

## Love in Action

Rod Reynolds

After Jesus Christ returns to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, we're told that his law will go forth from Zion to all the nations (Isaiah 2:2-3). God's law will become the law of every nation on earth. What is the foundation of that law?

On an occasion during his ministry Jesus was involved in a discussion with some of the religious leaders among the Jews: "Then one of them [a Pharisee], a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?' Jesus said to him, ' "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets' " (Matthew 22:35-40).

The very foundation of God's law, it's vital essence, the motivating principle which permeates it, is the principle of divine love. Those who are in the first resurrection will be teaching to all nations that law, founded on the principle of divine love (Isaiah 2:3-4; Matthew 5:19; 1 Corinthians 6:2; Revelation 20:4-6). It's essential that we master the concept of divine love, not only intellectually, but in its application as well.

It is elementary knowledge for a Christian that we must love (Colossians 3:14). But what does that mean? How are we to love?

In the world, the idea of love has been distorted and perverted in any number of ways. From earliest times up to this very day apostates and charlatans have used false concepts of love to deceive and subvert those lacking understanding of true godly love (Proverbs 7:18-22; Ezekiel 33:31; 2 Peter 2:1-2, 14, 18; Jude 1:4). Some Bible versions (Syriac, Arabic, Vulgate), as does also the "First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians" (chapter XV), translates Psalm 78:36-37 as follows: "They *loved* Him with their mouth, and lied to Him with their tongue; but their heart was not right with Him, neither were they faithful in His covenant." The idea in both the original Hebrew as well as such renditions is that the professions of love and loyalty toward God were superficial and lacked genuine faithfulness toward God. The whole world, beginning with us, has to be reeducated in the meaning of love. Understanding the truth about the meaning of godly love and how to manifest it is vital to the practice of true Christianity and God's way of life.

The New Testament was written in Greek. A peculiar strength of the Greek language is it's precision and power to express shades of meaning. Greek has no fewer than four words to express different kinds of love. They are *eros*, *storgē*,

*philia* and *agapē*. Outside of the New Testament the occurrence of *agapē* is extremely rare (although *agapē* and *agapaō*, the verb form of the word, together occur more than three dozen times in the *Septuagint*). But in the New Testament *agapē* (with its cognate verb *agapaō*) is by far the most common word for love, occurring about 250 times.

Just what is *agapē*, as defined by Scripture? Unlike some other varieties of what might be called "love," *agapē* is not fundamentally an emotional response. Rather, it is a product of the mind and will empowered by the Spirit of God. *Vine's Expository Dictionary* says in this regard, "Christian love, whether exercised toward the brethren, or toward men generally, is not an impulse from the feelings, it does not always run with the natural inclinations, nor does it spend itself only upon those for whom some affinity is discovered. Love seeks the welfare of all, Rom. 15:2, and works no ill to any, 13:8-10..." (p. 382). And, in discussing *agapē*, William Barclay in his book *New Testament Words* says, "Agapē has to do with the mind: it is not simply an emotion which arises unbidden in our hearts; it is a principle by which we deliberately live. Agapē has supremely to do with the will. It is a conquest, a victory, and achievement" (p. 21).

It is true there may be emotional aspects of godly love, but these are secondary, not primary. Godly love, *agapē*, does not occur accidentally, it is something you choose to do. Joshua reminded his Israelite brethren, "But take careful heed to do the commandment and the law which Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you, to love the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways, to keep His commandments, to hold fast to Him, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul" (Joshua 22:5).

And again, "Therefore take careful heed to yourselves, that you love the Lord your God" (Joshua 23:11). In both of these verses *agapaō* appears in the *Septuagint* where "love" appears in the English translation. These verses emphasize that loving God is something we must choose to do and that it requires deliberate effort and an exercise of will to accomplish.

Jesus' instructions illustrate the point further that godly love, *agapē* love, requires the heart, mind and will. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you

shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:43-48). God's love extends to all, regardless of whether they are good or evil, or friend or enemy. Godly love has been described as "unconquerable benevolence, invincible good will.... A deliberate conviction of the mind issuing in a deliberate policy of this life; it is a deliberate achievement and conquest and victory of the will" (*New Testament Words*, p. 22).

At the same time, godly love is not something you can generate on your own, it must come from God as you submit your will to his. A number of Scriptures show clearly that Christian love is a fruit of the Holy Spirit dwelling in you (Romans 5:5; Galatians 5:22). We need to go to God daily and pray for his love, for ourselves and for others (Philippians 1:9-11).

The well known minister Herbert W. Armstrong often defined love as outgoing concern. Godly love is not inward or selfish, it's not directed toward self. The objects of godly love are first of all God, and secondly, other people (Matthew 22:36-40). It's a given that we love ourselves. That's natural, even if we don't necessarily like ourselves (Ephesians 5:28-29). But *agapē* is an outgoing love toward God and fellow man. That's why those who say you must first love yourself to love others have it wrong. Love God, love other people, and you won't have to be much concerned with loving yourself. One of the things we learn as we strive to imitate God's love is that his capacity for love is infinite, and that love extends to you as well as to others.

You must understand, however, that loving others means loving them in accordance with God's law, which defines love (Romans 13:10; the Greek actually reads, "...therefore [the] fulfilling of [the] law [is] love"). Loving others doesn't mean giving in to manipulation or pressure to do or approve what is destructive or lawless. It does not mean allowing yourself to be unduly influenced to do things unedifying or harmful to yourself or others. At the same time, godly love often requires self-sacrifice toward a goal that is truly edifying (Ephesians 5:2).

We've seen then that love is a matter will, of deliberate choice, it's outgoing concern, but we need to focus on one other aspect of our definition to which we've already alluded. Love is how you live. As Barclay said, love "is a principle by which we deliberately live." As *Vine's* says, "Love can be known only from the actions it prompts" (p. 381). Love is rooted in the mind, but it's manifested by how you act, by how you behave.

Godly love then is choosing to behave toward others in a particular way out of genuine concern for their well being. An example of godly love in action is God the Father giving up the life of his Son Jesus Christ so that sinners might be saved

(John 3:16). Jesus Christ giving up his life so that we might share eternal life with him in the resurrection is another example of love in action (Romans 5:6-8). Even God's chastening is done out of love (Hebrews 12:6-10). And there are many other examples of love in action found in the Scriptures. Paul's love, for example, was demonstrated by his self-sacrificing service to God and the people to whom he ministered, even when many among them were critical of him or refused to respond in a positive way to his entreaties (2 Corinthians 12:15).

How can we put love into action? The law of God is intended as a practical guide for how to love. It is, you might say, an expanded definition of love. The entirety of God's word, for that matter, defines and explains godly love. Our love should be first toward God. Jesus said, "And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment" (Mark 12:30). You manifest your love toward God through obedience. "...I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments" (Exodus 20:5-6; see also Deuteronomy 7:9; 11:1).

As *Vine's* says, "Christian love has God for its primary object, and expresses itself first of all in implicit obedience to his commandments" (p. 382). Numerous statements and examples from Scripture teach us that to love God is to obey him. Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15). John wrote, "He who says, 'I know him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:4). Those who teach that we need not obey God's commandments teach against love, and they teach against God's will.

What about love toward men. How can we put love into action there? Again, God's law, as magnified through the teachings of Jesus Christ, reveals how to love our fellow man. Jesus said the weightier matters of the law are justice, mercy and faith (Matthew 23:23). The law teaches us how to treat others justly, with mercy and kindness and faithfulness. For example, for young people, and really for all of us, the law says, "Honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12; cf. Ephesians 6:1-3). If you honor your father and mother with appropriate obedience, with acts of kindness and service, you are loving them as God would have it.

Those of the ten commandments that are stated negatively do not just tell us what not to do, but their corollaries revealed in Scripture teach us how to exercise justice, mercy and faith towards others. For example, the law says, "You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:15). But the corollary to that is give generously to those in need, a principle taught throughout the Bible (Proverbs 11:25; Ephesians 4:28).

The law says, "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13). A corollary to that is to feed the hungry, heal the sick, give comfort and aid to all who need it within the means at your disposal (Romans 12:19-21).

The law says, "do not commit adultery." A corollary to that is love and respect your wife. Treat her with devotion, kindness and tenderness (Ephesians 5:25, 28-29). If you're a wife, love your husband. Respect him as head of the family. Be faithful to him in thought, word and deed (Proverbs 31:10-12; Ephesians 5:33; 1 Timothy 3:11; 1 Peter 3:7-11).

The law says, "You shall not bear false witness..." (Exodus 20:16). A corollary to that is tell others the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Share the gospel through your example. Be a light to others (1 Peter 2:9, 12). Support the formal proclaiming of the gospel through your tithes and offerings (1 Corinthians 9:13-14; Philippians 4:14-19).

The apostle John summed it up, saying, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

There is much more to learned about godly love. It will take us a lifetime and then some to learn everything we need to learn. We are to put on love (Colossians 3:12-14). We are to walk in love (Ephesians 5:1-2). Now is the time for us to be learning to put love into action in our lives, not only for the present benefits, but also so we can teach godly love in action to all the world when Jesus Christ returns.

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