

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Essentials for Growth in Godliness, Part 1

Scripture: Philippians 1:9

Code: 50-5

We come again in our study of God's precious treasure, the word, to Philippians, chapter 1 – Philippians, chapter 1 – and most particularly, the study that will occupy us for the next couple of weeks is from verses 9 through 11. I've entitled these, "Essentials for Growth in Godliness." For many of you, the things we will speak about will be review, because these are the basic elements of spiritual life. Let me read verses 9, 10 and 11, and you follow as I read. "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."

Paul here basically is praying for the continual spiritual progress of the Philippian believers. Like newborn babies are expected to grow to maturity, so are newborn spiritual babies, and Paul's constant concern was for the maturing of the people to whom God had sent him in ministry. In fact, repeatedly this is pointed out. If we go back to Galatians, and chapter 4, one of my favorite insights into Paul's heart, verse 19, he says, "My children, with whom I am again in labor pains until Christ is formed in you." He said I travail, I experience pain in concern over your spiritual growth.

In Ephesians, chapter 4, writing to the saints at Ephesus, he points out similarly the desire that those who are in Christ would come to "a mature man," verse 13, "to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ," that they would, in verse 15, "grow up in all aspects unto Him who is the head, even Christ." In the letter to the Colossians, chapter 1 and verse 28, he says, "We proclaim Him" – that is, Christ – "admonishing every man, teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ." That desire for spiritual maturity and completeness was always on his heart. Peter echoed it in 2 Peter 3:18, when he said, "Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Paul, then, had a passion for the spiritual development of his people. That was his great concern. We see that passion revealed, not only in his preaching, his teaching, and his writing, but particularly in his prayer life. As you go through the New Testament and read the various prayers of the apostle Paul, you will note that they focus on that in particular. For example, if we were to go back again and look at some of his epistles, we would find in Ephesians, chapter 1 that he prays. He prays for his people.

Verse 15, he says, "I have heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which you have and your love for the saints. I do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers; and I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so you may know what is the hope of His calling, and the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe." In other words, I want you to continue to grow in wisdom, and knowledge, and love, and power, and faith; his great concern for their progress.

Chapter 3 of that same epistle, verse 14 says, "I bow my knees before the Father," and what do you pray, Paul? "I pray," verse 16, "that you'd be strengthened with power through the Spirit in the inner man. I pray that Christ would settle down in your hearts, that you would be rooted and grounded in love. I pray that the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge would be yours, that you would be filled with the fullness of God, that you would do exceeding abundantly above all you could ask or think, according to the power working in you." And again I point out to you that the ringing note in his prayers was for their spiritual growth, their spiritual development, their spiritual strength and power.

In writing to the Colossians he prays for them, that they would walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, that they would bear fruit in every good work, Colossians 1:10. That they would increase in the knowledge of God; that they would be strengthened with all power, that they would attain steadfastness and patience, that they would joyously give thanks to God; spiritual growth, spiritual maturity, spiritual progress. In writing to the Thessalonians, "We give thanks to God for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers." And, of course, the passion of his prayers was the enhancement of their spiritual life.

The same thing we find in his letter to Timothy, 2 Timothy 1:3, "I thank God, whom I serve with a clear conscience, and I constantly remember you in my prayers night and day." And, of course, he prayed for Timothy's spiritual power. That beautiful little epistle called Philemon, in verse 4 says, "I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective." Praying for their spiritual progress – that was his passion, that was his burden, and we find it at the outset of all of those epistles.

And no different here in Philippians, chapter 1; having given them a salutation of sorts through verse 8, having told them that he prays for them in verse 4, always offering prayer with joy, he now tells them what the content of that prayer is. And the content of that prayer is on behalf of their spiritual needs. We don't find examples of Paul praying for physical needs, for our generic church success and blessing. He ties his prayers directly to spiritual need. That was his passion and that was his burden. And I'd like to suggest to you, and I'll come back to this in a moment or two, that nothing is

more definitive of true spirituality than the nature of a person's prayer life. Paul was compelled to pray because of the tremendous working of God's Spirit in his heart. Look at how he begins in verse 9. "And this I pray – and this I pray."

Now, let me let you know here that I think it's important for us to recognize that we must look at prayer two ways. Okay? First of all, I would agree that prayer is a duty – it is a duty. In fact, in Philippians, chapter 4, verse 6, it says, "In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." That is a duty. That is something enjoined upon us as a spiritual responsibility. In Romans 12:12, it says we are to be devoted to prayer. In Luke 18, verse 1 Jesus said we ought always to pray and not to faint. In 1 Peter 4:7, we are to pray fervently for one another in terms of expressing our love, which is to be a fervent love. So there is no question but that Scripture teaches us that we must pray. There is a duty to pray.

But there's something much deeper than that that must go alongside that duty, and that is we must perceive prayer not only as a duty, but as a compulsion – as a compulsion. In fact, there are very few scriptures, really, that command us directly to pray. There are many scriptures that tell us how to pray. Jesus said, "When you pray, pray like this." Paul said, "Continue in prayer." We are given much instruction about how to pray, and how often to pray, pray without ceasing, but prayer is not just a duty, it is a compulsion. That is to say, it does not just arise because of external requirement; it rises because of internal passion. In fact, the deepest longings of a Spirit-filled heart flow out in prayer. We see that compulsion throughout Scripture. In the Psalms, Psalm 55 gives us a typical statement from the psalmist, in which he says to God, "Give ear to my prayer, O God. Do not hide Thyself from my supplication. Give heed to me and answer me." In other words, there's no one here commanding him to pray, he is compelled to pray, and he's crying out that God would hear the prayer his heart is compelled to offer.

In Psalm 61:1, it says, "Hear my cry, O God, give heed to my prayer, from the end of the earth I call to Thee when my heart is faint." And again, prayer is a compulsion. In that great 119th Psalm, in verse 58, we read the psalmist's words, "I entreated Thy favor with all my heart." And in verse 145, "I cried with all my heart, Answer me, O Lord." So prayer is a compulsion. It is, in a sense, like breathing. You don't have to be commanded to breathe; air pressure exerted on your lungs forces you to breathe. And a believer exists in a sort of a prayer pressure in which praying is a natural response to his environment.

In the New Testament, we find the same kind of thing. In Acts, chapter 9, and verse 11, I believe it is, regarding Saul of Tarsus it says, "The Lord came and spoke to Ananias, said, 'Arise and go to the street called Straight, inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for behold he is praying.'" I don't believe after his conversion immediately anybody gave him a command to pray. I believe he was praying out of a compelling in his heart. In Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6, it says the Spirit planted in us, causes us to cry, "Abba Father," crying out in prayer to God. In 1 Thessalonians,

chapter 3 and verse 10 it says, “Night and day we keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face.” How can you pray night and day? How can you pray night and day earnestly? Only when it’s an internal compulsion. In 1 Timothy 5, verse 5, Paul says, “A widow indeed continues in entreaties and prayers night and day.”

Now, what I’m pointing out to you is a very simple truth, and yet one that you must understand. Prayer is a duty on the one hand, and we don’t deny that. But on the other hand, prayer is a compulsion. Prayer is something that compels us from deep within. You say, “Well where does that compulsion come from?” It’s generated by the Spirit of God. It’s generated by the Holy Spirit within us. Now, listen carefully, because this is something you need to understand. The measure of a person’s spirituality – get this – the measure of a person’s spirituality is not how well they conform to the demand to pray, but how internally compelled they are to pray, simply because their passion for others in God’s Kingdom is so strong. That’s basic. We have to be compelled from inside.

And let me put it to you another way, simply. The deepest longings of your heart will come out in your prayers. So if you look at your prayers and they’re all about you, and your needs, and your problems, and your questions, and your struggles, then that’s where your heart is. And if you pray very infrequently, and very briefly, and very shallow, that means that you have a cold heart, because prayer is a compulsion. And I’ll tell you something very simple – all the calls to the duty of prayer cannot overcome a cold heart. They can’t. All the calls to the duty of prayer cannot overcome a cold heart. So if you do not pray, it is not simply disobedience, it is that you’re selfish and the heart is cold.

You look at the apostles in Acts 6:4, and it says, “We will give ourselves continually to the ministry of the word and prayer” – literally, the other way around, to prayer and the ministry of the word. That was a compulsion. They were compelled to teach the Word. They were compelled to pray. That’s a dynamic that works in the believer. And Paul had that. And that’s just by way of an introduction really, but Paul had that compulsion. There was something down inside of him, namely the working of the Spirit of God. He was so controlled by the Spirit, so pure in life, that the impulses of the Spirit in his heart gave him a passion to pray for people. He prayed night and day – night and day, prayed without ceasing, at all times, on all occasions. Not because he was trying to do some duty like a Pharisee, but because his heart drove him to that from deep within.

Now, what form did his prayer take? What was the nature of his prayer? Let’s look at it in verses 9 to 11. As he prays for the spiritual progress of his people – and I remind you again that that is the duty of the leader or the pastor, to pray for the spiritual progress of his people – as he prayed for them, what were the issues on his heart? Here we find five things for which he prays: love, excellence, integrity, good works, and glory. He prays that they may, that we may pursue those things. Now we’ll never arrive at perfect love, perfect excellence, perfect integrity, complete good works, and fully glorifying God, but that’s the pursuit of our life. So he gives us these five things that are the essentials of spiritual life – essentials of godliness.

Now, I want you to note in your mind – and we're not going to get through them today, we're going to look only at the first one because it's so important – but I want you to note that they're sequential. Love produces excellence produces integrity produces good works produces glory; they're each one laying a foundation for the next one. If you want a way to grasp them in your mind, they are the essentials to sound spiritual health. Okay? Essentials to godliness, Christlikeness, spiritual growth, spiritual health – whatever you want to use as a concept. Now remember, Paul had a great love for the Philippians. He says, "I have you in my heart, you are precious to me, you are dear to me. And it is out of that that I express my prayer on your behalf." He cared deeply for these people who had ministered to him in his imprisonment, in his trial, who had been so loving and so kind, on so many different occasions. And so his prayer for them involves five key essentials that they must pursue if they are to be all God wants them to be.

Let's look at the first one. Basic, very, very basic, love – verse 9, "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment." Now, we're not surprised that Paul brings up love to begin with, but you might be surprised a little bit about what I say regarding love. The issue of love is well known to us, and was, of course, in much of what Paul wrote. In his introduction to the Ephesian letter, he talks about love. In his introduction to the Colossian letter, he talks about love. In his opening in 1 Thessalonians, he talks about love. In his opening in 2 Thessalonians, he talks about love. And a lot of other places he talks about love.

And in those introductions in his letters, he very often links love with two other things: faith and – what – and hope, as he does in 1 Corinthians, chapter 13, where he says, "And these three, faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is – what – is love." There were many great spiritual virtues; faith was one, and hope was one, but the greatest is love. And so because of his affirming that love is the greatest thing, we're not surprised that that is at the head of his prayer list for those who would grow in Christ to spiritual maturity.

I might just point out to you that in Colossians 3:14, he says love is the bond of unity; love is that unique bond that ties us to one another. In 1 Corinthians 13:7, he says, "Love believes all things, love hopes all things," which means that faith and hope are embodied in love. So love is the surpassing one. It is the surpassing virtue. It is the most essential factor in spiritual life, did you get that? Because no matter what you do, it says in 1 Corinthians 13, no matter what you know, no matter how sacrificial you are, even if you give your body to be burned, if you have not love you are – what? Nothing – absolutely nothing; that's very, very direct. The single greatest virtue in spiritual life is love. And I don't think he here is particularly talking about love for God, although that certainly is included, but he is focusing here on love for one another, that same love that he mentions in chapter 2, verse 2, maintaining the same love toward one another, being united in spirit, being of the same mind. The greatest commodity the Christian possesses is love. Now, let's talk about this love from this one verse – so deep and so profound. He gives us several factors to this first essential. We must pursue love,

and he defines it for us in some very, very, very special ways.

First of all – and I'll give you a series of "Ds" you can jot down – it is divine love. He is speaking here of divine love. How do you know that? Verse 9, "And this I pray, that your love may abound." Now, he is then asking God for this love to abound; therefore, we would conclude that God is the source of it, and therefore, we say it's divine love. It has to be divine love, or he wouldn't be asking God to provide it. In Romans 5:5 it says, "The love of God is shed abroad in your hearts." In Galatians 5, "The fruit of the Spirit is love," and everything else flows out of love – "joy, peace, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control." But it's a gift of God. We love Him because He what? He first loved us. We have the capacity to love because He gave it to us.

So the prayer here includes the great truth that God is the source of love. We're talking, beloved, about a divine kind of love, not a human kind. We're not talking about a sort of an object attraction. We're not talking about a sentimentality. We're not talking about an emotion. We're not talking about a feeling. We're talking about a divine virtue given by God. It is not without feeling. It is not without emotion. But that is not its definition, as we will see. So what he's calling for is divine love.

And that divine love is known because it is love which is not the result of an emotional attraction. It's not. God didn't love us because we were so attractive. That's not the point at all. Recognize then that what he prays for is divine. He's not asking you to stir up your human love, he's not asking the Philippians to try to be more sentimental, more emotional, more sensitive to people on a human plane. That is not the idea at all. He is asking God to grant them more and more abounding love from His own resource. It is divine love – the kind of love with which God loves, with which Christ loves.

There's a second word that I would give you in this little list, *de facto*. It is *de facto* love. What do you mean by that? Notice again in verse 9, "And this I pray, that your love may abound." The fact that he says your love may abound indicates that they already have some love, and he's calling for a greater expression of that love. The form of his words indicate they already have this measure of love. They have divine love, as I said, in Romans 5:5, "The love of God is shed abroad in your hearts." It's there. It's not a question of acquiring it; it's a question of seeing God increase it. Every believer possesses divine love. It's *de facto*, it's there, it's present, it's a given.

Listen to 1 John 3:14: "We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers." Very simple. How do you know you're a Christian? You love brothers in Christ. "He who doesn't love abides in death, and everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life." If you love, you have eternal life. If you don't love, you don't have eternal life. And he's not talking about human love, he's talking about divine love. It's *de facto*, it's there, it's in your life. It's not a question of asking for it. "I don't have any, God; give me some." It's simply a question of "give me more – give me a greater measure, a greater abounding of the love which is already mine."

And again I say to you, this is the single greatest virtue in the church. John 13:34 and 35, “By this shall all men know that you’re My disciples, if you have” – what – “love one for another.” It is our single greatest testimony in the world that we love each other. And if we don’t love each other we are in real problems. In fact, Reinhold Niebuhr, the German theologian, said on one occasion the church reminded him of the ark; you couldn’t stand the stink inside if it weren’t for the storm outside. But the church has got to be more than just a better of two bad alternatives, and if there’s a stink inside that’s a little bit better than the storm outside, it’s because the church has lost its touch with the reality of the need to love.

So Paul’s prayer indicates he’s talking about a divine love, God being the source; a de facto love, we already have a measure of that love within us; thirdly, a decisive love – a decisive love. And I say that based upon the term that is used for love in verse 9, it is the term *agap*, and it refers to the highest and noblest kind of love – listen carefully – which is the love of choice, or the love of will. It is not object-drawn. It is not an impulse, it is not emotion, it is not sentiment; it is not drawn to something because of its beauty, its attractiveness. That’s the world’s love. The world says, “I love you because you do something to me.” The world says, “I love you because I feel something for you.” That is not the love of choice; that is the love of impulse. That is not the love of the will. In fact, people say, “I fell in love and couldn’t help it.” Some guy comes home and says to his wife, “I’m divorcing you.” “Why, why?” “Well, I couldn’t help it, I fell in love.”

That is not divine love. Divine love can help it. Divine love is the love of will. It is the love of choice. It is decisive. “God so loved the world,” and it wasn’t because we were so attractive that his emotions just got out of hand, and He fell in love with all of us. Bizarre thought. That’s not the idea. It is the love of choice, and the love of will, that says, “I will love you whether you’re my friend or my enemy, I will love you whether you do good or evil, I will love you whether you can give me anything or take away everything, I will love you.” And Jesus defined it when He said, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man would lay down his life for his friends.”

It’s sacrificial love. It’s the love of choice. It’s the love that chooses to love the unlovable, the unlovely, it’s a choice. And you have to make that choice over and over again. I’ve said to myself many, many times, “I will choose to love that person no matter what they do. I will choose to love that person no matter what they say. I will choose to love that person no matter how they might hurt me.” It’s the love of choice. And it’s a love that expressed in meeting a need, doing a deed of kindness, caring for someone in a practical way, humbly serving others. That’s the kind of love it is. It’s not the love of a feeling; it’s the love of action. It is not really an emotion, although emotion will come along.

If you read 1 Corinthians 13, the greatest chapter in the Bible on love, love is described. It says, “Love is patient, love is kind, is not jealous, love does not brag, is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not

rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." Every single one of those is a verb in the Greek. Love is an action. Love is a series of actions. It is not a static attitude. It is what you do, not what you feel. It is what you say, not what you think. It is action. It is the love that reaches out to meet a need.

And Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as yourself," and the question came, "Who is my neighbor?" And Jesus told the story about a man lying in a road with a need, and said, "That's your neighbor. Anybody you come across with a need." This is the love of the will. This is character that says, "No matter what you do, who you are, I will sacrificially serve for your good and your blessing." And, beloved, the church will never survive without this. This should be our distinguishing mark. You see, it's so different from the world. The world's love is totally the love of impulse, totally the love of emotional attraction. It knows very little about the love of the will. Even at its most philanthropic point, it plays on the emotion.

For example, when they want you to send money to some orphans or some deprived people in some part of the world, they get little sad-eyed children. Why? Because they want to deal with your emotion, not your mind, because all that human love knows is a response to a feeling. And God has granted to us a decisive *agap* love which is far surpassing to that, which will love and meet the need of a repulsive person as well as a tender-eyed little starving child. That's biblical, that's divine love. And you have it, *de facto*, it's there by virtue of the indwelling Holy Spirit and the love of God shed abroad in your heart, and it is activated by your choice, your will.

It's the greatest virtue in the Christian life, if for no other reason than according to Romans 13:8 to 10, it says if you love, you fulfill the whole law, right? If you love, you fulfill the whole law. Do you have to have a law, "Thou shalt not kill," if you love somebody? You're not going to kill somebody you love. Do you have to have a law that says, "Thou shalt not covet?" If you love people, you're not going to covet what they have. You don't need to hang a bunch of rules in your house if you love everybody there, because you'll act in their behalf, and to their good, and to meet their needs. Love fulfills the whole law, Romans 13:8. It's all the sum of everything.

And, beloved, the mandate to the church and the great burden of the prayer life of Paul is that the church at Philippi, and our church, and all other churches would experience this kind of divine love, where we decide to love each other, no matter what we do or don't do. Jesus summed it up by saying, "Love your enemies, do good to those who spitefully use you." Love your enemies, love the unlovely. What do you mean love them? Feel something about them? No, do something for them; meet their need, whatever the need might be. It may be an emotional need, physical need, spiritual need, economic need, whatever it is. It's the key to life and growth and effectiveness of the church – the love of decision, choosing to love. It's a choice. And if you have spiritual character and spiritual depth, you're going to choose to love. But that's not how it is in the church. It's so sad. Somebody says something that you don't like and you retaliate, and then you've got fractures and friction. It's so

sad. You have people set against other people. Love is the solution to all of it.

Let me give you a fourth word, the love of which Paul prays here is dynamic; it's not static, it's dynamic. He says, "I pray that your love may abound still more and more." It's already abounding, he wants it to abound more and more. It isn't static, it isn't staying the same. He says, "I see your love abounding," and the word he uses here, *perisseu*, means to overflow, wave upon wave, to cascade like a waterfall. He says, "I see your love if dynamic, it's growing, it's progressing, it's expanding, it's enlarging, and I want it to get more and more." It's dynamic. You can never be content with the way you are. His prayer is that it will go more and more and more through the church.

By the way, the present tense Greek verb indicates a continual progress, enlarging the capacity for more than an ordinary measure of love. I pray that your love will abound, and abound, and abound, and abound, and abound. Now, you have to work at that. You see, I think the second law of thermodynamics works with spiritual virtue just as much as it does with nature. Second law says that all things are breaking down, the law of entropy. I think that's not only true as it is scientifically, but I think it's true spiritually. We can do the best we can to cultivate love, but if we don't work at it and commit ourselves daily to the power of the Spirit of God, that very dynamic of love will disintegrate, and disintegrate, and disintegrate, and disintegrate. It has to continually be strengthened, continually be looked to and tended to.

It is the most basic element of godliness – love – love. And Christ, of course, has set the standard. It says in Ephesians, chapter 4 that we're to be "kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other as God in Christ has forgiven you." And then in verse 1 of chapter 5, "Be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and sacrifice to God." He says, "Love everybody like Christ loved you." And how did Christ love you? He loved you by giving His life as a sacrifice. Love sacrificially – love sacrificially.

You remember when Jesus washed the disciples' feet? It was then He said, "You're to love each other as I have loved you." How had He loved them? By washing their dirty feet – humble service, humble sacrifice. Christ is our model.

And again I say this is not a mushy sentimentalism. It's a very controlled love. Let's go further in verse 9 to see this dynamic of love. He says, "That your love may abound still more and more" – now, watch this – "in real knowledge," says the New American. In real knowledge, better in full knowledge, better yet in advanced knowledge – now, listen to this thought. Love is not an uncontrolled emotion. Love is not an unregulated impulse. It is linked with truth in verse 9, that your love may cascade more and more, wave upon wave, in real knowledge. The thing that confines love and conforms love is true knowledge, *epignosis*, advanced knowledge, real knowledge, true knowledge, full knowledge. Of what? God's revelation, God's truth, Scripture.

So let your love be controlled by Scripture. Boy, that's so basic. Love is not an unregulated impulse. It's controlled by truth, Christian love is. You can't say, "Well, I tried to love them but, boy, they're so unkind to me I can't stand them." You're not free to do that, because Scripture says love your enemies, so your love is controlled by the regulation of Scripture. I heard a woman say this week – well, I didn't hear her say it, I heard of someone who said she said it – she said, "Well, I'm having an affair, but this is God's will because He gave us the love." No. He didn't give you that love. His love is controlled by truth, and truth says that you can't commit adultery.

This is not an unregulated impulse. People say, "Oh I fell in love and I couldn't help it. I just couldn't help it; I fell in love and lost all control." That's the kind of love our world has, they're all out of control, they're all out of control. And they say, "Well, it's love, and when you fall in love you're out of control." That's right, that's human love, it's completely out of control. It's all built on impulse, it's all built on sentiment, it's all built on emotional attraction. It has nothing to do with biblical love at all, which is totally conformed and confined by truth. Sure, everybody in the world's out of control, because they have their own definition of love.

So, let's add another "D" to our little list, and let's say it's deep. The kind of love he's talking about is deep. And by that, I mean it is anchored to conviction that is based on truth. Typical of this kind of thing would be going back to the passage I just mentioned to you, Ephesians 5, where he says, "Walk in love." And then he says right after that in verse 2 he says, "Walk in love," and in verse 3, "Don't let immorality be named among you." In other words, don't let your love get out of control. You're going to say, "Well, I'm going to walk in love, and whoa, I want to walk in love with her." See. And you start to walk in what you think is love with her, it turns into adultery or fornication, and the Bible says, "Stop." That's not the kind of love we're talking about. It's a self-sacrificial, humble, service attitude that is conformed to and confined by the principles of the Word of God. It is not feelings out of control; it is action under control by the truth of God.

In 1 Peter, chapter 1, verse 22, it sort of ties it together. It says, "Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart." Boy, what a tremendous statement. Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls – all right, you obey the truth, your soul is purified – you now have a genuine, honest, non-hypocritical love for the brethren, go after it, he says, and fervently love one another from the heart – as long as it's controlled by obedience to the truth, you can love to the limit. Fervently is *ektens*, stretched. It's used of a muscle stretched to its extremity. As long as your love is controlled by obedience to the truth, you can love to the maximum – an obedient heart, the controlling factor.

So the love we're talking about here is very deep. It touches way down at the level of conviction and truth. And that truth comes from God's word. That's what controls your love. That's what compels your love. The more you know about God's Word, the more you're committed to God's Word, the

more you obey God's Word, the greater your love will be, the greater its expression, and the more pure its expression as well. So the love of which the apostle Paul writes, and for which he prays, is a divine love; that is, it's not human, it comes from God. It's de facto, it's there, in residence by the indwelling of the Spirit. It's decisive, in the sense that it is not the response of an impulse, but it is a choice. It's dynamic in the sense that it grows, and flourishes, and cascades, wave upon wave, under the energy of the Spirit, much like the Holy Spirit out of your belly flowing rivers of water, as John 7 said. And then it's deep, it's anchored way down to truth that controls and conforms it. I say to someone, "I love you, I love you in Christ," and they go into all kinds of sin. What's my response? To say, "Oh, I love you; I just love them too much to be unkind?" No, your response is to grab them by the neck and shake them, and say, "Stop your sin." Why? Because your expression of love is controlled by purity and holiness, which is defined in Scripture. Now, that's an illustration of how love is controlled by real knowledge, advanced knowledge. So as you learn the Word and grow in the Word, it affects your love.

Then one other word: discerning – discerning. This love is also discerning. In Philippians, chapter 1, verse 9 we read at the end of the verse that this love is to abound not only in real knowledge, but in all discernment – in all discernment. Very interesting Greek word, *aisthesis*, which we get the word "aesthetic" from. It is the only time this word is ever used in the Scripture, and it means insight or perception. It has to do with moral perception, moral insight. It has to do with practical application of that deep knowledge, okay? So he is saying your love is controlled by your theology, and your insight in the application of that theology, how you apply it. It's truth applied.

Friends, real love is not blind. You say, "Love is blind." Love is not blind, not biblical love. Biblical love is very insightful, very perceptive. It knows exactly what is right and what is wrong, what is false and what is true, and it can make the right application at the right moment in life. It is that serving, sacrificing, humility which meets the needs of others as it sees and ascertains and understands them. Believe me, love as an unregulated impulse is dangerous, volatile, deadly. But given to some hard thinking, and careful scrutiny, and sensitive discrimination, the love of God conformed the Word of God and applied in perception and insight is what Paul really seeks. It's a biblical discriminating love, under the control of a spiritual mind, a spiritual reason; a wise, judicious love.

William Hendriksen, for example, wrote, "A person who possesses love but lacks discernment may reveal a great deal of eagerness and enthusiasm. He may donate to all kinds of causes. His motives may be worthy and his intentions honorable, yet he may be doing more harm than good." Because he lacked discernment. I'm amazed, to pick up on Hendriksen's illustration, how many well-meaning people, trying to show their love for God, give money to people who work against the Kingdom – because they don't discern. They haven't learned how to apply their knowledge. We must – we must be discerning.

Now, drawing this together, we are called to love each other; that's Paul's passionate prayer. Do you know how deeply we need this; to look at it not from the side of the lover, but the loved one, for a moment? I was reading this week an interesting thing in a book that sort of analyzes a little bit of our culture. It says, "During World War II orphaned babies were placed in a large institution. The accommodations were pleasant – new furniture, brightly covered toys, delicious food – nevertheless, the health of the children began to rapidly deteriorate. Although there were no signs of disease, they stopped eating and playing. They then grew weak and began dying." These are newborn babies. "United Nations doctors were flown in to investigate. Their prescription: for ten minutes each hour all children were to be picked up, hugged, kissed, played with, and talked to. The orders were obeyed, and within a short time, the strange epidemic disappeared. The little ones brightened. Their appetites returned. Their toys were once again played with. And when their ten minutes came, they enthusiastically reached out their little arms to be picked up by the approaching nurses."

"The doctors identified their fatal lethargy as marasmus, and described it as a mysterious and gradual emaciation of the body which seems to strike when others don't take time to show enough love," end quote. And then the writer says, "The same principle holds true for the elderly. Social disengagement leads to loneliness and eventual death. Our senior citizens feel the effects of such isolation perhaps more than any other group in our society. No doubt that is why senility is so prevalent, and why" – get this – "post-retirement life averages four years. The cry of most older people was voiced to me by my father shortly after his retirement. 'Son, you can criticize me, accuse me, borrow from me, make fun of me but just don't ever leave me alone,'" end quote.

James J. Lynch researched the lives of seven thousand persons aged 30 through 69 for a period of nine years. His conclusion is that "outgoing, sociable individuals live longer and healthier lives than those who are shut off from others. The former are more resistant to heart and circulatory diseases, cancer, and strokes, and are even less inclined to suicide. People refer to this phenomenon in many ways: assimilation, systemics, linkage, social webbing, or fellowship; it all comes down to one important idea, we're all born with an insatiable inner need for meaningful interaction with others. The need begins on the first day of our lives and continues until we breathe our last breath."

You see what we're saying? God made us to be utterly fulfilled in the loving environment of the church. You say, "Well now, wait a minute. We have our little group." I'm sure you do. "We have our little web of friends." Let me talk about that for a minute. Again, you know what goes into action, the law of entropy, and things start to disintegrate. You start out with this wonderful, loving fellowship, and you think it's *agap* love, and you're enjoying it. And as you get into it a little more, your little webbed-in group begins to develop standards, and with those standards you web in some, and you web out others. And if they don't fit the standard, they don't get in, and so you've got your little group. The worst of it is nepotism, where the little group is all in the same family. But there are other forms of it, such as cronyism, where you have your pals and your buddies.

It's a little, small network of people that you associate with all the time. You deeply care for them. They deeply care for you. They're like extended family. There's the little web that you fit in. You get strokes there. You feel secure there. You even feel flattered there. You are accepted with no risk. Everything is absolutely predictable. In fact, the conversation is usually the same every time you get together. You never involve yourself with unpredictable people; you never get into any risky deal. You never allow low-status outsiders into your little web, and you say that's love. And may I suggest to you that the higher the comfort level of your web, the higher the walls that keep other people out. That's right. The higher the comfort level of your web, the higher the walls that keep other people out; and usually there's a part of your little web that talks about the people on the other side of the wall, and how they would never fit into your group. But you feel good about your little web, and you call it love, and you totally ignore maybe real love.

How we need to reach out beyond that kind of confinement, and work to show love to all those who come into our path, no matter what the risk might be. And I guess you could say you've arrived at a certain point in this when you look to God alone for your reward. You can tell when you're really building relationships on the right level when you never look for anything from the relationship, but you look to God for the reward. That's a focus you need to have. A heart of love, that's what Paul wants us to have. May God help us, because the Spirit has given us love to express it to one another. Well, we'll come back and take up number two next time; let's bow together in our closing.

I want you to understand, as we bring our service to a conclusion, that all of us struggle with these things, myself included. We all tend toward that comfortable zone. We all move away from high risk, unpredictable relationships. We fear intrusion into our private lives by people who don't know us well. We like to be very, very comfortable, and not at all have to be on guard. We don't like to think that we might lose some control of our time and our resources because someone else had a need for them.

But that's what God calls us to – to go beyond the web, beyond the wall, to love the people that we don't necessarily find attractive, but who have needs. All those that God puts in our path, whatever might be their need, knowing that people might abuse that, but looking to God for our reward. Looking at relationships not for what we can gain from the person, but from what we can gain from the Lord by doing what's right. My prayer for you is that you would know the kind of love that Paul desired the Philippians to know, and that you would know it in the fullest expression. And if we as a church would begin to love this way, the world would take notice of us.

Thank You, Father, for our time this morning. Seal to our hearts Your truth. Conform our lives to it, for Your glory. Amen.

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