

This
Thing
Called
Love



LARRY DEASON

One Step Closer to Jesus Series

About the Author

Larry Deason has been proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ for 40 years. He has served the Body of Christ as deacon, elder, preacher, missionary, counselor, teacher and writer.

Larry's seminars have been presented throughout the Northeastern United States, Texas, California and Florida. He has also presented seminars in Australia, New Zealand, Tonga and the Fiji Islands.

While doing mission work in New Zealand Larry co-founded and taught for four years at the *Tauranga Two-Year Bible School*. He also co-founded and directed the *Northeast School of Biblical Studies* where he taught for 12 years. He also consulted in the establishing of the *South Pacific Bible College* in New Zealand. Larry has been a guest lecturer each year for the past 23 years at the South Pacific Bible College.

Larry Deason has written more than 20 booklets, books and in-depth study guides. The books have been distributed in all the states in the USA and in more than 70 nations worldwide including China, Eastern Europe, and Russia.

Larry and his wife Helen have been married for 50 years. They have two daughters, five grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Larry Deason continues to do mission work, present his seminars and distribute his books worldwide.

To
Jesus Christ
My Personal
Lord and Savior,
Who is the
Focus of my life.

My orientation in His Amazing Grace and
His Love my motivation in loving all others.

Other Books

by

Larry Deason

The Eternal Purpose and Plan of God:

The Meaning and Purpose of Life

The Love of Christ in the Local Congregation:

Sharing Together in the Life and Labor of Christ

That You May Have Life:

Gospel of John

The Righteousness of God:

Romans

Set Free? Stay Free!

(The Fallacy and Failure of Legalism)

This Thing Called Love

Reality or Fantasy?

*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever*

Psalm 107:1

*But God demonstrates
his own love for us in this:
While we were still sinners,
Christ died for us.*

Romans 5:8

*This is how we know what love is:
Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.
And we ought to lay down our lives
for our brothers.*

1 John 3:16

“...the real thing—God’s love”

False Concepts of Love

People are failing to find the Way of Life because they do not understand the most basic aspects of love. Consider these four false ideas about love that are currently popular.

First, the emphasis today is on “how to be loved” rather than on “how to be loving.” A glance at the popular titles in the self-improvement section of your local bookstore reveals the modern preoccupation with trying to become lovable by a myriad of techniques and gimmicks. It is easy to become infected with the false idea that we become lovable by attaining vocational success, material wealth, and social prestige. Especially ensnaring is the obsession with making ourselves *attractive*. Many are paying dearly for trying to keep up with faddish tastes and trends in clothing and cosmetics. Physical health and financial soundness are being sacrificed on the altar of “The God of Good Looks.”

Of course, there is nothing wrong with making ourselves attractive; the problem occurs when our physical appearance becomes the *basis* of our self-esteem, rather than a *reflection* of it. And yet, we do all kinds of things to make ourselves “look good” in order to be liked and accepted. We cultivate our bodies, our dress, our sex appeal, our manners. We

develop our conversation to make it as broad and as interesting as possible, so that we can “win friends and influence people.” As long as this wrong emphasis persists, we will understand nothing about the real nature of love and will therefore fail to find meaning in life.

A second myth about love is that its real challenge is in finding the right lover or love object. The underlying assumption is that loving is easy; the trick is to be sure to direct one’s love toward a sufficiently lovable object. While the first misconception kept us preoccupied with our own shortcomings (both real and imaginary), this one causes us to blame others for our failure to love. The headlines on the supermarket tabloids about this or that celebrity finding “exciting new love” seem to reduce this thing called love to a matter of shopping. Many blindly follow this pathetic approach to love: shopping from place to place in quest of the perfect one to love or to be loved by.

Third is that peculiar notion that people “fall in love.” Music has strongly influenced our thinking here. I could “date” myself by recalling the lyrics to musical standards of the past few decades, but the reader is probably familiar enough with songs about chance encounters of two strangers passing like ships in the night. Their eyes meet, and suddenly they are caught up in a magic moment. The

proverbial birds sing; the traditional bells ring. They have, as the saying goes, “fallen in love.”

I am truly in sympathy with those who desire to retain an element of romance any mystery in our words. Poetry is, after all, one of the evidences that many is uniquely created in the image of God. But our speech often reveals and reinforces deeply held beliefs that we have never deliberately examined.

What poets and romantics mean by “falling in love” is clear enough: they mean that love, like an accidental tumble, is something that happens to us by chance, in an unguarded moment. It is elusive, unpredictable and yes, even victimizing. No wonder those who subscribe to such a view of love seem to stumble from one disastrous relationship to another, for “falling” is a dangerous, often harmful, experience.

Until we understand that love is not some power beyond the control of our wills, we will undoubtedly keep “falling in love again”—and again, and again, and again. One can fall out of a chair, through a window, or into a hole; but one does not “fall in love”—not even metaphorically. If we think so, it is because we have not thought deeply enough about the idea. Sleep and temptation are things into which we may fall. Love is not.

A final example of erroneous thinking about love is the belief that “nothing is easier than loving.” This attitude about love is reflected in clichés about “doing what comes naturally,” and “learning about the birds and bees.” This “natural” thing, which is being billed as the simplest of human endeavors, is not love at all—at least, not in any proper sense of the word.

Everyone knows that the most natural, effortless, and agreeable function of human nature is the enjoyment of experiences that feel good. Insofar as such experiences often involve communication and interaction with other people, it is easy to confuse pleasurable social contact with love. But as for the idea that loving is a simple pastime, the evidence of all human history is against it. Eric Fromm wrote, “Is there any activity or enterprise which is started with such great expectations and tremendous hopes, and yet fails so regularly, as this thing called love?”

A behavioral scientist who specializes in the field of human sexuality recently admitted in a television interview that man’s best efforts have failed to unlock the secret of love. He said, “After 50 years of work as a researcher in sex, [I believe that] we have come to know everything about physical sex, but we don’t know much about love. This is the problem.”

Some know more than others about this thing called love, but they did not learn it by their own ingenuity. They learned it by listening to and imitating One who knows more about love than any of us, for He is the personification of love. For us human beings and for our salvation, He became the physical embodiment of love. Love is not discovered through scientific research; it is bestowed by gracious revelation. It is not a human achievement, but a divine gift. It is not mined out of the earth: it descends out of heaven. It is not made with hands: it can only be received by empty hands. *All sound thinking about love must begin with God:*

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed His love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.¹

The Truth About Love

Love is not “one of the virtues of Christianity.” “Real” love is “real” Christianity and “real” Christianity is love. We should not think of love as one

of the most important things that Christians have to do; rather, this *one* thing is the Christian's "whole" business.² He has no other concern.

The spectrum of love's expressions may be so broad and multi-colored that our definition of Christianity itself must stretch beyond the boundaries of Bible classes and church buildings. Narrow ideas about Christianity usually co-exist with shallow thinking about love; deep, genuine Christianity thrives on deep love. That is why the Good News about Israel's Messiah, Jesus Christ, couldn't remain confined within the old wineskins. It is a gospel of love that is too big to be held within any single nation or culture.

*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. If 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. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.*³

*We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death.*⁴

Our problems—as individuals, families, communities, and nations—are overwhelming, both in nature and in number. But if God has indeed spoken in Christ and Bible, we have only one basic problem: selfishness. “All we like sheep have gone astray,” each disregarding the voice of the Shepherd and oblivious to his fellow sheep. Had we never left the Shepherd, we never would have strayed from the flock. If we will hear His call of love, He will lead us back, not only to Himself, but also to the other sheep of His pasture.

The remedy for our social ills, then, depends on the solution of our spiritual dilemma. The Good News is that in Christ God has reconciled us to Himself and to one another.⁵ We must open our hearts to this proffered divine love, both *initially* (when we obey the gospel of Christ), and *continually* (as we apply it by faith to our personal problems and in our relationships).

God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.⁶

But the fruit of the Spirit is love...Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.⁷

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage

and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore...⁸

The Mentality and Mindset of Love

The Bible clearly teaches that God's love is mediated to us by His Holy Spirit, as we open our inner selves to the Good News concerning His Son. This teaching of God's Spirit, once internalized in our hearts, can begin to progressively solve the problems and mend the broken relationships caused by our selfishness. But, as with any worthwhile endeavor, this thing called love is far easier to talk about than it is to do.

The grip of selfishness is so strong in our hearts that we must begin to decisively rejecting it as a life principle. We cannot pick up the cross of Christ if our hands are already full of selfish pursuits and priorities. Surely, we were not hoping to receive such a precious gift as divine love without picking up the cross, were we? For there is no real love except that which is offered at the cross. *The way of love is the way of the cross.*"

Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and

take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.”⁹

The world at large has rejected Christ and His cross, and calls upon each one of us do the same. Like shady street vendors at some vanity fair, the spiritual forces of wickedness are filling the world with cheap, shoddy lifestyles that will fall apart under the pressure of life and death. The merchandise often looks very real and most attractive: self-improvement psychology, social and economic programs, political platforms, religious reforms, and medical and technological advances.

Some of these commodities can be real blessings, and many are compatible (in theory, at least) with Christianity. *But where is the cross in all of this?* Where is the divine mandate to renounce self as the center of life, and top put in its place Christ’s steadfast determination to do the will of God, no matter what the cost?

There is no use complaining that we haven’t the personal means to do what God commands. Our Forerunner removed that objection by emptying Himself of all divine privileges to face human trials and temptations with the same resources that God supplies to us: the power of prayer, the comforting

presence of the Holy Spirit, and the sure guidance of Holy Scripture.¹⁰ Our failure to love is not due to inadequate resources, but to a refusal to choose the way of love once and for all, trusting God moment by moment to provide the means:

“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” He replied, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.”¹¹

There is only one love worthy of the name, and that love begins with a firm rejection of all “self-ism.” God has promised to supply the means as we, in faith, give Him our wills. We would do well to heed the warning against the world’s alluring (but ultimately dead-end) self-centered philosophy of life:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what

*he has and does—comes not from the Father, but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.*¹²

Misdirected Lifestyles—That is, “Lovestyles”

The central issue in being human, in being uniquely created in the image of God, is each person’s accountability before the Creator to choose an approach to living in His world. We must choose a working philosophy of life. No person is exempt from this God-given responsibility. Every individual must first adopt a way of looking at his or her life in this world, and then live one’s life in a manner consistent with that worldview.

Of the two parts of this task, the first by far is the most crucial: once we have decided how to *view* our lives in this world, it is almost inevitable that we will (in general) *behave* accordingly. But if we constantly fail to practice what we have perceived to be right, we are probably either deliberate hypocrites, or self-deluded about our real beliefs.

Obviously, some sincere believers occasionally act “out of character,” who may even repeatedly stumble into unbelieving behavior because of spiritual immaturity, weakness, or habitual response to certain stimuli. But Jesus was not addressing such

cases when He taught about the relationship between a person's beliefs and his behavior, his perception and his practice:

*“The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!”*¹³

This matter of adopting a worldview is too important to be left to “chance”; our lifestyle and eternal destiny depend on it! Yet, most people seem content to let circumstances and environment determine their view of life. They uncritically absorb the attitudes and ethics that infiltrate their minds (often on a subconscious level) from such sources as family tradition, television and other media, their social and economic peers, and their educational institutions.

Most people pursue a way of life that is chiefly concerned with fame, fun, pleasure, and power. Some opt for the “passive” point of view. I’m referring to those who view life indifferently—they are unconcerned about living life to the fullest. They are apathetic. Some reach a point where they simply “drop out of life”; they merely exist.

These lifestyles are the product of habit. They have become “ways of life” because of previous desires, interests, and pursuits. One has unthinkingly developed certain patterns of living, and these have finally become a lifestyle.

On the other hand, have you ever seriously considered the kind of life pursued by the Son of God when He lived among men? His way of life can be summarized by this brief statement: “He pleased not Himself.”¹⁴ When Jesus was tempted to live selfishly,¹⁵ He virtually responded, “No, I’ll not live for selfish pleasure; I’ll not live for selfish recognition; I’ll not live my life irresponsibly. No! I’ll not live my life without God...without meaning...without love!”

The only life worth living is based upon a principle that produces and promotes life, and the only thing that brings authentic life is a genuine love. e.e. cummings wrote, “Unless you love someone, nothing else makes any sense.” Nothing so demonstrates our selfishness as a continuous failure to express love!

Why should the way of love, God’s love, become my lifestyle? Because God’s love is the only way to true meaning, purpose, joy, and fulfillment. Without it, we remain confused, frustrated, and cheated—aimlessly wandering,

never having anything except superficial relationships and never knowing the satisfaction this love brings!

As a follower of God, I want to walk in love. My Father is love and I want to be like my Father. My Lord responded to the love of the Father by loving as a way of life.

What “Walking in Love” Is

In following Jesus, we are following the way of love, the “most excellent way,” of which He Himself is the perfect embodiment.¹⁶ In Jesus Christ, the principle has become a Person; the Word has become flesh. It is past time to finish our abstract conjectures about love. Jesus takes the guesswork out of the study of this subject. It is now a matter of observation, not speculation. The matter is no longer restricted to the realm of the professional theologian, philosopher, or psychologist.

Love is More Than a Feeling

Away with our prejudices and preconceptions about this thing called love—they are preventing us from seeing the truth that renders such guesswork an unnecessary hazard. It is folly to continue along a route which is only one’s best guess, when an absolutely reliable map is readily available.

We need not make the legalistic mistake of believing that the Way is merely a matter of consulting a rule book; it is rather a matter of knowing and following a living Person by means of a written revelation. There is a place for personal feelings and an experiential relationship in Christianity. But the way of love is more than a feeling. It must begin with an informed decision, a conscious commitment to follow this living Person.

The love to which Jesus calls us is the love which He embodied. In the New Testament, this love is called *agape* (noun form) and *agapeo* (verb form). Since it is an attitude or quality of character which is commanded of us by the Lord Jesus Christ and enjoined upon God's people throughout the entire biblical revelation, *agape* is obviously not primarily a matter of emotional involvement. Indeed, it is to be practiced even toward those who count themselves among our enemies, toward whom we may feel nothing positive whatever.¹⁷ The concept of intimate endearment or personal fondness is covered by another Greek root with which we are not presently concerned. We must think here of the divine love that was revealed by the Father in sending the Son, and by the Son, in submitting to the Father for our salvation.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”¹⁸

*You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*¹⁹

This is a love that deliberately chooses to be committed to the highest good, the ultimate well-being, of its object. It is not concerned with the “worthiness” of the beloved, nor the possible rejection of the love offered. It is absolutely forgetful of superior status of the one who is offering this undeserved kindness.

Agape is the natural companion and generator of *charis* (grace). Its active cause lies in the nature of its giver, not its recipient, and its ultimate and only source is God. God decided; God chose; God committed; God gave; God loved! Love, pure and personal and infinite, has poured itself out from the highest height of heaven, down into the lower parts of the earth, where the broken body of Christ lay until the third day, on which He arose!

But consider the incarnate Son of God, whom we know as Jesus of Nazareth, in Gethsemane on the night He was betrayed:

He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.²⁰

The entire New Testament (especially the Epistle to the Hebrews) repeatedly emphasizes the true humanity of Jesus. The best way to understand what Jesus experienced in Gethsemane that night is to ask oneself: "How would I have felt, knowing that I was about to be unjustly tried and condemned, flogged and manhandled, reviled and ridiculed, and finally tortured to death by crucifixion?"

As William Barclay noted, no one wants to die; no one wants to die at only 33 years of age; and no one wants to die by slow torture. Jesus, in His "loud cries and tears" that night, was saying to His heavenly Father, "I don't want to go through with this! Emotionally, I am not up to it. Isn't there some other way, Father? I don't feel like going through this. Nevertheless..."

The Great "Nevertheless"

How I thank God for that great "nevertheless"! By means of it, Jesus Christ was saved from the rule

of His emotions at that critical moment, when the salvation of all believers hung in the balance. Jesus demonstrated in His own life that which He calls each of us to learn and demonstrate in our lives: the decision, the commitment, the “choice” to love, no matter what the external circumstances or the internal emotion.

This “agape” love is foundational in all covenant relationships, because the commitment of the *will* acts as a “backup” support when emotional affection fails. Husbands and wives, let’s admit it: we do not always maintain those same feelings of joy, warmth, and oneness that we had when we took those sacred vows of marriage. A bad day at the office, a particularly trying day at home with the kids, and friction occurs. Tension rises, emotions become strained nearly to the breaking point. Both partners are suffering; both are really crying out, “Meet my needs!” What will see us through those moments when our emotions would lead us to damage or even destroy the relationship of oneness with our spouse? It is this thing called love! “Father, I am not happy in this relationship at this time. If you are willing, I think I’ll ‘pass’ on this one, and try another cup instead.” But God has clearly said that He is far from willing that people should tear apart that which He has joined together. Since love is primarily a matter of commitment, and not emotion, we are called at such

times to say to God, “Nevertheless, not my will, but Yours be done.” I will continue to love in spite of my feelings.

Loving the Unlovable Unconditionally

In Christ, God has taught us the truth about love, and it is the truth about Himself: Love loves the unlovable and the unlovely, unconditionally. Love is committed, without qualification or exception, to the *ultimate* (and nothing less than the ultimate) happiness, well-being, peace, joy, help, service, stability, and growth of the loved one(s). God may disapprove, may detest with His entire being, certain attitudes and actions of His human creatures. His own loving nature constrains Him to *oppose* ungodliness (lovelessness) whenever it establishes a stronghold, to *forbid* it to continue its destructive work unchecked, and to clearly *reveal* His wrath from heaven against it. But no human being has ever lived, nor ever will, for whom love, unlimited and unconditional, has ever failed in the heart of God.

Truly, “love never fails.” It is we who fail. Love is not measured by degrees, as if God had more for some than for others. Can God be limited or parcelled out, like dessert servings? Love’s only limitations are in the capacities of our own hearts, first to freely receive, and then to freely give. As our Lord said to Simon the Pharisee regarding a certain sinful woman:

“Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.”²¹

I personally have chosen to commit myself to the way of love. Of course, I don't practice it flawlessly at all times. My best efforts undoubtedly fall far short of perfection. My commitment, however, is fixed. I am walking in the way of love. If in a moment of pressure or distress, I speak harshly or say unkind things, I will acknowledge my error and renounce it. I will continue to love you, no matter what the external circumstances or the internal feelings might be. There will always be love here for you, for in Jesus Christ I have tapped into a bottomless ocean of love.

There is an old con artist's trick in which a piece of nearly invisible string is attached to a coin or bank note. When the currency has changed hands in a purchase, the swindler pulls the string at an opportune moment and the money returns to its place in his “bag of tricks.”

This game is often played for much higher stakes, however. I might extend a hand of loving concern toward a fellow human being (my spouse, my child, my brother, sister, or neighbor). I am holding out my love to another person, but I find my other hand reaching out also—not to give, but to receive in like

manner. I will let go of my love for you, *if* you will reciprocate. I have a string attached to my “love”; it is not unconditional. This is not love. It is a cheap counterfeit. The love of God calls us to let go of our love, leave it in the other person’s hand, and let it work for God. We are not to seek love in return.

“If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”²²

If we will faithfully invest in others the love which the Lord entrusts to us, we need not worry about the return. It is *His* love, to be spent on *His* purposes. And yet, as one who has committed himself to this way, I know by experience that, however much we offer to others of the riches of God’s love, forgetful of the outcome for ourselves, much more is reaped than sown.

God knows I am not boasting, except in the Lord: I have, in my lifetime, known and dearly loved three individual who, on separate occasions, have freely and spontaneously confided a willingness to lay down their lives for me. I did not solicit such a confession; I never manipulated or dressed up anyone

to love me in this manner. I only committed myself, by the mercy and grace of God who loves me, to love even the unlovely, unconditionally.

Loving “Even as Christ” Loved

The gospel of Christ teaches us that, as surely as sin leads to death, love leads to everlasting life. Therefore, when we think of a life of selfless love as “a big risk,” we are forgetting the meaning of the Christian faith. *Jesus* took the “big risk,” though He never doubted the eventual outcome. We are not called to blaze the trail, but to follow it faithfully. The crucial question is, do I trust my Guide? This question clarifies the relationship between “faith” and “love” in Christianity. If we *believe* in “Love” (as revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ), we will *practice* “love.”

*The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*²³

*But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.*²⁴

*If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.*²⁵

Jesus embodied the kingdom (rule) of God, not only by miraculously breaking Satan's grip on human minds and bodies, but by constantly sowing love everywhere He went.²⁶ The Servant has poured out His life unto death for the triumph of the Kingdom. As He left His proper place at the head of the paschal feast, stripped off His outer garments, and washed His disciples' feet, He vividly illustrated His descent from heaven, the laying aside of His divine glory to assume the work of Yahweh's Servant.²⁷ And for what prize did Deity descent from the throne of the universe to be born of a poor Jewish virgin? What treasure could possibly warrant such humiliation?

The answer is so shocking that it has proven too scandalous for many to believe. Those who do believe it usually confess it to be the most wonderful facet in the entire mystery of divine love: He did it all for you and me! He did it so you and I could clearly see and choose the way of love, the way of healing and restoring that which has been broken by sin.

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God...Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself

*up for her...*²⁸

Relational Love

The love of God came into this world to “seek and save that which was lost”—to reconcile rebellious human beings back to God. The purpose of God among men concerns *relationships*. Some human actions and attitudes are reflective of those of God in Christ, and always result in healing, restoring, nourishing, and extending personal relationships according to God’s purpose. Other human actions and attitudes are unlike the heart of God revealed in Christ. These selfish characteristics tear down and destroy the very relationships that Christ came to build up among human beings.

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails...*²⁹

If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died...We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the

*weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself...Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.*³⁰

Christ is the standard, in action and attitude. Love, acceptance, forbearance, encouragement, and service for others—especially for brothers and sisters in Christ—are enjoined on Christians as part of Christ’s light and easy yoke. But without reliance on the grace of God and prayerful submission to Christ’s indwelling Spirit, it would indeed be a yoke too heavy to bear. It is fellowship with God in Christ that transforms the most burdensome labor into a joyful walk of discipleship.

As Christ leads, we follow. We learn the steps from Him: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness...your brother for whom Christ died...accept one another as Christ accepted you...” What begins as clumsy, faltering imitation becomes natural, flowing, graceful movement—with much practice. It is a heavenly walk that never ends:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow man has fulfilled the

*law.*³¹

Earlier in this context, Christ's apostle had commanded that Christians pay everyone whatever was due. A Christian can and should pay in full whatever debts he or she incurs: taxes, revenues, honor, and respect should be rendered to governing authorities, as the Lord Himself had taught.³²

It is possible and desirable to fully meet financial and fiscal obligations. You can receive a "paid in full" receipt upon completion of property payments or tax installments. But the obligation to love is inexhaustible; it is an eternally outstanding responsibility to be carried out with a willing heart.

Love: Central and Supreme

I have written about "this thing called love" with a general readership in mind. But now I must single out the disciple of Christ: I urge you, I admonish you, I beg you to seek this thing called love as the most crucial and important value in life. Sell all you have to possess it and develop it. Count everything else rubbish in order to gain it and grow in it. Don't be sidetracked by any other emphasis, no matter how apparently noble or lofty.

Love is the most excellent way, because God is love. Let us admonish one another to keep love central and supreme in our thinking and in our living. Errors

in certain points of doctrinal theology will separate us from certain portions of truth, but if we miss these things called love, we will be eternally separated from Truth Himself. If you settle for less than love, you are settling for less than God Himself.

I must admonish parents: do not sin against your children by offering them less than unconditionally love. Don't give them the idea that love is something they must "deserve" or "earn"; that, unless they measure up, or unless they never fail in a moment of weakness, you will not continue to love them.

God has never dealt in this way with any of His children. His love is steadfast. God is always ready to run toward even the most wayward penitent who wants to come home. Only false love holds itself aloof and says, "I will not love you as you are. You must *buy* me by becoming what I want you to be. Then you can have me." This is not love; it is prostitution. If you need to understand more about the difference between God's love and prostitution, read the biblical book of Hosea. It was written for the very purpose of teaching this distinction to God's people.

A Family Affair: Participating Love

Divine love is a "family affair." It originates from eternity in the relationships that created and sustain all things: the mutual love and communication and

purpose existing among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. From all eternity, the Son has lovingly submitted Himself to the creative and redemptive purpose of the Father.³³ From beyond the beginning of time, the Father has been pleased to center all things in His Son, to place all fullness in Him, to give all things to Him.³⁴ The eternal Spirit of God has ever participated in the loving interaction between the Father and the Son, and has mediated this divine love to mankind throughout history.³⁵

By its very nature, love has always been expressed in the mutual submission, obedience, and joint participation that we describe as “fellowship” or “community.” In Christ, God brought His love down from heaven into the arena of human history. This was done primarily for our salvation, but also (and, in a way, inseparably) for our instruction:

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.”³⁶

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love...My command is this: Love each other as I have

loved you."³⁷

In the case of the eternal Godhead, proper community relationships were maintained (and mankind's broken relationships restored) by obedient submission: the Son to the Father, the disciples to the Son.

Christ's perfect obedience until death won us a restored place in the family of God. He calls us now to imitate the "family pattern" in our human relationships. Having failed to render *perfect* obedience to God, we can yet render *real* obedience, because Christ's love has set us free from the condemnation of sin and has shown us the meaning of fellowship with God.

But, as always, God will not treat us as less than human—not even to save us from sin and death. He has done all He possibly can to restore us to fellowship with Himself, but friendship must be freely accepted; love cannot be programmed or coerced. Will we choose to respond to God's love, even from this moment on, in all of the relationships He has entrusted to us?

We who are husbands, wives, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, friends, neighbors, even (regrettably) enemies: will we choose to participate in the divine nature by activating God's love in each of these relationships? In the home circle, in the

classroom, the office, the local congregation: there is a solution for all the heartache, disillusionment, and discouragement. There is a way out of the pain of broken promises, shattered covenants, betrayals, and backstabbing. It is this way of love. There is no other way out.

How many persons are in your family? Only two, you say? Two plus love always equal one. Have you more than two at home? Are there 500 or more in your local church? No matter. Love can bind any number of people together in unity and cause them to live cooperatively in peace.

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace...to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it...to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ...From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.³⁸

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord...Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church...In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself...just as Christ does the church—for we are members of His body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.³⁹

The love of God in Christ brings oneness into human relationships. It can transform a bickering pack of self-proclaimed “spiritual superstars” (such as the first Corinthian epistle reflects) into the beautiful, spiritual unity described in the Epistle to the Ephesians. It can make the “one flesh” of marriage mean infinitely more than the mere physical joining of two bodies in sexual intercourse. It is more than physical; it is most importantly spiritual.

Where love reigns, division and divorce are nonexistent. Where there is love, there will be a visible, beautiful (though not flawless) unity which will

commend the gospel of God's redeeming love to a blind, sinful, and sick world. Jesus prayed that God's "extended family in Christ" would live in a unity that would confirm the truth of the apostles' message to the world at large:

*"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that they world may believe that you have sent me."*⁴⁰

The Christ-rejecting world is finding it more and more difficult to avoid the conclusion that lovelessness means lifelessness. The evidence is piling up: broken trusts, broken homes, broken people. Love—healing, restoring, reconciling love—is needed.

What does "life" mean to you? If you find no real meaning in it, I know that you have not realized *love* in your life. And I affirm, in the name of God, who cannot lie, that if you will open your heart to the reality of God's love, you will find yourself ready, willing, and able to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. You will come to know and love yourself with an overflowing love that will spill out into every relationship in your

life. You will enter a lifestyle of joy beyond your natural imagination, and you will find inexhaustible spiritual resources to deal with life's obstacles and troubles.

You may have noticed a tendency throughout this chapter to vacillate between the discussion of “this thing called love” and the consideration of the personal God who *is* love. I have tried to be as straightforward as possible in presenting the subject, but I confess my inability to totally separate this *thing* (quality, attribute) called “love” from the One who absolutely personifies it, and who embodied it among us.

I leave you, therefore, with this final appeal: For the sake of your own life, choose the will of God; choose the way of life; commit yourself to this thing called love; the real thing—God's love.

Scripture Index

(Passages quoted in the text are in boldface type.)

Isa. 42:1-4

Isa. 49:1-6

Isa. 50:4-9

Isa. 52:13-53:12

Isa. 61:1-4

Matt. 4:1ff

Matt. 5:46-48

Matt. 6:22-23

Matt. 11:25-27.....

Matt. 12:20.....

Mat6t. 12:22-30.....

Matt. 12:33-37.....

Matt. 17:1-9.....

Matt. 22:34-40.....

Matt. 25:31-46.....

Matt. 28:18-20.....

Mark 12:13-17

Luke 4:1-13

Luke 7:47

Luke 9:23

Luke 17:3-6.....

Luke 22:41-44.....

John 1:1	
John 1:1-5.....	
John 1:10-14.....	
John 1:16-18.....	
John 1:14.....	
John 1:18.....	
John 3:16.....	
John 3:31-36.....	
John 5:17-30.....	
John 5:18-30.....	
John 6:35-39.....	
John 6:44-59.....	
John 7:14-18.....	
John 7:28-29.....	
John 7:37-39.....	
John 8:12.....	
John 8:19.....	
John 8:23.....	
John 8:25-29.....	
John 8:28-29.....	
John 8:42-59.....	
John 10:14-18.....	
John 10:22.....	
John 10:30-38.....	
John 10:38.....	
John 12:41.....	
John 12:44-50.....	
John 13:1-3.....	
John 13:1-17.....	
John 13:34-35, 78, 93.....	

John 14:1-10.....
John 14:5-11.....
John 14:15-26.....
John 14:22-24.....
John 14:28-31.....
John 15:9-10

John 15:12.....
John 15:26-27.....
John 16:5-15.....
John 17:1-5.....
John 17:1-26.....
John 17:10.....
John 17:20-21

John 17:20-26.....
John 20:24-31.....

Acts 10:38

Rom. 5:5

Rom. 5:6-8.....

Rom. 5:6-11

Rom. 8:3-4

Rom 8:28-30

Rom. 13:6-7

Rom. 13:8.....

Rom. 13:8-10

Rom. 14:15.....

Rom. 15:1-3.....

Rom. 15:3.....

Rom. 15:7

1 Cor. 8:1-13
1 Cor. 13:1-3.....
1 Cor. 13:4-8.....
1 Cor. 16:14.....

2 Cor. 5:14-21
2 Cor. 8:9.....

Gal. 5:6.....
Gal. 5:13-26
Gal. 5:14.....
Gal. 5:22.....
Gal. 5:25.....

Eph. 1:3-10.....
Eph. 1:11-14.....
Eph. 2:11-18.....
Eph. 4:1-3.....
Eph. 4:7
Eph. 4:12-13.....
Eph. 4:16
Eph. 4:30-5:1
Eph. 5:1-2.....
Eph. 5:21-22.....
Eph. 5:25
Eph. 5:28-33.....

Phil. 2:1-5.....
Phil. 2:5-8.....
Phil. 2:5-11

Col. 1:15-20	
Col. 1:19-23	
Heb. 2:5-13	
Heb. 2:9-18	
Heb. 2:17-18	
Heb. 4:15.....	
Heb. 4:15-16	
Heb. 9:14.....	
Heb. 10:5-7	
James 2:18.....	
1 Peter 1:1-2.....	
1 Peter 1:10-12.....	
1 Peter 1:18-21	
1 John 1:1-5.....	
1 John 2:3-10.....	
1 John 2:9-11.....	
1 John 2:9-11.....	
1 John 2:15-17	
1 John 2:23	
1 John 3:8.....	
1 John 3:10-11.....	
1 John 3:11	
1 John 3:14.....	
1 John 3:16-20.....	
1 John 3:17-18	
1 John 3:23	

1 John 3:23-24.....
1 John 4:7-10
1 John 4:7-12.....
1 John 4:16-21.....
1 John 4:21

1 John 5:1-2.....
1 John 5:2-3.....
1 John 5:20-21.....

2 John 9.....

Rev. 5:1-13.....

Notes

¹John 4:7-10.

²The Christian's business is to do the will of God, which is entirely fulfilled in the commandment of love. (See Matt. 22:34-40; Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14; 1 John 2:3-10; 3:11, 23-24; 4:21; 5:2-3; compare John 13:34-35; 15:12).

³1 Cor. 13:1-3.

⁴1 John 3:14. This entire First Epistle of John is marked by a strong insistence on practical demonstration of love toward fellow believers. This was John's response to certain early agnostic-like teachers who apparently believed themselves to be "above" ordinary Christian morality (compare 1 John 2:9-11; 3:10-11, 16-20, 23; 4:7-11, 16-21; 5:1-2).

⁵See Rom. 5:6-11; 2 Cor. 5:14-21; Eph. 2:11-18; Col. 1:19-23..

⁶Rom. 5:5.

⁷Gal. 5:22, 25.

⁸Eph. 4:30-5:1.

⁹Luke 9:23.

¹⁰See Phil. 2:5-8 and compare Heb. 2:17-18; 4:15-16.

¹¹Luke 17:3-6.

¹²1 John 2:15-17.

¹³Matt. 6:22-23. Jesus makes a similar point in Matt. 23:33-37.

¹⁴See Rom. 15:3.

¹⁵Matt. 4:1ff. See the exposition of Luke 4:1-13 by John Powell (*Unconditional Love* [Niles, Il.: Argus Comm., 1978], pp. 16-18).

¹⁶John 1:1, 14, 18. See also John 3:31-36; 5:17-30; 6:44-59; 7:28-29; 8:12, 19, 23, 28-29, 42-59; 10:30-38; 12:41, 44-50; 13:1-3; 14:5-11; 17:1-26; 20:24-31; 1 John 1:1-5; 2:23; 4:7-12; 5:20-21; 2 John 9.

¹⁷See 2 Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2:5-8; Rom. 8:3-4; Heb. 2:9-18; 4:15.

¹⁸John 3:16.

¹⁹Rom. 5:6-8.

²⁰Luke 22:41-44.

²¹Luke 7:47.

²²Matt. 5:46-48.

²³Gal. 5-6.

²⁴James 2:18. James specifically discusses the “works” that come from “faith.”

²⁵1 John 3:17-18. Compare Matt. 25:31-46.

²⁶See Acts 10:38 and compare Matt. 12:22-30; 1 John 3:8.

²⁷See John 13:1-17 and compare Phil 2:5-11 and the so-called “Servant Songs” of Isaiah (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12) as well as Isa. 61:1-4.

²⁸Eph. 5:1-2, 25. Compare also Matt. 12:20; John 13:34-35; Phil. 2:1-5.

²⁹1 Cor. 13:4-8. Compare Gal. 5:13-26.

³⁰Rom. 14:15; 15:1-3, 7. Compare 1 Cor. 8:1-13; 16-14.

³¹Rom. 13:8.

³²See Mark 12:13-17 and compare Rom. 13:6-7.

³³See John 1:1-5, 10-14, 16-18; 5:18-30; 6:35-39; 7:14-18, 28-29; 8:25-29, 42-59; 10:14-18, 22, 38; 12:44-50; 14:1-10, 22-24, 28-31; 17:1-5, 10, 20-26; Eph. 1:3-10; Heb. 10:5-7; 1 Peter 1:1-2, 18-21..

³⁴See Matt. 11:25-27; 17:1-9; 28:18-20; Rom. 8:28-30; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 2:5-13; Rev. 5:1-13.

³⁵See Heb. 9:14; 1 Peter 1:1-2, 10-12; Eph. 1:11-14; John 7:37-39; 14:15-26; 15:26-27; 16:5-15.

³⁶John 13:34-35.

³⁷John 15:9-10, 12.

³⁸Eph. 4:1-3, 7, 12:13, 16.

³⁹Eph. 5:21-22, 25, 28-33.

⁴⁰John 17:20-21.

Other books in the
One Step Closer to Jesus Series:

Come Follow Me

The Way Up is Down

Not By Sight

Losing Life and Finding Life



Life Communications™

P.O. Box 1689

Lady Lake, Florida 32158

\$2.00