

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

The Essential Second

Scripture: Matthew 22:37-39; John 13:3-5; John 13:34-35; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:1; James 2:8; 1 John 3:16-17

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A well-known Peanuts cartoon shows Lucy accusing her little brother, Linus, of not loving his fellow man. "I love mankind," was his indignant response, "it's people I can't stand!" It is very easy to love the whole wide world, and it is easy to love the church. However, it may be very difficult to love one particular person. But the love our Lord calls you to exercise is a practical, personal kind of love that is expressed primarily to individuals.

A Jewish law expert once asked Jesus, "What is the greatest commandment?" You remember His answer: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment" (Matthew 22:37-38). Though that seemed to satisfy the question, Jesus wasn't finished. Without taking a breath, He added, "The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:39).

Love for God and love for your neighbor are vitally connected and cannot be separated- you cannot do one without doing the other. How important is this second commandment? James called it the "royal" or sovereign law-it towers over the rest. Paul said if you keep it, you will be fulfilling the demands of the entire Old Testament (Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14). Recognizing the command is one thing—understanding and practicing biblical love is another.

Love in Action

When I first came to Grace Community Church, I wanted badly to love everyone, but I couldn't figure out how to get the emotional feeling I thought was necessary. Some people were kind of irritating, and some even purposely made things difficult for me. I wanted to love them, but I didn't know how. One day I went to a man who was particularly difficult, put my arm around him, and said, "I want you to know something. If there's any way I can ever serve you, I'd sure love to have the opportunity." The opportunity came. My attitude toward him didn't change because of how I felt about him emotionally, but because of how I came to love him by serving him.

Loving others is not a question of patting someone on the back and saying, "You're so wonderful, so irresistible. I love you!" You show love by making personal sacrifices to meet someone's need. Sometimes I'm asked how I can minister to individuals in a large church. It is not by running around to everyone and expressing love, but by making sacrifices in my life to help them grow spiritually. I care enough about them to do what is necessary in my life to bring them into conformity to Jesus Christ.

If you still have doubts about what biblical love is, ponder this: Has God ever shouted, "I love you!" from heaven or written it in the sky? No; we see the love of God in Christ laying down His life for us. God put His Son on a cross on our behalf. That is how He expressed His love-through sacrifice. Since Christ "laid down His life for us... we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John

3:16).

Death isn't always the price; sometimes love requires the sacrifice of your possessions, your time, or some other precious commodity. "But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?" (1 John 3:17). If you see someone who has a need, you must meet that need as far as you're able, or you prove yourself to be deficient in love.

"Well," someone interjects, "before we can love someone, we have to love ourselves. After all, the Bible says in James 2:8 we are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves." That is a popular concept. But it is not what James 2:8 (or the rest of Scripture) teaches. Psychologists have made a business out of misinterpreting that verse. They say you must learn a "healthy" self-love to gain a good self-image; if you do not have a high regard for yourself, you will never be able to love other people the way God intended.

That's a serious misunderstanding. Those who advocate the saying, "learn to love yourself before you can love others," naively ignore what the Bible teaches about sin-that it is inherently self interested. To teach someone to love themselves is to justify or encourage the consuming sin of pride and to undercut any effort or desire to sacrifice self and love others.

So what does it mean to love others as you love yourself? Look at James 2:1: "My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism." The text goes on to give the illustration of a rich man and a poor man visiting a congregation and being treated differently. James is saying that as a Christian you are not to treat certain people with respect while you treat others with indifference. Rather, to fulfill the royal law, you are to treat everyone as you would treat yourself- the assumption is that you are already naturally inclined to treat yourself best. Whatever great sacrifices you make for your own comfort, you should make the same for the comfort of others, without respect to their status in life. It has nothing to do with the importance of loving self; it has to do with your service toward others.

Just stop, for example, and consider the lengths you go to make yourself comfortable. That is the same way you should meet the needs of others. The way you treat your own desires is the way you should treat the desires of others. You should love them in terms of self-sacrificing service, just as you make sacrifices for your own benefit.

Are you willing to do that? Are you willing to give up whatever it is that makes you comfortable in order to provide for the comfort of someone else? Are you willing to sacrifice the things you enjoy so another's needs may be met? That is loving your neighbor as yourself. It is not psychological; it is sacrificial.

Love in Humility

One vivid example of self-sacrificing love for others was given Jesus Himself. On the night before He suffered and died, the Lord did not tell His disciples in the upper room, "I love you. I'd like to give you a discussion of divine love and tell you how it works."

Instead, our Lord washed His disciples' feet. John 13:3-5 says, "Jesus . . . got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded." God in the flesh was stooping to wash dirt off the feet of His weak, sinful disciples. Now that's love!

And that is precisely the kind of love the Lord demands of the rest of His disciples. After His amazing example of self-humiliation, Jesus said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

How had Jesus demonstrated His love for them? By washing their dirty feet; by taking the role of a slave; by doing the distasteful thing, the sacrificial thing. Loving one another is not just feeling little pangs of emotion. It is serving. When you willingly sacrifice what you want for the good of another, when you choose to fill the need of someone instead of satisfying your own need, then you really love (no matter what your emotions may be). That is what God expects.

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