

Love One Another As I Have Loved You



BY SUSAN LUTZ

In the last few days before His crucifixion, Jesus introduced a new command to His disciples: “As I have loved you, love one another.” In John 13-17, Jesus reflects seven times on the deep interpersonal unity on which this command rests.¹

There are several amazing things about it. One is that this simple formula is anything but. It’s simple like “ $e=mc^2$ ” is simple. Jesus’ command opens you up to worlds within yourself and the heavenly realms at the same time, as you consider the vastness of God’s love for you and what needs to happen in you to offer that same kind of love to others.

Another amazing thing about this command is that Jesus should give it at all! After all, God is the ultimate realist. He is not oblivious to our sin, and He is not stupid or naïve about human nature. After living among us for thirty-three years, certainly Jesus knew that we are not creatures who are motivated to love as He has loved us, nor capable of loving at that level if we *were* willing.

So why does He give this command? He gives it because of who *God* is. This command is not about us and our natural abilities and

inclinations. It’s about God, and the life-changing power of His love when God pours it out on us. Nothing about Jesus’ command makes any sense at all unless we start there.

How Has God Loved Us?

To understand God and His love, we need to begin with the fact that God is a Trinity—one God in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is not something we can understand, but it is the truth. Someone once said, “If you try to understand the Trinity completely, you will lose your mind. But if you deny the Trinity, you will lose your soul.” We are asked simply to believe that God has revealed His nature to us honestly.

As the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit had the perfect relationship throughout all eternity. They knew each other completely and loved each other totally. They enjoyed perfect harmony and unity of purpose with a diversity of roles. There was never a moment of discord, anger, hurt, jealousy, competition, bitterness, or greed. It was absolute sinless perfection. As the Trinity, God didn’t need someone to talk to. He didn’t need anyone else to glorify Him or complete Him. He wasn’t in search of an identity, a purpose, an understanding of reality, or relationships. But for some reason known only to God, He decided to create human beings. He loved us for reasons deep in His heart. And the first way God loved us is as Creator.

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¹John 13:14-16, 34-35; 15:9-14, 17; 17:11, 21-23, 26.

God's Love as Creator

The way God created us reveals His love for us, because He created us in such a way that we would be able to know Him. We were never meant to live independently, apart from Him. He gave us a mind, emotions, will, and a conscience, the ability to communicate, and an appreciation for things beyond ourselves, including beauty, truth, love, and justice. All these qualities reflect God's intention in Genesis 1:26 to make us in His image.

This means that we get our identity from our connection to God. We get our purpose for our lives from our connection to God. We understand reality because He teaches us. We live in relationships with Him and with others because He gave us those relationships. God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." Part of being made in the image of God is to have people with whom—at least spiritually—you can be naked and not ashamed: people—not just spouses—with whom you have a joyful sense of being welcomed, accepted, and understood.

For a brief time, everything was wonderful. God walked with Adam and Eve in the garden in the cool of the day. It was as close to heaven as you could get. But Adam and Eve failed to appreciate it. The serpent came along and began attacking their relationship with God. He didn't just try to get them to eat fruit. He began by breeding distrust in God's character and motives. "Did God really say?" he questioned. He argued, "God doesn't really love you. He's not really good. He doesn't really want what's best for you. The fact is, He's holding you back. You don't need Him to tell you who you are and how to live. You can make your own rules—and be like God, knowing good and evil *independently*."

Isn't it ironic that the creatures God made in His image were lured away from Him with the promise that they would be like God? They were already like God! But this time, they became like God in a way that destroyed their relationship with Him. Adam and Eve believed the serpent. They decided God shouldn't be trusted and they disobeyed Him. Soon everything was broken. Sin and death entered the world, along with weeds and thorns, and pain in childbirth. Everything was spoiled.

And the brokenness was seen first in relationships. That was the first thing to go. Adam and Eve saw they were naked, and they hid from each other and from God. Three chapters into the Bible and we have rebellion, fear, and self-protection. Soon after, they began blaming each other and God for the mess they were in. "The woman You gave me—she gave me some fruit and I ate it." All of a sudden there are accusations and blameshifting, arrogance and anger. The image of God is not totally destroyed, but it was just as the serpent had said: they became *like* God, but *without* Him. You can still see the image of God in man, but everything is distorted.

God's Love as Redeemer

But right there begins the second way God loves us—as Redeemer. He promises to rescue us from sin and death. In Genesis 3:15, He tells Satan, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel." Someday, one of Eve's descendents would come and destroy Satan. In v. 21, God makes a sacrifice. He covers Adam and Eve's nakedness with animal skins. Before this, there had been no death, but now a creature's blood was shed to cover Adam and Eve's shame. This is a glimmer of what God was preparing to do to bring us back to Him. The rest of the Bible records the way God worked out that plan of salvation.

As we read that record, we discover that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit *all* got involved in our salvation. The Trinity that had once been perfectly happy in itself disrupted the perfect peace of that relationship to rescue us. They didn't need to. God could have judged us for our sin and that would have been that. But God's love for us prevailed and God went after us, to rescue us and buy us back. Why? To restore us to a relationship with Him, and to restore in us the image of God. To make us like God in the right way, submitted to Him in love and worship, and partakers of the divine nature, according to 2 Peter 1:4. Every person of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—made a deep, genuine, personal, painful, and lasting sacrifice in *their* relationship with each other to make that possible.

How Has Jesus Loved Us?

As we consider the sacrifice that each person of the Trinity made for our salvation, it seems natural to start by considering what this involved for Jesus.

Countless passages describe the work of Christ² and there is no time to consider them all here. Instead, let me challenge one common attitude that people have about Jesus' incarnation, suffering, and death. They think that because Jesus was God, it wasn't as hard for Him to go through life, surrounded and tempted by sin—and to stay sinless.

I believe that assumption is totally wrong. I think it was actually much harder, much more painful, for Jesus to live in a sinful world because He WAS God. In *Lord of the Rings*, Frodo wears the evil ring of power around his neck. The evil it embodies and the master it serves are constantly seeking to undermine Frodo, to wear

Lord to bruise Him, He hath put Him to grief." Jesus was totally alone, for our sake.

Since His resurrection, Jesus has kept His physical body, in a glorified form. Jesus did not have a body before He came to earth; He took on a physical body for one purpose only—so that He could die. He became a man to live the perfect life for us and then to die in our place. But even when all that was over, He kept a physical body for eternity in heaven, with the scars on His hands and feet and side now part of His glory. He has permanently identified with us. This is amazing love.

How Has God the Father Loved Us?

For many people, even Christians, Jesus is understood as a loving person, but God the Father is the person who is easily angered and full of wrath. The reality is very different. In John 17, Jesus is having His final heart-to-heart

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him down and cause him to give in to it. It takes a heavy toll on Frodo physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

That is just a faint echo of what it was like for Jesus to be surrounded by evil every day. It was toxic to His nature. I would get sick breathing polluted air or drinking contaminated water, but Jesus was basically allergic to sin; it hurt Him and oppressed Him.

While this was going on, Jesus was separated from God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. His most intimate relationships were drastically altered while He served us unrecognized, unappreciated, slandered, and betrayed. His human friends were oblivious to what He was here to do and were usually thinking only of themselves. The destruction and oppression caused by sin was everywhere. It must have been unbearable.

And finally, when He took upon His body the weight, filth, and perversity of sin, He looked around and saw He was alone. His father had turned His back on Him. "It pleased the

talk with His father before He dies. They talk about their love for each other and for us, and their desire that we be enfolded into that love. Jesus says in John 17:3, "Now this is eternal life: that they [meaning us] may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, *whom You have sent.*" Verse 23: "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that *You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me.*"

Our salvation was God the Father's idea, and it cost Him dearly. In Genesis 22, we read about the time God told Abraham to offer his only son, Isaac, as a sacrifice. We watch as Abraham ties his son to the altar and lifts the knife to kill him. But God stops him. God says, "Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from Me your son, your only son." Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by the horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide."

I have always been struck by the way God

²Phil. 2:5-9; 2 Cor. 5:21; 2 Cor. 8:9.

lingers twice over those words, “your son, your only son.” I believe that in His thoughts, God was looking ahead to the day when He as a father would actually have to carry out the command He gave to Abraham. But this time, there would be no ram in the thicket; there would be no substitute. If there was going to be an offering for sin, God the Father was going to have to kill His own son. God was going to have to abandon Him, turn his back on Him, allow people to hurt Him, and require Him to bear alone the sins of the world. Not only that, but the Father’s own righteous wrath and punishment for sin was going to have to fall—not on the ones who deserved it, but on His own son, who had never done anything but love and obey Him. God would not be able to lift a finger to help Him. Instead, He had to *inflict* the punishment for our sakes.

Some parents know a little of what this feels like. Their children embrace destructive lifestyles. They genuinely need a great deal of help, and the parents are eager to offer it. However, if the child is unwilling to change, certain kinds of help must be withheld so that it is not used to stay on a destructive path. The parents’ love is there, but the help cannot be offered. I have heard from more than one parent how difficult it is to refuse to help someone you love when the help is clearly needed. The strength to refuse comes only from knowing that real love requires this choice. Sometimes a child needs to reap the consequences of his sins before he is willing to accept the help that will rescue him from destruction. So, though it can be sheer agony, the parent allows the child to suffer *for the child’s sake*. Sometimes there is no other way.

But it wasn’t that way for God the Father. He had to allow His son to suffer for my sins and yours—for people who didn’t care about Him, who betrayed, mistreated, and disliked Him. It *wasn’t* for Jesus’ own good—it was for us, God’s enemies. I think to myself, “Would I have loved anyone enough to put a child of mine through that kind of rejection and suffering for *someone else’s sake*?” The answer is no.

But God the Father loved us that much. He suffered a grief that we will never understand to punish *His* child for *our* sins. The fact that God is God does *not* minimize His pain

and suffering in a case like this: it multiplies it many times over.

Deflecting God’s Love

Yet it is troubling to consider how many Christians have only a formal and impersonal relationship with God. We know that God has made us His friends and His children, but we treat it like it’s nothing more than getting registered to vote. We hear God say over and over that He loves us, yet we deflect it. We treat it like it’s His business policy, not the outpouring of His heart.

There are many reasons why we push God’s love away, but all of them are the *result* of sin, Genesis 3 alive and well in our hearts. Pushing God’s love away is *not* normal. The reasons we do are not “understandable” or true. They do not reflect reality or the way we were created to be. Everything in the universe outside of hell knows this but us. Everything in the universe feels sorry for us that we think this way.

We hold onto our reasons to push God away because we believe Satan’s lies or our own fears. Perhaps we have certain sins that deep down make us feel so guilty and unworthy that we think we can’t move towards God. Perhaps our own pride and rebellion doesn’t want anyone to control us, not even with love. Maybe we have suffered at the hands of evil people and painful circumstances and so we’ve chosen to look at God through a bitter, angry, or fearful lens, instead of letting God tell us who He is and letting Him help us face those very painful things.

When we believe these lies and allow our heart to minimize and reject the love of God, we not only lose God and the fellowship Jesus prayed we would have with Him, we lose our own selves. We will not know the One in whose image we are created and for whose glory we are meant to live. The French philosopher Blaise Pascal said, “Not only do we know God through Jesus Christ, we only know ourselves through Jesus Christ.” And when we lose ourselves, we lose all ability to have the relationships with others we are intended to have.

How Has the Holy Spirit Loved Us?

The third person of the Trinity also loves us sacrificially. His sacrifice for our salvation is

on par with the Father and the Son.

In John 14, Jesus says, "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another counselor to be with you forever—the spirit of truth . . . He will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."

In Romans 8:26, 27, we learn more about what the Spirit does for us. "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express."

has commands like, "Don't quench the Spirit—don't put out the Spirit's fire." "Don't grieve the Spirit." Living with us is hard work. We are not that attractive spiritually. But the Spirit continues on because He loves us. He sacrifices His own happiness so that we can be brought into fellowship with God.

The psychiatrist Oliver Sacks once had a nursing home patient who dreamt one night of her childhood in Ireland. When she woke up, she could still hear the voices singing the old childhood songs. It turned out that she had had

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These and many other verses make it clear that the Holy Spirit commits Himself to make His home within us. He moves in and reveals truth to us; He enables us to understand what's real and right; He gives us a heart to obey God, a heart to love Him and to want to be like Him. He prays for us, even when we don't know what to pray for. He fights sin in us, with us, and for us. He comforts us, and He renews our mind so that we can understand life as it truly is. He does all these things in us and for us so that we can enjoy the oneness and love and fellowship that He has Himself with the Father and the Son. He makes it happen. This is why the Father and the Son sent Him.

But have you ever wondered what must this be like for the Holy Spirit? He's just as pure and holy as the Father and the Son. How comfortable do you think He is in our hearts? He's not spiritually blind; He sees and feels everything. Do you think our hearts feel like heaven to Him? Are you really that good company? I know I'm not!

I know that I stand before the Father in Christ's robes of righteousness. But the Spirit's task is to make what's true for me before the throne of God a living reality in my life here on earth. I do not envy Him. In heaven, there was perfect obedience to the Father's will. There was goodness, harmony, love, and all the fruits of the Spirit experienced within the Trinity. As the Holy Spirit indwells me, that is not what He is encountering. That's why the New Testament

a stroke in the area of her brain where musical memories were stored. The stroke brought these memories out of storage, as it were, so she could hear the singing again. Mrs. O'C loved it. She said, "I feel I'm a child in Ireland again. I feel my mother's arms. I see her. I hear her voice singing."

These resurrected memories were wonderful because Mrs. O'C had been orphaned at the age of five. She had been sent to America to live with an unfriendly relative and she had had a sad life with no conscious memory of her early years. Now, for the first time, she had the experience of knowing that she had once had a real childhood and home, that she had once been mothered and loved and cared for. She turned down medicine that would have stopped the seizures because she said, "I need what's going on. There's a completeness I never had before."

Mrs. O'C discovered that she had had a mother who loved her. It changed the whole experience of her life. What the Holy Spirit does for us is to awaken in our hearts the realization that God loves us. Romans 5:5 says, "God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us." The Holy Spirit enables us to affirm 1 John 3:1: "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are!"

We need to listen to what the Holy Spirit is telling us about God's love for us. We need to

be like little children and joyfully receive the love God has poured out on us. Don't be afraid or proud or indifferent. Surrender your heart to it and let that love transform your understanding of yourself and what you bring to all other relationships. Everything our lives are about comes out of our relationship with Him.

How Does God's Love Change Us?

Understanding the depths of God's love for us is something we learn only as we live in it over a lifetime. At the same time, Jesus' command makes it clear that it's meant to be something that enables us to love others. If we want to love others well, we need to begin with God's love for us. God promises that His love is present and powerful enough to enable us to fulfill the command. The big question is, How does that happen?

When Jesus says, "As I have loved you, love one another," what gets me from the first part of the sentence to the second? It seems like a rather big jump! Is knowing what God did to save me enough to help me love the same way? If I had the perfect courtship with my husband and we got married, and he drove off and left me after the wedding reception, would that be enough for me to understand love and share it with others? Hardly.

But when God saves us, He doesn't just bring us into His kingdom and leave us at the gate. He stays with us. The relationship is just beginning. God's love is going to continue to be poured out on us. And that love will have a huge impact on us. It will change us so that we can love others.

Unquestionably, being in a continuing relationship with God is going to change us. We come to Jesus as we are because we can't come any other way, but God never intends for us to stay that way. Change is on His agenda *because* He loves us. Sin 1) destroyed our relationship with God and 2) damaged the image of God in us. God wants to restore both. He wants a relationship with us that transforms the dynamic of the way we live our lives—the things we value and fear, the way we deal with people, all the things in the image of God that were distorted and misdirected by the fall. God wants a relationship that makes us more and more like Him again. The two things are intentionally

interlocking.

Have you ever noticed that when you spend time with someone, you start to pick up his way of doing things? My husband and I have known each other since I was nineteen. We basically grew up together. There are many parts of my personality, attitudes, and beliefs that he is so much a part of that I truly don't know where one of us ends and the other begins. And he would agree.

Something similar happens in our relationship with God, with two important differences. One, with God the changes are supernatural—it's far more than me acquiring some new habits. God's power supernaturally transforms us from within. And second (and this is a very good thing), God changes me, but I don't change Him! You can't improve on God. I would only mess Him up. But God works in us so that we can become more and more like Him, as we see in verses like 2 Corinthians 5:17, 2 Corinthians 3:1, and Ephesians 4:24.

So we know change is coming, but how does that change take place? There are a couple of models. I'm reminded of the story of the old hillbilly and his son who go to the big city for the first time. They wander into an office building and stand in front of an elevator. They had never seen one before. As they stand there, an old woman hobbles past them and goes into the elevator. The doors close behind her. As the hillbilly and his son keep standing there, the doors eventually open again and out walks an absolutely gorgeous young woman. The two men take this in and then the father turns toward his son. He says, "Jimmy, go get Mother."

Wouldn't we love it if change were that easy? It's like the difference between my mother's experience of childbirth and mine. In my mother's day, they knocked her out and she woke up and found out what she had. In my day, it was natural childbirth. I knew what I had, all right, and I knew exactly how they got there!

God's way of changing us is more like the second way. He could have done it my mother's way or the elevator way, but He chose the way where we would be involved, and where we would be in relationship with Him. It's pretty hard to show your love to someone who is under anesthesia. It's not going to improve your relationship. God wants our hearts to be

changed by our *experience* of knowing His love.

Just as each person of the Trinity pours out His love in different ways to accomplish our salvation, the same is true in our sanctification, the process by which our salvation is applied, and we are changed to become more and more like Jesus. Start looking and you will see that the New Testament talks about us responding to the love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each want to be known, loved, and honored by you. Each one has a distinctive way of blessing and helping you. And as we respond to that in faith, we will be changed to become more like Christ and more able to love others.

The Father's Transforming Love

How does God the Father want us to know Him, and what impact is that meant to have on our hearts and lives? Clearly, He wants us to know Him as a father.

Every time the Bible talks about God as our father (see, for example, Matthew 7:11 and Psalm 103:13), it presses home the idea that God is *committed* to us in *love*, for our *good*. He has adopted us into His family and given us everything we could possibly need. God promises to provide for you, love you, protect you, and bless you. He wants you to *believe* His promises—not only that He can do it, but that He wants to do it. And that He *will* do it.

Two things can stand in the way of knowing God as your father. The first is the instinctive doubt and distrust toward God that was hard-wired into our hearts in Genesis 3, which Tim Keller calls the sin beneath every other sin. Without Christ, distrusting God is what feels natural to me, and the devil and the world are always encouraging me in this direction. This is good to know; otherwise, I would just assume that I distrust God because of my problems. Really, it's my sinful nature being exposed. Without Christ, disliking God is my default mode.

The second obstacle may be that you had a lousy earthly father and whenever you think of God, you load all of your father's sins and failings onto Him. Some people have had fathers who abused and neglected them; these fathers broke their promises and rejected and used them. It can be tough to shake those

memories when you think about God—tough, but not impossible. After all, one reason why you know your earthly father was bad is that God planted in your heart a true sense of a *good* father. What's more, God has the right to tell you who He is. He deserves not to be seen through the lens of your experience with sinful humans. That is looking at life through the wrong end of a telescope. God has shown you in Christ who He really is. You can and should believe Him.

Another way God the Father wants us to know Him is as the great I AM, the Creator, the Lord of the universe, the One whose ways are higher than our ways, the One we will never fully figure out. We will never say about God, "Is that it? Is that all there is?" In other words, you can know God better by recognizing that you are out of your depth: you will never fully know Him.

Job was a man who experienced this. He knew God before his troubles started, and even when tragedy struck, he still kept talking with Him. The problem was he kept asking God to explain Himself. Job expected an answer he could understand, and on top of that an apology. How did God respond? With four chapters of questions that basically blew the lid off Job's mind. They revealed Job's total inability to comprehend the scope of God's power and wisdom. This completely humbled Job, as God intended. Job's last response to the Lord was,

"I know that You can do all things; no plan of Yours can be thwarted.

...Surely I spoke of things I did not understand; things too wonderful for me to know.

You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer Me.'

My ears had heard of You, but now my eyes have seen You.

Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

When you get to know God the Father, you start to understand that you don't have to fully understand Him to love, trust, and obey Him. You will be liberated if you accept that. No offense, but do you really want a God so

ordinary that *you* can figure Him out? A God who will do what *you* want whenever you snap your fingers? That kind of God is worthless—and He does not exist.

There are times when great music gives me

that change my perspective and give me hope? How does that keep me from being a hostage to that person's agenda? God's purposes for my life always override the plans of human beings.

The Father's love also helps us love by

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a glimpse of what Job saw—that I am in the presence of a God whose ways are totally beyond me. I get a sense of what heaven will be like when I enter a reality I have only read about before. Suddenly, everything is going to be different. I am not going to look at anything in life the same way. The pain and struggle that seem to last so long and have no purpose will someday be put right. He has it under control, and amazingly, He has committed Himself to love me and to glorify Himself through me.

As I open myself up to this loving ministry of my Father and my Creator, how will I be changed? How will it help me to love others? I have a saying on my refrigerator: "If I knew what God knows, I would want exactly what I have today." When I face the imponderables of my life, when I don't understand what God is doing, I know I can still trust Him. I don't have to get angry and bitter at God or other people as I wait for difficult circumstances to change. I don't have to be controlled by fear. I have the foundation I need to love difficult people and pray for them. It's not that I have arrived; I have my dark moments. But what a difference it has made to keep me from dumping fear, anger, and despair onto people who have no spiritual resources to deal with it. Knowing the love that God the Father has for me increases my ability to love others well.

Where do you need to trust God like this? With a parent? An ex-husband? A boss who thinks he holds your career in his hands? Don't ever approach a horizontal human relationship without starting with your vertical relationship with God. Don't ever relate to a human being without first remembering: God has a reason for this person being in my life, no matter how wrong he or she may be. What is God doing? How can I pray with that in mind? How does

giving us a secure identity and a sense of purpose. I know I was loved when I was created. I have a purpose God intends me to fulfill. God will be with me in my circumstances. I needn't try to get my identity and purpose from people. I needn't desperately try to please them, controlled by the fear of man instead of by a healthy fear of God.

For example, a man I will call Andrew was raised in a religious home by a mother with severe problems. She hated men to the point that she drove her husband off and they divorced. Then she turned on her two sons. One day, Andrew's brother went out in the woods and killed himself. The mother's response was to blame Andrew, though he was in no way involved. She threw him out of the house and he had to find a place to live and to work his way through school.

Andrew dropped out of church. His mother wouldn't see him, and she rarely let him see his sisters. Fortunately, a family took him in and cared about him, but he couldn't move on with his life. He wanted a family of his own, but he just couldn't get to where he could do it. He didn't want to believe what his mother said, but he had nothing else to replace it.

I was able to show him from Scripture how God saw him and what He said about him. I could tell him, "You know what your mother thinks of you. But what about what God thinks about you? You have sins that you need to repent of, but they are not the things your mother accuses you of. You don't have to live under her condemnation when God has loved, forgiven, and accepted you and raised you up! Whenever there are two opposing views about who you are and what you are worth, God's view always wins. Because He is the Lord!"

Andrew's heart was ready to believe this,

and the change was amazing. He was able to forgive his mother. He still reaches out to her, even though she rarely answers the phone or returns calls. He leaves Mother's Day and Christmas gifts at her door because she doesn't answer the door. But he's not eaten up by it because he knows now that it's not about him. He is free because he opened himself up to God's love. He is now married to a Christian girl and they have a beautiful son. And believe it or not, his mother actually came to his wedding.

If you have been the victim of treatment like this, if some human being is telling you one thing and God tells you another, who wins? You'd better believe that the Lord of the Universe wins. He is the One who gets to tell you who you are. This gives you the strength not to be controlled by toxic human relationships, like Andrew. The more you get to know the love of your heavenly Father and believe Him, you can be a new person with your mother or husband or child or boss. You can grow, you can change, and you can change the dynamics of the relationship even if you can't change the

The moment we accept Jesus as our Savior, He *also* becomes our Lord. Colossians 1:13 says that God "rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves." First Corinthians 6:20 says, "You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore glorify God with your body." We were freed from the bondage to sin *so that* we could belong to the Lord. As our Savior, Jesus brings us into the freedom of grace. As our Lord, Jesus leads us into a life that allows us to *experience* what grace is for.

P. T. Forsythe said, "The first duty of every soul is not to find its freedom, but its master." We are not meant to be "free" without a master. Actually, we *can't* be—it's a spiritual impossibility. "It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody," as Bob Dylan used to sing. The thing is, we need a *good* master.

The summer I graduated from high school, I worked at a camp in upstate New York. One weekend I came home to visit my parents. I was taking a bus back to camp, so my parents

As our Savior, Jesus brings us into the freedom of grace.

other person. If you serve the Lord, you cannot be enslaved by anyone else. You can love and forgive in your heart, and in ways appropriate to the relationship.

The Son's Transforming Love

Let's look now at God the Son. How will His love change you? What will your relationship with *Him* be like? The Bible talks about Jesus as the Great High Priest, the Lamb of God, the Good Shepherd, our elder brother. But it primarily talks about Jesus as our Savior and Lord. And those two titles really go together.

Jesus is our Savior because He paid the penalty for our sins. He saved us from spiritual death, and gave us a new heart and a new life. Because of Him, we no longer try to earn God's approval or pay our own way through life. We *rest* on the finished work of Christ. *It is finished!* Though we are sinners without hope apart from Jesus, with Him we are forgiven and brought into His family.

dropped me off at the Port Authority Bus Terminal in New York, I bought my ticket, and then went to get some snacks and magazines for the trip. I was eighteen and all alone.

In one of the stores, an oily, sleazy guy came up to me and started asking me about myself, trying to be friendly. I was raised to be polite and I applied it wrongly in that situation and talked with him. But as he got more personal, I knew I shouldn't be drawn into any kind of connection with him. At one point, he reached out and removed a hair that had fallen on my shirt, as if he was helping me out. It was a small but clear violation of my body and personal space and I was scared. I got out of there and sat in my bus until departure time. Only later did I read that because so many runaway kids come into New York through Port Authority, it was filled with sexual predators trolling for stupid, innocent girls they could lure into prostitution.

Stupid and innocent I may have been, but I was not a runaway. A runaway kid has no

master. A runaway kid is “free.” Translation: a runaway kid is controlled by her own sins, her own fears, her own problems, and her own lusts, and she is controlled by the sins of others against her. I had a relationship with God and my parents, and because of that I had a destination: camp. A runaway kid has no relationship, no identity, no destination. She has no one to protect her or lead her. She is easy pickings for a stranger who promises freedom and love but only wants to ensnare her. She needs a master; and she needs a good one. And so do we.

As we get to know Jesus, we realize that He is our Lord because, as God, He deserves to be. He is our Lord because, as Savior, He bought us with His own blood. He is our Lord because we were created to need one, and it isn’t spiritually safe or possible to be without one. And finally, Jesus is our Lord so we can experience God’s love and grace in our lives.

This is why Jesus says these things in John 14:

- “If you love Me, you will obey what I command.” (v. 15)
- “Whoever has My commands and obeys them, He is the one who loves Me. He who loves Me will be loved by My father and I too will love him and show Myself to him.” (v. 21)
- “If anyone loves Me, he will obey My teaching. My Father will love him and We will come to him and make Our home with him.” (v. 23)

The commands of Jesus are designed to help us to live out the gospel. They steer us away from bondage to anything else and help make grace real in our lives. In other words, Jesus’ commands as *Lord* lead us to rest on His finished work as *Savior*. They protect us from living a life based on anything else. Jesus said, “Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matt. 11:29-30).

When you receive that love and wear that yoke with Jesus, how do you change? You learn how to live in the pathways of the gospel and grace. For example,

- You have hope for your life and for others. You don’t say, “It’s too late; things

are too far gone,” because you realize what Jesus has done for you and *can* do for them.

- You can *receive* forgiveness and you can *give* it. You aren’t controlled by shame and regret for your own sins, so that you say, “Maybe God forgives me, but I can’t forgive myself.” You accept the Lord’s forgiveness and reject your pride and self-hatred. Similarly, you aren’t controlled by bitterness and pain over someone else’s sins against you. You don’t say, “Maybe God forgives you, but I can’t.” You believe the gospel for others, as well as for yourself, and you ask God to make that forgiveness real in you.
- When you live a grace-based life, you’re Christ-centered, not problem-centered. You trust His grace to accomplish His will in your life—and in others’. That affects your expectations of what people should do for you, the kind of help you offer them, your fear of failure, and so on.
- Also, you have one Master, and one delight. You say with Jesus, “I delight to do Your will, O my God. Your law is within my heart.”

The Apostle Paul is a wonderful example of what this looks like in real life. He consistently loved people who did not love him back. Paul reveals his foundation for this in 1 Corinthians 4:3, 4: “I care not whether I am judged by you or by any human court. Indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.”

Paul is not controlled by the negative opinions of the people he is writing to: people who should have appreciated him, but didn’t. “I care not if I am judged by you or by any human court.” He simply doesn’t care what they think, but not in a way that is bitter, fearful, or defensive. When people reject him, he doesn’t say the next thing I usually say: “Well, if you knew what was in my heart, you wouldn’t say that. You just don’t understand. I’m really nice underneath.” No, he says, “I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent.” He says, “Look, I may think I’m OK—especially compared to what you are saying about me. I have a clear conscience. But

what difference does that make? My conscience isn't the last word. I could be completely wrong about myself. But the point is, that's just not the point. "It is the Lord who judges me."

When you think about the Lord judging you, is that a safe and comforting thought? It was for Paul, *because* he understood the gospel. He knew he was judged *in Christ*. He was on this side of salvation and the forgiveness of sins. He didn't have to fear rejection by the Father, and that made him so secure and at peace that he could keep doing the work God had given him to do, no matter what people thought. In fact, he had the strength to keep on loving those same critical, ungrateful people. He could love them even though they didn't love him: just like God has loved us.

The Spirit's Transforming Love

Our relationship with Jesus helps us to rest on His finished work. But the Holy Spirit helps us with what is *unfinished*. He shows His love for us by changing us into the people that Jesus' death entitled us to be. And He will keep on doing this until Jesus returns in glory to complete our transformation into His image.

To put it in the kindest way possible, spiritually speaking, we are the Beverly Hillbillies about ten minutes after we pull into the driveway of our new mansion. We are millionaires, yes. That is our official legal status. The oil is on our land back home and we have the money in the bank to prove it. The new house and pool are ours. But we haven't a clue how to think or act—how to become what we already are. The Holy Spirit's job is to bring about that transformation in the daily details of our lives. How does He do this? In many, many ways.

He reveals God's truth to us. (1 Cor. 2:9-10, 12-13)

He gives us an inner assurance of our salvation. (Rom. 8:16)

He lives within us. (1 Cor. 6:19; Rom. 8:9)

He prays for us and helps us in our weakness. (Rom. 8:26)

He gives diverse gifts to the body of Christ. (Eph. 4:7-13)

He unifies that same body of Christ. (Eph. 4:3-6)

He renews our minds. (Rom. 8:6)

He shows us our sin and enables us to repent. (John 16:8-11)

He enables us to put sin to death in our bodies and to do what is right. (Rom. 8:13)

He enables us to approach God as our loving Abba Father. (Rom. 8:16)

He pours out God's love on us. (Rom. 5:5)

He guarantees our future redemption. (Eph. 1:13-14)

He bears good fruit in our lives. (Gal. 5:16, 18, 22-26)

How can you respond to His love? Basically, by cooperating! The Holy Spirit is like the physical therapist who works with you after you've had a major operation. Your health has been restored, but you'll never benefit from it unless you let the physical therapist teach you how to use your body again. Yes, it hurts. No, it isn't easy. No, the physical therapist can't do it for you. Yes, sometimes it seems like he's asking you to do something you can't do. But he knows what he is doing. He knows you need to do what he's asking. So do what he says in all those little ways that make the difference in the way you live your life. So, also, don't grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30) by willfully disobeying Him. Don't quench the Spirit (1 Thess. 5:19) by suppressing His ministry in your life. He knows you very well, and He knows what you need to be.

In John 15 Jesus says, "As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Now remain in My love. If you obey My commands, you will remain in My love, just as I have obeyed My Father's commands and remain in His love. I have told you this so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be full."

We've all watched people make destructive choices that led them far away from God. We've all been those people, to one degree or other. Every choice we make, big or small, changes us just that amount. You are not the same person *after* you live out the choice that you were before. But what's true in the negative is true positively, too. Every choice you make to move towards the Lord changes you too, this time in a good way. You will be just a little different by living out that choice, and one choice will lead to another. God's love is

powerful. As you trust Him, submit to Him, and obey Him, you will become the person God wants you to be. Your joy will be closer to being complete. And so will your capacity to love.

How Can We Love Others?

We turn now to the last part of Jesus' command, "Love one another." In John 13-17, He commands this or prays for this repeatedly, and He also gives reasons why this is so important.

One of the more amazing reasons is repeated three times.

- "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another." (John 13: 34)
- "May they also be in Us so that the world may believe that You have sent Me." (John 17: 21)
- "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me." (John 17: 23)

How do you react to a plan that says, "By this will all men know that you are My disciples if you love one another"? I am tempted to say, "Lord, You must be kidding!" Most of the time we love miserably! The church misses so many opportunities to love, and we have so many good reasons why we think we shouldn't be expected to. If I were God, I would not want to be identified by what the church does. If I were God, I would not want someone like me telling his life story.

Yet, Jesus does make this the standard by which people judge Him. What does that tell you? First, it tells you how much God truly loves you; how close He wants to be. It's like when you are the geek of the high school, and the coolest kid in class sits with you in the cafeteria and lets everyone judge him by the fact that you are his friend. God does this with us a million times over.

It also gives us some idea of how powerful and persuasive the love of God is when it is expressed to others. The fact that it is not natural to us increases its impact when it is displayed in our lives. It is compelling evidence that we have been supernaturally changed by the presence of Christ.

In his book, *Miracle on the River Kwai*,

Ernest Gordon gave two examples of the power of loving others as Jesus commanded. In this WWII POW camp, the Japanese worked Scottish soldiers to build a jungle railroad under inhumane conditions. The cruelty was unbelievable. Many prisoners died and those that didn't started treating each other in the same dog-eat-dog way that the Japanese treated them. They started to do whatever they needed to survive.

But earlier on, the prisoners had established a buddy system that paired two soldiers together, so that they would work together to help each other survive. A man named Angus McGillivray had a buddy who was not doing well. He was so sick that someone else had stolen his blanket, figuring he would die anyway. But Angus still took his commitment seriously. He gave his buddy his blanket, saying that he had found an extra one. When the food rations would come, Angus gave his buddy his share, saying that he'd found extra food. He would stand there making sure the other soldier ate it. Funny thing, the guy started to get better. But just around the time he recovered, Angus collapsed and died from starvation and exhaustion. The news that Angus had given up his chance for life for someone else swept through the camp.

Another thing happened at the end of a day when a work party lined up and turned in their shovels to their guards. The count came out that one shovel was missing. The guard was enraged. Turn in that shovel or else! But no one came forward. The guard took out a gun and threatened to kill them all unless someone confessed. Silence. Finally, one man came forward. The guard put the gun away and beat the man to death with a shovel. Afterwards the men carried his body to the second checkpoint where all the shovels were counted again. This time the count was correct—no shovel was missing. There had simply been a miscount at the first checkpoint; the shovel had been there all along. The man had died not because he was guilty, but to save the rest of the men.

The sacrifices of these two men had a profound effect on the camp. The men started to look out for each other again and use their resources to help each other. The prisoners actually were able to put together their own

small versions of a university, a hospital, a library, and an orchestra full of homemade instruments. They began what they called a "Church without Walls" that had such powerful worship that even some Japanese guards attended.

When the Allies finally liberated this camp, the prisoners were lined up across from their Japanese captors. They had an opportunity to seek vengeance, but they said, "No more killing, no more hatred and cruelty. We need forgiveness." God's love is powerful.

God's love is powerful *and* purposeful. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit made big sacrifices in Their relationship to bring us into Their fellowship. In the same way, the love of God at work in us is intended to expand the circle again, to bring more people in. The momentum is always there.

But God's love never stops being personal. Jesus commands us to love others also because it deepens *our* experience of God's love in our *own* hearts and lives.

Did you ever watch a relationship where the guy showers his love and affection on his girlfriend while they are dating, but once they get married, he moves on to other things and expects her to pitch in and help? That is not

to deepen our own experience of God's continued love for us. He *did* love us, He *is* loving us, and He *will* love us through all eternity.

This is a very different message from what we are sometimes taught. My first spiritual crisis came in high school when a missionary spoke at our church. He talked about some missionaries working with a jungle tribe who were offered monkey eyeballs as guests of honor at a feast. He went on in some detail about how disgusting it was, and how crucial it was to their witness to eat them. Finally, he challenged us, "Do you love God enough to eat monkey eyeballs?"

What a question! How do I answer that? I can't even eat a hard-boiled egg, never mind a monkey eyeball. This threw me into a spiritual tailspin. Maybe I didn't love God. Maybe I wasn't a good Christian, because I just didn't think I could do it. At most I could get it down; but there was no guarantee that it wouldn't come right back up!

That was a challenging question. It was also the wrong question. God does not expect me to eat monkey eyeballs or do *anything* to love God and others *in my own strength*. As I obey Jesus, I remain in His love. I am equipped to love others because of my own immersion in it.

God's love is powerful *and* purposeful.

what Jesus is like. When He tells us, "As I have loved you, love one another," He's *not* saying, "Well, you've had your turn with My affection, now come on and help Me with the program here."

God's command to love others reflects His *continuing* love for *us* and His *continuing involvement* in our lives. You can see this in John 13:17: "You will be blessed if you do these things"; John 15:10: "If you obey My commands, you will remain in My love"; John 15:11: "I have told you this so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete"; John 15:16: You will bear fruit that will last, and "the Father will give you whatever you ask in My name."

Blessing, intimacy and love, joy, fruitfulness, and answered prayer are all things Jesus promises will be ours when we step out in obedience to love others. Clearly, Jesus intends

As I obey Jesus, my connection with Him is deepened. I become more like Him; I participate in and pass on His love. He is blessing me, loving me, increasing my joy, helping me to bear fruit, and answering my prayers as I love others. In other words, His command is one way He gives me what I need.

Still, many of us react to Jesus' command to love one another by saying, "Let the other guy go first." Love is scary and inconvenient. We have to trust and we are afraid we will be hurt. We have to depend and we like to be in control. We have to give and we are afraid we will be used. We have to forgive and we are afraid we will be blamed. We have to sacrifice and we are afraid we will miss out. Love asks for something that we are not sure we have and we are not sure we want to give.

In many ways, these are the same

reservations and objections we have about receiving God's love. Maybe that's not a coincidence. Whether we give love or receive it, love insists on breaking through the walls of self-trust, self-centeredness, pride, and fear that characterize all of us since sin entered the world. If we are going to love or be loved, those familiar walls come down.

C. S. Lewis wrote,

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable; impenetrable, irredeemable...The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love is Hell.

Most of us are not going to be asked by the Lord to be like the POW who was beaten to death with the shovel. Most of us are asked to be like Angus McGillivray to make those daily, small choices to love others again and again. And loving people that way does have risks. Sometimes it's painful. It's not always returned or appreciated. You're not always understood. It isn't something we can do in our spare time any more than love was a casual afterthought for God. It was costly for Him, and God asks us to be willing to suffer if need be for someone else's good.

As we read the New Testament and consider the many different ways God calls us to care for each other, do you find yourself thinking, "This is an impossible obligation"? Or do you read it and cheer, "This is my liberation! If this is what God calls me to do, this must be what He promises to *produce* in me as I depend on His love. This is not something I crank out in my own strength. This is my deliverance! This is what freedom from sin looks like in relationships. It's what God's love looks like in

relationships. It is what God's love *for* me will create *in* me as I reach out to others for His sake."

Do you ever get tired of all the ways sin messes up our relationships? Do you ever think about what it would be like to be so free that it was natural for you to reach out first to someone else, to love without needing anything back, to be completely truthful, to forgive, to be known by someone without being ashamed? To no longer be controlled by your own needs, wounds, bad memories? To no longer be paralyzed by your resentments, your fears of rejection, or your need for approval? This is what it looks like to overturn the power of sin in our relationships with others. No wonder Jesus says, "By this will all men know that you are My disciples."

To love people like this is as amazing as God loving us. It sounds impossible—and without God it is. It is completely opposite of what our old nature tells us to do. But to God, that is the point.

Love is our deliverance. The command to love puts pressure on our sins of self-centeredness. It brings them to the surface, exposes them for what they are, and, when we are obedient to the Spirit, puts them to death. We start to become in reality who we already are positionally in Christ. As we love others, Jesus says that we will remain in God's love and our joy will overflow. God knows that once we really start to love, we're not going to want to go back to our old way of life.

A friend told me how God worked this out in her difficult relationship with her husband. "I was listening to Elizabeth Elliott one day. 'Is your husband an enemy?' 'Oh yes!' 'Does your husband feel like your enemy?' 'Yes!' 'What does the Bible say about how to treat your enemies? Love them, do good, pray for them...' 'Do good?' I thought. Could it really be that simple? I set my mind to do one good thing for Fred every day, in the name of the Lord. I couldn't do it for Fred, but I could do it in obedience to God. To make a long story short, I started with a cherry pie, Fred's favorite dessert. Simple enough. As I did these things, I just became so broken. Had I really been so, so selfish and thoughtless all these years that these little things should mean so much? Gradually, I saw my true heart, as Fred

had seen it all these many years...cold, bitter, awful. Wow, am I really as bad as this? Yes...yes...yes! Finally, I was broken.

“Over time, compassion replaced bitterness. Even love begins to grow. Glimpses of delight? Yes, even that! God began to show me how he loves Fred too, and just how foolish I have been. I feel like Isaiah 61 is coming to pass: ‘The hand of the Lord is upon me...beauty for ashes...be fed...praise...joy...dressed and filled... Thanks be to God!’”

Our old nature tells us that trying to love like that is just not smart or safe. But our new nature in Christ says, “I’ll tell you what’s not smart or safe. It’s to keep on living with other people as if Jesus had never come. As if sin still reigns. As if you hadn’t been loved by God and the only person you can rely on is yourself. That is hopelessness. That is what will never work.”

If you don’t obey God’s call to love, you may think you are protecting yourself. What you are really doing is setting yourself up for relationships where the sins of others and the sins of your own heart are always fighting for control. But if your heart is the Lord’s, you are free, like my friend. If your life is surrendered to His care, you won’t be controlled by anyone else. You are free to love. It is one of the divine paradoxes at work: “Whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it” (Matt. 16:25).

There have been times when I have gone out of my comfort zone to love someone sacrificially. Sometimes the person responded

is a return on our investments in love, not necessarily from the people we reach out to, but from God.

Think about the people God has placed in your life: your roommate, your husband, your parents, your children, your neighbors, your co-workers, people from your church. How has God’s love equipped you to love them? What have you learned about the Father’s love that gives you a secure foundation to love these people? What have you learned about Jesus’ love that frees you to extend grace and hope to others? What have you learned about the Spirit’s love that you can rely on as you reach out to other people? If you are submitting, obeying, and cooperating with God’s love for you, it will have practical implications for the way you think about questions like these:

1. What is your vision for relationships?

God’s love reached out to bring us in. Do you have a heart to look beyond your circle of friends to the needs of others? Do you see your friends, family, neighbors, and co-workers as people who have been given to you in trust from God, or do you just want people to facilitate your personal happiness? Do you invite God to take your friendships anywhere He wants? Do you treasure them but not hoard them?

2. How wide is your circle? Are all your relationships with people from the same income bracket and the same phase of life? Or do you do some practical rejoicing in the diversity the Holy Spirit brings to the body of Christ? Do you have

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and moved towards the Lord; but sometimes it seemed as if I’d put myself out there for nothing, only to get hurt in return. But the Lord has reminded me, “You know, Sue, maybe I wasn’t using you so much to work in that ‘needy’ person’s life as much as I was using that ‘needy’ person to work in you. Maybe *you* are the one who needed the lessons of that relationship. Maybe I was using that other person to make My love more real and complete in *you*.” There

single friends if you are married, and married friends if you are single? Do you know people of different ages and Christian maturity, so that you can give *and* receive? Are new people welcome in your life? Are all your friends Christians, or do you spend time with people who don’t know the Lord? We live in a world where increasingly people are “belongers” before they are “believers.” They come to Christ *after* they are loved.

3. How deep is your communication?

Does knowing the love of Jesus help you talk heart to heart? Or do your friendships have an unspoken agreement: "I won't challenge or criticize you if you won't challenge or criticize me"? Are you secure enough in Jesus to be honest about your sins and struggles? Are you convinced of your spiritual blindness so that you expect that people will need to confront you? Is there enough gospel in your relationships so that if there is sin, you will be accepted and yet held accountable? Do your friendships encourage your love for the Lord, even in the hard times? Do your friends have your permission to tell you the truth? When they do, do you remember they did it in love or do you make them "pay" for daring to help you?

4. Do you know how to do conflict?

Intimacy and conflict go together. This area reveals your foundation in the gospel. Are the needs of your friend more important than your fears of confronting her? Is reconciliation more important than winning an argument? Do you always have to be right? Do you know how to

forgive? Can you ask for forgiveness—and receive it?

A kindergarten teacher was once watching her students draw pictures, and she came across one little girl who was coloring away very vigorously. She asked the little girl what she was drawing. "Oh, I'm drawing God," she said lightly. The teacher paused. "But no one knows what God looks like." The little girl said, "I know. But they will in a minute."

First John 4 says, "No one has ever seen God, but if we love each other, God lives in us, and His love has been brought to full expression through us." We can show what Jesus looks like to people who do not know Him: not with our drawings, but by how we love. If you feel inadequate to the task, that will lead you to repent and to rely on the love God has for you. Mother Teresa said, "We can do no great things, but we can do small things with great love." As Jesus said, "Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."