

Putting First Things First (Increasing in Holiness) Increasing in Love

Introduction: One of the priorities a Christian should always have is increasing in holiness. As we make this a priority, we obey the Lord's command through the apostle Paul:

Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. (2 Cor. 7:1-2)

But what does it mean to “perfect holiness?” Is it not to increase in those qualities that disciples share with our holy God? Are they not those qualities that are produced from within us by the Spirit of God?

Paul gave the Galatians a list of those qualities which he called “the fruit of the Spirit.” The first one in the list is love. Let think about increasing in love.

It is only natural that the quality of love should head the list because God's word teaches us:

The Importance of Love—Its necessity

Paul said it was the greatest of the three abiding virtues.

But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor. 13:13)

It guides our walk as a disciple of Jesus.

Therefore 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 a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma. (Eph. 5:1-2)

It is the spirit that binds God's people together in unity.

And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. (Col. 3:14)

It is the safeguard that prevents our Christian liberty from turning into destructive selfishness.

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. (Gal. 5:13)

It is the attitude in which all our preaching and teaching of the truth must be spoken.

but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ, (Eph. 4:15)

It is the "universal motive" for all that we do.

Let all that you do be done in love. (1 Cor. 16:14)

The Meaning of "Love"—Its Characteristics

The meaning of love gets a little fuzzy in our modern world since this single word is used to describe everything from God to pizza—from the purest and most noble thoughtfulness to the sensual lust of the immoral.

The Greeks had four words which we translate "love".

Eros - carnal, sexual attraction

Storge - family closeness, belonging

Philia – friendship, affection

Agape – a more general word for love that is most frequently used for the “love” of God, though “philia” is also used.

Paul uses “agape” in his list of the fruit of the Spirit. And though the Greeks would not have thought of “agape” as “divine love,” the NT writers fill this word with meaning by commonly using it of the love of God, so that Biblically we could say:

God is the perfect model of "agape". When we listen to what the Scriptures say about the "love of God" then we begin to understand what this real love is in which we should be increasing.

The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. (1 Jn. 4:8)

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. (Jn. 3:16)

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus, in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 2:4-7)

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom. 5:8)

“Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. (Jn. 15:13)

The qualities of God's love

It is voluntary--It is not an uncontrolled reaction of the heart, but a conscious exercise of the will.

It is selfless--It is a caring love, one which becomes involved with the need of others.

It is giving—It provides the need that another has.

It is unearned--It does not depend upon the one being loved having to earn such love.

It is non-exclusive—not expressed only to a select few, but an all-embracing benevolence, shown toward all.

But how do we demonstrate this love?

The demonstration of love—Its deeds

Demonstrating our love toward God—Mt. 22:37

Keeping His commandments

“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments. (Jn. 14:15).

“He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him.” (Jn. 14:21)

Jesus answered and said to him, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father’s who sent Me. (Jn. 14:23-24)

“If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments, and abide in His love. (Jn. 15:10).

The proof of our spirituality toward God ultimate rests in how serious we are about doing what He says, about obeying what He commands!

Demonstrating our love toward our fellow-man.

Here we could spend the rest of the week looking at commands of God that show love. However, the spirit of agape is captured beautifully in the Jesus’ sermon on the plain.

“But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. “Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either.

“Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back. “And just as you want people to treat you, treat them in the same way. “And if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. “And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. “And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, in order to receive back the same amount. “But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. “And do not judge and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned. “Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, they will pour into your lap. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.” (Lk. 6:27-38)

As we read this text we can see the actions of love. Do good, bless, pray, don’t return evil for evil, treat others as we would like to be treated, lend expecting nothing in return, be merciful, do not judge or condemn, pardon, give.

Results of love—Its reward

The response of others to your love will be mixed.

Some people will be moved and inspired by your love to return it to you and to love others.

Some people will never be anything more than takers of the love of the others; but never find a way to show it to others.

In the end, the reward of love is not in receiving reciprocal love from others, but in receiving the reward of God. We love others not in order to be loved by others, but because God has loved us. And as we live lives of love, His love toward us will also increase.

CONCLUSION

Take a moment to explore your spirituality. Is this the love you show toward God and those around you?

Even if we already excel in the matter of love...

Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, (1 Thes. 4:9-10)

"And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you" (1 Thes. 3:12)