

SPIRITUAL GROWTH part 5: BECOMING A LOVING PERSON

You don't have to read very far in Scripture before you begin realizing the fact that God is a loving God. References to God's love are seen everywhere. God is love. That being true, there is no way that we are going to be able to please Him without being people of love. The world needs love.

The well-known psychiatrist Dr. Karl Meninger said, "Love is the medicine for the sickness of the world." Here is a true story. In the year 2000, a virus that began in the Philippines rapidly spread around the world. It was one of the fastest spreading viruses of its kind in history. Within 3 hours of its inception, it had affected every continent on the planet. It wasn't a disease virus. It was a computer virus. Within ½ day, it had infected computers at the FBI, the CIA and the pentagon. The U.S. State department had to literally unplug its computer from the wall because it was rendered ineffective by this virus. Also, by the end of the day, the British House of Commons had to turn off their computers because they were affected by this virus. How did this virus get started? The virus was written by a 20 year old Filipino student who was upset because he had been cut from his computer science program, and he wanted to show them that he could program something. So how did it spread all around the world? That was not his original intent. He just mailed it to his school. The secret to its irresistible spread was this: the virus was sent to everyone whose name was in the address book of the computer it was sent to, and when it reached a new computer it was sent to all of those in that computer's address book. The catch was, however, that it was sent with an attachment, and it would not do anything unless someone opened the attachment. Why did people who should have known better open that attachment? It was emailed out with this subject line, "I love you." And people all over the world who should have known better, people at the CIA, the FBI looked it that attachment and said, "Someone loves me?" really? Click. Uh, oh! What does it tell you? That tells me that we live in a world where people are desperate for love. People are so hungry for love that they're willing to throw caution to the wind. It has been said that the three most powerful words in the English language are "I love you." That's why God tells us in such passages as Ephesians 5: 1, "live a life of love."

WHAT IS LOVE?

Someone asked children to give a title to a love song that they would write to someone they were not with.

Bob, age nine, gave this title, "I love you most of the time, but don't mess with me when I am with my friends."

Arnold, age 10, said "how do I love you when you are always picking your nose?"

Will, age 11, said "hey baby, I don't like girls, but I am willing to forget that you are one."

Will also answered another question. When asked if it is better to be single or married, Will answered it gives me a headache to think about that kind of stuff, and I'm just a kid. I don't need that kind of trouble. "

1. Love Is an Unpaid Debt

Romans 13:8, "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another...."

Love is the one debt we can never repay. All our efforts pale into nothingness compared to the vast love of God. The least we can do—in fact the only thing we can do—is to love other people in Jesus' name. Each day as we get up, we are to think, "Today I will meet many people who need the love of God." As we walk down the street, we will say to ourselves, "I am put here as an ambassador of God's love." Each day in the office or the classroom or working the third shift at the factory, we should look for ways in which we can show love to others.

2. Love is the Fulfillment of the Law

Romans 13:8b-9, "for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet,"¹¹ and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself."¹⁰ Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

All the "Thou Shalt Nots" ultimately flow from love. If you love your neighbor, you won't hurt him. If you love him, you won't kill him. If you love him, you won't steal his money or his good name. And if you love him, you won't begrudge him his prosperity or get angry because you have less than he does. The law merely spells out what love looks like in concrete situations.

3. Love is a Commitment

Some would say that love is just a feeling. But that is not what the Bible says. It has much to do with our emotions. But it isn't just a feeling only. In fact, when our relationships rely upon love to be a feeling, we're in trouble because our feelings change, don't they? We don't always feel the same way today as we might tomorrow or we did yesterday.

Others would say that love is uncontrollable. It just happens to us. It's an overwhelming feeling that sweeps people off their feet when the right two eyes meet. They don't have to know one another. They don't have to know one another's values or backgrounds. It's just this tingling, gushy overwhelming sensation.

Again, the Bible doesn't say that. In fact, the Bible says that love is a choice. Somebody has said that love is the mental and emotional commitment to care and act like we care even when we don't feel like it. If all of us were honest, we would say there are times we don't feel like loving our spouse, our children or our friends. We don't feel like loving our job or the people we work with. Love is a matter of choice. It's my choosing to be committed to another person, even on the days I don't feel like it. If that is true, what kind of commitment does love require?

A COMMITMENT TO PATIENCE

1 Corinthians 13:4, "love is patient."

Since we live in a fallen world, we will often find ourselves surrounded by irritable, aggravating, frustrating, unreasonable people. And that's on a good day! Sometimes people will say things or do things to deliberately irritate us. We all know people who seem to have the "spiritual gift of irritation." They know how to get under our skin and upset us. You may work with those people or go to school with them. Sometimes we are married to someone like that.

That means that sometimes another person's actions, though they may disappoint me and though I may be frustrated by what I see going on. I want to demonstrate my care for them by giving them time, and maybe space, when it's needed.

I like Calvin and Hobbes. The scene in the first box of a cartoon: his mom is laying in bed, it's pitch black. It's obviously the middle of the night. You read this, "Mom! Wake up. Come quick." It's Calvin calling for her. She sits up and kind of mumbles, "What is wrong, what is the matter?" "Come here." So the next scene is her standing in the bedroom with him, saying this. "Do you think love is nothing but a biochemical reaction designed to make sure our genes get passed on?"

His mom in the next scene looks at him and says, "Whatever it is, it's the only thing that is keeping me from killing you right now."

The last box is Calvin safely tucked back in bed, saying, "Mom's midnight reassurances are never very reassuring."

A COMMITMENT TO KINDNESS

Several years ago Barbara Walters interviewed Christopher Reeves on 20/20. Christopher Reeves was in an accident jumping in a horse show and was paralyzed from his shoulders down from a broken neck. He could only speak as the respirator pumped in enough air, and it goes past his vocal chords so his speech was somewhat halting.

Barbara asked a very direct question, "How can you do this? How can you live like this?" But he had dreams and hopes. He said, "If it was not for the love of my family and my friends and those who have been supporting me and caring about me, I couldn't make it."

His wife, Dana helped him with physical therapy. When the ventilator became disconnected to him, she would hook it back up before he quit breathing. That is kindness. It is love demonstrated in action.

A COMMITMENT TO SELFLESSNESS

1 Corinthians 13:5, "Love is not rude. It is not self-seeking. It is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrong."

All of the things mentioned in verse five have their foundation in selfishness. Real love is selfless not selfish. If you're going to have a real love that lasts, you are going to have to get over the idea that the universe revolves around you because it doesn't. There is a story about a couple who were celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary. The granddaughter came to her grandmother and asked her how she maintained her relationship with her husband for 50 long years. The grandmother began to explain that when she and her husband were married, they agreed to each make a list of 10 things that they would forgive the other one for. With great curiosity, granddaughter asked her grandmother what the things were on her list that she would forgive her husband for. The grandmother answered back, "I really don't know. I never looked at the list. When your grandfather would do something wrong, I would say to myself he had better be glad that that what he did was one of the 10 on my list. If the love is to truly last, we must get over the selfishness that will destroy it.

4. Love is the main thing

If I were to ask you to complete this sentence, how would you complete it? "My aim in life is..." If you had to boil it down to one word, my aim in life is success, my aim in life is fame, my aim in life is approval, my aim in life is achievement, and my aim in life is wealth. What would it be if you had to say my aim in life is?

Your priority determines the kind of choices you will make in life. For example, if the priority in my life is to have fun, then I will always choose the thing which will be the most fun to me. Your aim in life determines everything that you do. If your aim in life is security, then you will always choose that which looks to be the safest. Every person has a dominant value that directs his life.

1 Corinthians 14:1 in the living bible says "make love your greatest aim." Paul tells us exactly how important the priority of love is.

1 Corinthians 13:1, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ²If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

a) WITHOUT LOVE ALL I SAY IS INEFFECTIVE

b) WITHOUT LOVE ALL I KNOW IS INCOMPLETE

You can have so many degrees they call you "Dr. Fahrenheit", but it doesn't matter. Without love you are nothing.

c) WITHOUT LOVE ALL I BELIEVE IS INSUFFICIENT

If you have the kind of faith that moves mountains, but don't have love, God puts under your ledger, your name, and He puts a zero by it. He says it means nothing.

Galatians 5:6 says, "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."

d) WITHOUT LOVE ALL I GIVE IS INSIGNIFICANT

e) WITHOUT LOVE ALL I ACCOMPLISH IS INADEQUATE

Life minus love equals zero. He says it over and over again. Our goal should be to live in such a way that people see the love of God coming through our lives.

It was said of the early Christians that their impact on society was due to their great love for one another. That is still true.

There was a survey done of Muslims who have converted to the Christian faith sometimes at great personal cost. The survey (which was over a 16 year period and involved 750 former Muslims) said the number one reason Muslim leaders chose to follow Christ was the lifestyle of the Christians among them.

LOVE IS A FAMILY CHARACTERISTIC

Sometimes, when you read the Bible, you'll come across a verse that jumps out and overwhelms you because it seems impossible. For example, when Jesus said, "*Therefore,*

you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48). I don't know about you, but that one hasn't been easy to pull off for me. There's another Scripture where Paul tells us to do the seemingly impossible.

Ephesians 5:1, "Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children..."

Some actors or comedians can take on the facial expressions and the vocal inflection of a famous person. Some imitations are good (Elvis impersonators), but they're no substitute for the real thing.

There's more to imitating God than just talking the talk. Some people think that if they just quote enough Scripture enough times in enough conversations, they'll be Godly. Quoting Scripture is a good thing, but there is more to imitating God than just knowing and quoting Scripture. So, how do we imitate God?

Ephesians 5:1-2, "Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ loved you."

That's how you imitate God: you love people. I like Eugene Peterson's translation from *The Message*: "Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents."

Note the word *therefore* at the beginning of Ephesians 5:1. It refers us back to 4:32, which tells us to be "kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you." That's the essence of imitating God, being kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving.

God's purpose has always been to make us like himself. Romans 8:29 tells us that the reason for our salvation is that we might be "conformed to the image of his Son." Because Jesus was a servant, we are to be servants. Because God is love, we are to "walk in love."

HOW DO I BECOME A MORE LOVING PERSON?

1. THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU ARE SAYING AND DOING

Someone has said, "An unexamined life is not worth living." We all have the tendency to just roll through life without really considering how we are living it. Be aware of what you're doing. Ask yourself the question, "Did I say what I said in a loving way? If you don't examine your life carefully, your life will default to that which is most natural to you, and that will not be the kind of loving life God wants you to have.

2. STUDY THE LIFE OF JESUS

When you study the life of Jesus, you're seeing love in action. How did he respond in certain situations, and how can you apply His response to situations in your own life? What would Jesus have said or done differently than you did?

3. DRAW NEAR TO GOD

When the Bible talks about the "fruit of the spirit," it is talking about that which is produced in our lives by the Holy Spirit when we allow him to control us. The bible says that God is love, and when he is given control of our lives, his personality shines through us. Not only is God's love better than anything that we could produce ourselves, it is lasting. That is because there's nothing that can cause God to stop being who he is. That being the case, true love is not a matter of work; it is a matter of worship. The more your heart falls in love with him, the more his heart is revealed through you.