at numerous Christian universities, teaching and writing course curricula. Her heart is drawn to the downtrodden and broken, including serving the homeless in inner cities, advocating for orphans, and ministering in Africa. Dr. Isaac's missions background deeply impacted her mindset for equipping the Church to be the hands and feet of Jesus to the "least of these."

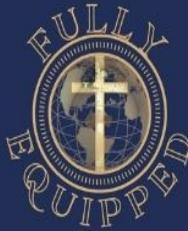
Dr. Isaac loves God's Word deeply. She has spent the last fifteen years teaching the Bible from Genesis through Revelation in

a chapter-by-chapter, verse-by-verse format. She draws on this extensive study of Scripture as a foundation for equipping Christian leaders with strong biblical foundations and practical discipleship training tools.

Immensely blessed as a wife, mother, and grandmother, Dr. Isaac's family is a source of deep joy and great inspiration. Her husband, Dr. Stephen Isaac, serves as the senior pastor of Reunion Church, a wonderful community of believers passionate about following Jesus. Dr. Stephen Isaac also serves as Vice President of Academic Affairs at the Fully Equipped Bible Institute. By God's grace, Drs. Stephen and Victoria are deeply committed to the spiritual growth of local and global churches through loving, serving, and teaching God's Word in all of its glorious richness.







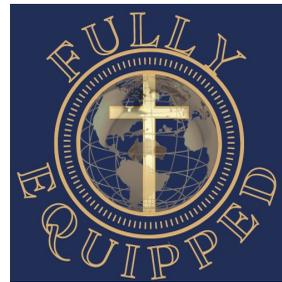
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"...that the man of God may  
be complete, equipped  
for every good work..."

2 Timothy  
3:16-17

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