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“Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another” (I John 4:11).

Grow in Love

Central Truth: God’s love produces loving attitudes in His people.

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For more than thirty years Lillian Howland has devoted her life to serving God in the work of Bible translation. Working with the Wycliffe Bible translators, her primary work has been with the Garifuna people on the north coast of Honduras. She reduced their language to writing, developing an alphabet with a dictionary and grammar book, and then translated the Bible into the language. It was a project of a lifetime and is not yet completed.

I asked her, "What was the most difficult biblical concept you had to translate into the Garifuna dialect?" Without hesitation she replied, "Love. The Garifuna word for love means 'what pleases me.' The problem was how to communicate the idea of the love of God to a people with that understanding of love." *"Even Christ pleased not himself; but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me"* (Romans 15:3).

Much of the modern concept of love is "what pleases me." That is why people "fall in" love and "fall out" of love. But how different is our love as the people of God. Divine love is unselfish, sacrificial, and unending. God has shown us the true nature of love by loving us.

I. THE CALL TO LOVE

"Beloved, let us love one another" (verse 7).

The significance of that appeal is in the word *"love."* It is the word for divine love. It is not based on physical attraction. It is more than a sense of

dearness because of the nature of the object loved. It is God's own love given freely to one who does not merit it or desire it. It is love extended for the benefit of the beloved. It is love which lifts and helps for no reason other than love.

The people of that appeal are identified as "*us*." Who are they? They are the people who know God. They are the people who have passed from death unto life by personal faith in Jesus Christ. They call one another beloved because each is loved by God and has received the love of God which He manifests in his relationships with others.

The recipients of the love required are identified as "*one another*." That is not surprising. "*This is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another*" (1 John 3:11). God commanded it. Jesus repeated it. Christians practice it. To confess love for God and deny love to a brother is to show oneself a liar (1 John 4:20, 21). Christ loved us enough to die for us. We are to love each other as He loves us. Let love flow freely through you to every person whom God loves. Thus you show yourself to be a true Christian.

II. THE EXPLANATION OF LOVE

"Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love" (1 John 4:7, 8).

What is the source of true love? Love is of God! It originates in Him and flows from Him. The Bible does not say only that God loves, or that God is lovely, or that God is loving. It says God Himself is love. His very nature is love (1 John 4:16). Love flows from God through us because God lives in us and works through us. It is as natural for a Christian to love as it is for him to breathe. God loves through him.

That is possible only because a divine transformation took place at conversion. When the Holy Spirit entered to live in each of us, He flooded our hearts (minds, emotions, and wills) with the love of God (Romans 5:5). Our love is based on the prior love of God (1 John 4:19). Now we can love any and all whom He loves. It is not our love which works in us now; it is God's love.

The absence of God's love in the heart has a dread implication. It is summarized in 1 John 4:8: "*He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.*" The conclusion is quite clear: you love or you are lost! But that does not mean you love with man's affection. It means you love with the love of God. Only a saved person can do that.

III. THE DEMONSTRATION OF LOVE

"In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us. and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (I John 4:9, 10).

A. Love is demonstrated by its gifts. God sending His only begotten Son to be the Savior of sinners has been called His *"unspeakable gift"* (II Corinthians 9:15). The gift of His own Son is incomparable, indescribable, a gift beyond words! It is explained in these words of Jesus, *"God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life"* (John 3:16).

We express our love by our gifts. Money given or service rendered to God or man is an indication of our love. Love is not just emotion or testimony; it involves deeds of practical service also (I John 3:16, 17). When our love expresses itself in deeds, it shows that it is true love.

B. Love is demonstrated by its goals. God gave the love gift of His only begotten Son that sinners might be saved. Jesus said, *"God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved"* (John 3:17). Could a more worthy goal than that be imagined?

If love is extended for one's own benefit, it is not God's love. It has an element of selfishness in it. But if love is extended for the benefit of the beloved, that shows the nature of God. Love is demonstrated by its motive.

C. Love is demonstrated by its grace. John makes it quite clear that God's love to us was not a response of our love to Him (verse 10). We did not love Him when He first loved us. We were both unlovely and unloving. Instead of seeking God in love, we were *"alienated and enemies"* because we were living a life of wickedness (Colossians 1:21). Yet, He loved us. His love was manifested in giving His only Son for us while we were still living in sin (Romans 5:8).

"Oh, the love that drew salvation's plan! / Oh, the grace that brought it down to man! / Oh, the mighty gulf that God did span / At Calvary"
(William R. Newell).

IV. THE CHALLENGE TO LOVE

"Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another" (I John 4:11).

A. We are challenged to imitate the love of God. We are not to do so in the sense that our love will pretend to be like His, but that our love will be swallowed up in His so that we are no longer operating on the level of human affection but in the heights of divine commitment in love. The love of God is perfected (finds perfect expression) in the one who obeys God's command to love (I John 2:5). He lay down His life for us; we ought to lay down our lives for fellow believers. Jude probably had in mind this challenge when he wrote, "*Keep yourselves in the love of God*" (Jude 21).

God can love through you people whom you cannot love on your own. Invite Him to do so. Watch your life expand.

B. We are challenged to love the unlovely and unloving. Read the records of missionary history. Many times a missionary has gone to a people where he was uninvited and opposed. He has sometimes been physically abused and more often his message has been rejected. But he stayed with the people, loving them and ministering to them. Gradually they came to understand his sincere interest in them and listened to the gospel he declared and demonstrated. Many mission fields have been opened that way.

Here is the standard by which to measure our love: "*I will very gladly spend and be spent for you; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved*" (II Corinthians 12:15). True love does not have to receive in order to love. It can love the unloving and even the hostile. But only God can love like that. So the person who loves that way is the one in whom God lives and through whom God's love is extended. Is that the way you love?

V. THE TESTIMONY OF LOVE

Take your Bible and read thoughtfully I John 4:12-21. That paragraph speaks of the testimony of true love in us. Four elements to the testimony of love are indicated in the passage.

A. Love testifies that God lives in us and loves through us. "*If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us*" (I John 4:12). That is the only explanation of the presence of a love which is beyond human understanding. It is God's love in His child.

B. Love testifies that the Holy Spirit lives in us. "*Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit*" (I John 4:13). The Holy Spirit spreads God's love in our hearts (Romans 5:5). Since divine love is so different and superior to human emotions, it is proof that God lives in us by His Spirit.

C. Love testifies that Jesus is our Savior. First John 4:14-16 declares that Jesus was sent in love. He came because He loves us. We would know

nothing of the love that God has for us or His love operating in us if it were not for Jesus being our Savior. Only one in whom He lives can have God's love flowing in him and through him. Love is a witness that we are saved (I John 3:14).

D. Love testifies to our hope for the future. We are so confident that God loves us and deals with us in love that we have no fear of what lies ahead (I John 4:17-19). He loved us when we were lost and doomed sinners. He loves us now that we are saved and delivered saints. Since His love centers in Jesus and Jesus is our Savior, we have no fear. *"Perfect love casteth out fear"* (I John 4:18).

E. Love testifies that religion is practical (I John 4:20, 21). A lifestyle becoming a Christian points out the love of God toward us and the love of the Christian toward other people. The principle is that God's love for us teaches us to love one another.

Do you love with human affection or with divine devotion? Our love is so much less than God's love that we must invite Him to love through us.

"My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him" (I John 3:18, 19).

Questions for discussion

1. What is love?
2. How does human love differ from divine love?
3. Why does the Bible command us to love one another?
4. How can you explain the statement that *"everyone that loveth is born of God"*?
5. Why is absence of love an indication that one is unsaved?
6. How did God show that He loves us?
7. How is love demonstrated by a Christian today?
8. How can you show the love of God which is in you?
9. What assurance does God's love give you concerning the future?
10. How do you love in deed and in truth?