

The Scriptures and Love

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This article brings to a close the present series. In them we have sought to point out some of the ways by which we may ascertain whether or not our reading and searching of the Scriptures are really being blessed to our souls. Many are deceived on this matter, mistaking an eagerness to acquire knowledge for a spiritual love of the Truth (II Thess 2:10), and assuming that addition to their store of learning is the same thing as growth in grace. A great deal depends upon the end or aim we have before us when turning to God's Word. If it be simply to familiarize ourselves with its contents and become better versed in its details, it is likely that the garden of our souls will remain barren; but if with the prayerful desire to be rebuked and corrected by the Word, to be searched by the Spirit, to conform our hearts to its holy requirements, then we may expect a Divine blessing.

In the preceding articles we have endeavoured to single out the vital things by which we may discover what progress we are making in personal godliness. Various criteria have been given, which it becomes both writer and reader honestly to measure himself by. We have pressed such tests as: Am I acquiring a greater hatred of sin, and a practical deliverance from its power and pollution? Am I obtaining a deeper acquaintance with God and His Christ? Is my prayer-life healthier? Are my good works more abundant? Is my obedience fuller and gladder? Am I more separated from the world in my affections and ways? Am I learning to make a right and profitable use of God's promises, and so delighting myself in Him that His joy is my daily strength? Unless I can truthfully say that these are (in some measure) my experience, then it is greatly to be feared that my study of the Scriptures is profiting me little or nothing.

It hardly seems fitting that these articles should be concluded until one has been devoted to the consideration of Christian love. The extent to which this spiritual grace is, or is not, being cultivated and regulated affords another index to the measure in which my perusal of God's Word is helping me spiritually. No one can read the Scriptures with any measure of attention without discovering how much they have to say about love, and therefore it behooves each one of us prayerfully and carefully to ascertain whether or not his or her love be really a spiritual one, and whether it be in a healthy state and is being exercised aright.

The subject of Christian love is far too comprehensive to consider all its varied phases within the compass of a single paper. Properly we should begin with contemplating the exercise of our love toward God and His Christ, but as this has been at least touched upon in preceding articles we shall now waive it. Much, too, might be said about the natural love which we owe to our fellow men, who belong to the same family as we do, but there is less need to write thereon than upon what is now before our mind. Here we propose to confine our attention to spiritual love unto the brethren, the brethren of Christ.

1. *Perceive the great importance of Christian love*

We profit from the Word when we *perceive the great importance of Christian love*. Nowhere is this brought out more emphatically than in I Corinthians 13. There the Holy Spirit tells us that though a professing Christian can speak fluently and eloquently upon Divine things, and has not love, he is like metal, which, though it makes a noise when struck, is lifeless. That though he can prophesy, understand all mysteries and knowledge, and has faith which brings miracles to pass, but be lacking in love, he is spiritually a nonentity. Yea, that though he be so benevolent as to give all his worldly possessions to feed the poor, and yield his body to a martyr's death, and have not love, it profits him nothing. How high a value is here placed upon love, and how essential for me to make sure I possess it!

Said our Lord, "By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). By Christ's making it the badge of Christian discipleship, we see again the great importance of love. It is an essential test of the genuineness of our profession: we cannot love Christ unless we love His brethren, for they are all bound up in the same "bundle of life" (I Sam 25:29) with Him. Love to those whom He has redeemed is a sure evidence of spiritual and supernatural love to the Lord Jesus Himself. Where the Holy Spirit has wrought a supernatural birth, He will draw forth that nature into exercise, He will produce in the hearts and lives and conduct of the saints supernatural graces, one of which is loving each other for Christ's sake.

2. Detect the sad perversions of Christian love

We profit from the Word when we learn to *detect the sad perversions of Christian love*. As water will not rise above its own level, so the natural man is incapable of understanding, still less appreciating, that which is spiritual (I Cor 2:14). Therefore, we should not be surprised when unregenerate professors mistake human sentimentality and carnal pleasantries for spiritual love. But sad is it to see some of God's own people living on so low a plane that they confuse human amiability and affability with the queen of the Christian graces. While it is true that spiritual love is characterized by meekness and gentleness, yet is it something very different from and vastly superior to the courtesies and kindnesses of the flesh.

How many a doting father has withheld the rod from his children, under the mistaken notion that real affection for them and the chastising of them were incompatible! How many a foolish mother, who disdained all corporal punishment, has boasted that "love" rules in her home! One of the most trying experiences of the writer, in his extensive travels has been to spend a season in homes where the children had been completely spoilt. It is a wicked perversion of the word "love" to apply it to such moral laxity and parental looseness. But this same pernicious idea rules the minds of many people in other connections and relations. If a servant of God rebukes their fleshly and wordly ways, if he presses the uncompromising claims of God, he is at once charged with being "lacking in love." Oh, how terribly are multitudes deceived by Satan on this important subject!

3. Taught the true nature of Christian love

We profit from the Word when we are taught the true nature of Christian love. Christian love is a spiritual grace abiding in the souls of the saints alongside faith and hope (I Cor 13:13). It is a holy disposition wrought in them when they are regenerated (I John 5:1). It is nothing less than the love of God shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5). It is a righteous principle which seeks the highest good of others. It is the very reverse of that principle of self-love and self-seeking which is in us by nature. It is not only an affectionate regard of all who bear the image of Christ, but also a powerful desire to promote their welfare. It is not a fickle sentiment which is easily offended, but an abiding dynamic which "many waters" of cold indifference or "floods" of disapproval can neither quench nor drown (Song of Sol. 8:7). Though coming far short in degree it is the same in essence as His of whom we read, "Having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end" (John 13:1).

There is no safer and surer way of obtaining a right conception of the nature of Christian love than by making a thorough study of its perfect exemplification in and by the Lord Jesus. When we say a "thorough study," we mean taking a comprehensive survey of all that is recorded of Him in

the four Gospels, and not limiting ourselves to a few favorite passages or incidents. As this is done, we discover that His love was not only benevolent and magnanimous, thoughtful and gentle, unselfish and self-sacrificing, patient and unchanging, but that many other elements also entered into it. Love could deny an urgent request (John 11:6), rebuke His mother (John 2:4), use a whip (John 2:15), severely upbraid His doubting disciples (Luke 24:25), and denounce hypocrites (Matt 23:13-33). Love can be stern (Matt 16:23), yea, angry (Mark 3:5). Spiritual love is a holy thing: it is faithful to God: it is uncompromising toward all that is evil.

4. Discover that Christian love is a divine communication

We profit from the Word when we *discover that Christian love is a divine communication*. “We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren” (I John 3:14). “Love to the brethren is the fruit and effect of a new and supernatural birth, wrought in our souls by the Holy Spirit, as the blessed evidence of our having been chosen in Christ by the Divine Father, before the world was. To love Christ and His, and our brethren in Him, is congenial to that Divine nature He hath made us the partakers of by His Holy Spirit... This love of the brethren must be a peculiar love, such as none but the regenerate are the subjects of, and which none but they can exercise, or the apostle would not have so particularly mentioned it: it is such that those who have it not are in a state of unregeneracy: so it follows, ‘He that loveth not his brother abideth in death’” (S.E. Pierce).

Love for the brethren is far, far more than finding agreeable the society of those whose temperaments are similar to or whose views accord with my own. It pertains not to mere nature, but is a spiritual and supernatural thing. It is the heart being drawn out to those in whom I perceive something of Christ. Thus it is very much more than a party spirit: it embraces all in whom I can see the image of God’s Son. It is, therefore, loving them for Christ’s sake, for what I see of Christ in them. It is the Holy Spirit within attracting and alluring me with Christ indwelling my brethren and sisters. Thus real Christian love is not only a Divine gift, but is altogether dependent upon God for its invigoration and exercise. We need to pray daily that the Holy Spirit will call forth into action and manifestation, toward both God and His people, that love which He has shed abroad in our hearts.

6. Rightly exercise Christian love

We profit from the Word when we *rightly exercise Christian love*. This is done not by seeking to please our brethren and ingratiate ourselves in their esteem but when we truly seek their highest good. “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep His commandments” (I John 5:2). What is the real test of my personal love to God Himself? It is my keeping of His commandments (see John 14:15,21,24; 15:10,14). The genuineness and strength of my love to God are not to be measured by my words, nor by the lustiness with which I sing His praises, but by my obedience to His Word. The same principle holds good in my relations with my brethren.

“By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep His commandments.” If I am glossing over the faults of my brethren and sisters, if I am walking with them in a course of self-will and self-pleasing, then I am not “loving” them, “Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him” (Lev 19:17). Love is to be exercised in a Divine way, and never at the expense of failing to love

God; in fact, it is only when God has His proper place in my heart that spiritual love can be exercised by me toward my brethren. True spiritual love does not consist in gratifying them, but in pleasing God and helping them; and I can only help them in the path of God's commandments.

Petting and pampering each other is not brotherly love; exhorting one another to press forward in the race that is set before us, and speaking words (enforced by example of our daily walk) which will encourage them to "look off unto Jesus," would be much more helpful. Brotherly love is a holy thing, and not a fleshly sentiment or a loose indifference as to the path we are treading. God's "commandments" are expressions of His love, as well as of His authority, and to ignore them, even while seeking to be kindly affectioned one to another, is not "love" at all. The exercise of love is to be in strict conformity to the revealed will of God. We are to love "in the truth" (III John 1).

7. Taught the varied manifestations of Christian love

We profit from the Word when we are *taught the varied manifestations of Christian love*. To love our brethren and manifest the same in all kinds of ways is our bounden duty. But at no point can we do this more truly and effectually, and with less affectation and ostentation, than by having fellowship with them at the throne of grace. There are brethren and sisters in Christ in the four corners of the earth, about the details of whose trials and conflicts, temptations and sorrows, I know nothing; yet I can express my love for them, and pour out my heart before God on their behalf, by earnest supplication and intercession. In no other way can the Christian more manifest his affectionate regard toward his fellow pilgrims than by using all his interests in the Lord Jesus in their behalf, intreating His mercies and favours unto them.

"Whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth" (I John 3:17,18). Many of God's people are very poor in this world's goods. Sometimes they wonder why this is; it is a great trial unto them. One reason why the Lord permits this is that others of His saints may have their compassion drawn out and minister to their temporal needs from the abundance with which God has furnished them. Real love is intensely practical: it considers no office too mean, no task too humbling, where the sufferings of a brother can be relieved. When the Lord of love was here upon earth, He had thought for the bodily hunger of the multitude and the comfort of His disciples' feet!

But there are some of the Lord's people so poor that they have very little indeed to share with others. What, then, may they do? Why, make the spiritual concerns of all the saints their own; interest themselves on their behalf at the throne of grace. We know by our own cases and circumstances what the feelings, sorrows, complaints of other saints must be the subjects of. We know from sad experience how easy it is to give way to a spirit of discontent and murmuring. But we also know how, when we have cried unto the Lord for His quieting hand to be laid upon us, and when He has brought some precious promise to our remembrance, what peace and comfort have come to our heart. Then let us beg Him to be equally gracious to all His distressed saints. Let us seek to make their burdens our own, and weep with them that weep, as well as rejoice with them that rejoice. Thus shall we express real love for their persons in Christ by intreating their Lord and our Lord to remember them with everlasting kindness.

This is how the Lord Jesus is now manifesting His love to His saints: "He ever liveth to make intercession for them" (Heb 7:25). He makes their cause and care His own. He is intreating the Father on their behalf. None is forgotten by Him: every lone sheep is borne upon the heart of the

Good Shepherd. Thus, by expressing our love to the brethren in daily prayers for the supply of their varied needs, we are brought into fellowship with our great High Priest. Not only so, but the saints will be endeared to us thereby: our very praying for them as the beloved of God will increase our love and esteem for them as such. We cannot carry them on our hearts before the throne of grace without cherishing in our own hearts a real affection for them. The best way of overcoming a bitter spirit to a brother who has offended is to be much in prayer for him.

8. Taught the proper cultivation of Christian love

We profit from the Word when we are *taught the proper cultivation of Christian love*. *First*, recognizing at the outset that just as there is much in you (in me) which will severely try the love of the brethren, so there will be not a little in them to test our love. “Forbearing one another in love” (Eph 4:2) is a great admonition on this subject which each of us needs to lay to heart. It is surely striking to note that the very first quality of spiritual love named in I Corinthians 13 is that it “suffereth long” (v 4).

Second, the best way to cultivate any virtue or grace is to exercise it. Talking and theorizing about it avails nothing unless it be carried into action. Many are the complaints heard today about the littleness of the love which is being manifested in many places: that is all the more reason why I should seek to set a better example! Suffer not the coldness and unkindness of others to dampen your love, but “overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:21). Prayerfully ponder I Corinthians 13 at least once a week.

Third, above all see to it that your own heart basks in the light and warmth of God’s love. Like begets like. The more you are truly occupied with the unwearying, unfailing, unfathomable love of Christ to you, the more will your heart be drawn out in love to those who are His. A beautiful illustration of this is found in the fact that the particular apostle who wrote most upon brotherly love was he who leaned upon the Master’s bosom. The Lord grant all requisite grace to both reader and writer (than whom none more needs to heed them) to observe these rules, to the praise of the glory of His grace, and to the good of His beloved people.