

Love in Action

*Basic Scripture resources: Mark 2:13-17;
Luke 15:11-32; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23;
Galatians 5:25-6:5*

Loving God cannot be separated from love for neighbors. This is why Jesus specified neighbor-love as the second greatest commandment without even waiting to be asked. As 1 John 4:20, 21 says,

If some one says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also (NAS).

Neighbor-love must be agape. That is, it must follow the pattern of God's love for us. We must love all people, just as God does. This includes our family, our neighbors, our friends, and even our enemies. How can we do this? We must remember that the essence of agape is *caring* about them. We do not have to like someone (i.e., be attracted to him) in order to love him. This is the presupposition of the missionary enterprise; we *care* about people in other parts of the world, even though we have never met them.

Christian love, then, is having a genuine concern for the happiness and welfare of all people, the lovely and the unlovely alike.

Most of all we need to remember that Christian love is *active*, not passive. It cannot remain hidden in the heart. It compels us to act. It demands concrete expression. As 1 John 3:18 says, "Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth" (NAS).

In this chapter we shall consider several different ways in which we must express our love for one another.

I. Love Compels Us to Bear Burdens

One way in which loving concern finds expression is through bearing the burdens of others. "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ," says Galatians 6:2. The law of Christ, of course, is that we love one another (John 15:12).

The particular kind of burdens that Paul has in mind here is spiritual burdens, or problems of the spiritual life. This is seen in the immediately preceding verse, Galatians 6:1, which says, "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such a one in the spirit of meekness. . . ."

Such a command is difficult to obey in a society where independence and self-reliance are held in such high esteem. Because of our fierce pride we are reluctant to admit our spiritual weakness and failures to others. Anyone who tries to be helpful in this respect is accused of being nosy and is often told to mind his own business!

But the very nature of Christian love and fellowship is that we must care when a brother

or sister in Christ is having spiritual difficulty. We must not ignore him, or gossip about him, or condemn him, or ridicule him, or scorn him. We should want to give him strength and encouragement in fighting and striving against sin, and we should gently rebuke him for his sins and lovingly lead him to repentance.

James 5:19, 20 says, "Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins."

Sometimes this may be very difficult, and we may not like to do it. But love compels such burdenbearing. Romans 15:1, 2 exhorts, "We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good to edification."

The church must be like a stone arch, with each Christian helping to support all the others, and Christ the keystone upholding all.

II. Love Compels Us to Forgive

The real test of love is when someone sins against us. We may be very generous and sympathetic toward one whose sin does not cause us harm. But how do we react when we personally have been slandered or mistreated or cheated?

If we can respond in such a situation not by seeking to get even but with a spirit of forgiveness, then we know that we love our neighbors. For as we know, neighbor-love must include not only our friends and brethren, but also our enemies (Matthew 5:44).

The Prodigal's Father

In the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) Jesus shows how love is expressed in forgiveness in the person of the prodigal's father.

The prodigal son had indeed sinned grievously against his father. He had spurned his father's love, abandoned his responsibility on his father's farm, wasted his portion of the father's estate, scorned his father's moral teaching, and exhibited a general disrespect for his patient parent.

But how does the father respond to his son's pitiful, repentant request to be received back into just the outer fringes of the household? He does nothing less than restore him to the full rights and privileges of sonship, giving him gifts and calling for festive rejoicing. He does not accuse or condemn; he does not even mention his son's sins. Because he loves, he forgives.

The Heavenly Father

The father in this parable, of course, represents our heavenly Father, who is the supreme example of the kind of love that compels one to forgive. As in the parable, His love and forgiveness are not just empty words but are demonstrated by His actions. He has done everything in His power to make forgiveness a reality for each of us. "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

We must respond in the same way to our enemies, to those who have sinned against us. We must forgive them and let them know that we have forgiven them. Concerning such a one who has sinned against the whole church, Paul says that we must "forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him" (2 Corinthians 2:7, 8).

III. Love Compels Us to Seek the Lost

The most authentic expression of love is evangelism. If we really care about the welfare of others, our greatest concern will be for their eternal destiny. There is something artificial about a love that acts to relieve the physical discomforts of this life for others, and yet does nothing to save them from the eternal torments of hell.

In our day two themes are constantly being emphasized: love (e.g., "make love, not war"), and "doing your own thing." But these two things are contradictory. If we really love one another, we must sacrifice "doing our own thing" (i.e., doing what pleases us) in order to reach the lost where they are.

Jesus Sought Sinners

The greatest example of such a self-denying love is, of course, Jesus Christ. His love for sinners led Him to do whatever He could to bring them to repentance. He himself was completely sinless and hated sin with a holy passion. Yet He did not shun sinners and try to avoid contact with them. In fact, He associated with them whenever He could. He ate and drank with those who were considered outcasts by the self-righteous "religious" people of His time (Mark 2:13-17).

Jesus did not do this because He enjoyed the company of sinners and sought fellowship with them. He did have godly friends, such as Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha; and He occasionally visited with them and had fellowship with them. But more often than not He sacrificed pleasant hours with them in order to seek the lost. As He said, "They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Mark 2:17).

All Things to All Men

The apostle Paul has also shown us how real love seeks the lost. He did not wait for people to come to him; he went to them. He identified with their situation as much as possible (without compromising his Christian principles, of course) in order to get next to their hearts. Paul describes his self-denying love for us in 1 Corinthians 9:19-22. Here he says,

For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; to them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

Love does not do that which merely is convenient. Until we have gone out of our way to call sinners to repentance, until we have made ourselves servants to all in order to win some, we cannot claim to love.