

10.

LIVING IN LOVE

When Jesus was walking physically on this earth, He gave His followers a new commandment. He instructed them to: "...love one another; as I have loved you" (Jn 13:34). We have touched briefly on this theme in a previous chapter, but here we will discuss at length what this admonition means.

While this may seem like a straightforward and fairly simple commandment, in practice it is something which is humanly impossible to do. It may be easy to love others who are attractive, interesting or agreeable to us. It is possible that we may be able to love others to some degree. But to love all of our brothers and sisters in Christ as much as Jesus loves them is far, far beyond our human capabilities.

Part of the problem is that God seems to select many who don't fit well with our ideas of who is lovable. At the very minimum, everyone whom Jesus loves is a sinner. Beyond this, many of them have serious problems and deficiencies. Others have personalities and dispositions which are disagreeable and/or offensive. Some have areas of their lives which are not yet transformed and so they are vulnerable to the work of God's enemy.

When we wish to walk in love, we encounter these and countless other challenges to the fulfillment of Jesus' simple command to love one another. Anyone who has

actually tried to love others has undoubtedly come into contact with other Christians who seem impossible to love.

Yet there is hope. Jesus not only gave us a new commandment. He also gave us a new variety of love. This new love is described in the New Testament with a special word – AGAPE. This love is not something which natural men have. It is not something that a mere human being can express. It is a special kind of supernatural love that only God has. This love is something which fills His heart. In fact, He is so full of this AGAPE love that the Bible says that “...God is [AGAPE] love” (I Jn 4:8). This word expresses His essential nature.

So if and when we decide to obey Jesus’ commandment and love others, we have to receive this love from Him. Our natural, human love will never be able to reach the goal. Only the love of God Himself can possibly achieve this highest and noblest requirement.

In order to obtain this supernatural love, we must walk in continual communion with our Savior. Since He is its source, we need to keep plugged into Him in order to receive it. While we maintain our spiritual connection with Him, an endless supply of this love is available. Since He is the eternal, unending source of this love, we have access to all that we could ever want or need.

Receiving this love is not a one-time thing. Neither is it something we get through a series of especially “spiritual” experiences and then always have. For us mere human beings to walk in love, we must also walk in daily intimacy with the Source of this love which is God Himself.

This fact is so essential that the Word of God tells us that if we love our brothers and sisters in Christ, this is proof that we really know God. We read in I John 4:7,8, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of [from] God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God [intimately]. He who does not love does not know God [intimately], for God is love.”

I have added the word “intimately” to help the reader understand what is being communicated here. The Greek word for “know” here can be used to signify the most inti-

mate relationships including those between a man and a woman (Mt 1:25; Lk 1:34). The supernatural love which we need is something which flows from an intimate, personal, constant communion with our Savior.

It is obvious that there are many believers, persons who truly have been converted, that do not love others. It is painfully apparent that a great many Christians are selfish, self-centered, infantile, rude, abrupt, irritable and many other things which demonstrate that they lack divine love for their brethren. Unfortunately, this is the condition of much of the church in the world today.

Although some would insist that these people cannot really be "saved," an honest, thoughtful analysis of the situation leads us to believe that this is not really the root of the problem. Many have met Jesus. They have truly been born again. But sadly, they are not walking in intimacy with Him. They do not walk daily in the Spirit. They don't understand how to commune with Him continually. They fail to enjoy the availability of His constant presence. Due to this failure, they do not often exhibit His supernatural love for one another.

These believers are simply babies. They have not grown up spiritually enough to have the continual supply of love which they need. Young children are often self-centered. They hardly ever think about others, but only about themselves. It is almost impossible for an infant to exhibit a caring love for others, since they have so many needs themselves. Therefore they do not express this love.

The evidence of true spiritual maturity; the proof that we know God intimately and are walking in communion with Him is that we love. This exhibition of love is the one sure sign, the one observable evidence, that we have a personal relationship with Jesus.

This love is so powerful we can not only love believers who are friendly or likable, but also those who are difficult to like. Being full of God's love, we can love those who are not kind to us, those who take advantage of us, those who abuse our efforts to help and to love them. We can love those who don't agree with us, those who oppose

us and those who sin against us in various ways. We can love those who offend us, those who take from us and never give back, those who disappoint us, those who reject us and those who mistreat us. We can love the most unlovable people with the love of God. This love whose source is God is so powerful and superhuman that, being full of it, we can even love our enemies (Mt 5:44).

LOVE IN THE CHURCH

Here in this book we have been speaking about the experience of the one true church. The key to this experience is walking in intimacy with God and being led by our true Head, Jesus Christ. Since this communion with God is the source of the real church, it is only logical to assume that those who are succeeding in living in the true church experience will also be full of love.

Here we find an important fact. Those who are truly enjoying the reality of church will be men and woman who are full of divine love. What we can conclude then is that the manifestation of this love is the test of the genuineness of our church experience. If and when we are full of love for one another, then this demonstrates that we are succeeding in enjoying the one true church. The evident expression of the love of God is the testimony that what we are doing is the work of God.

Any believers who are succeeding in walking together in communion with God and one another will manifest this love. This is a sure sign that they are enjoying the one true church. This is a dependable indication that what they are living out is genuine. This love is not something that man can produce. Its origin is only divine. Therefore, when it is in evidence, you can be confident that God is doing His work among those who are manifesting this love.

NEW TESTAMENT VERSES

The New Testament is full of admonitions for us to walk in love. It may be the most common exhortation of

the New Covenant. We have already stated Jesus' command for us to love one another. As we read along we encounter many other such admonitions, exhortations and examples.

We read: "Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another" (Rm 12:10). "Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law" (Rm 13:8). "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Rm 13:9). "Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rm 13:10). "Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts..." (I Cor 14:1).

We also learn: "Let all that you do be done with love" (I Cor 16:14). "For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Gal 5:13); "...with all lowliness and gentleness, with long-suffering, bearing with one another in love (Eph 4:2); "...causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love (Eph 4:16). "And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us... (Eph 5:2).

Also we are exhorted: "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more" (Ph 1:9). "Fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind" (Ph 2:2). "That their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love" (Col 2:2). "But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection" (Col 3:14). "And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all..." (I Th 3:12).

Even more we are admonished: "But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another" (I Th 4:9). "Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart..." (I Tm 1:5). "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works..." (Heb 10:24). "Let brotherly love continue" (Heb 13:1). "Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart..." (I Pet 1:22).

Summing things up we are taught: "Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous..." (IPet 3:8). "And above all things have fervent love for one another..." (I Pet 4:8). "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God" (I Jn 4:7).

The above paragraphs are by no means a complete list of all the verses in the New Testament which encourage us toward AGAPE love. Yet surely they are sufficient to show that the manifestation of divine love is at the very center of the gospel message. It is an expression of the very heart of God.

We have studied in earlier chapters many of the different ways and methods which men use to try to hold a "church" together. There are innumerable artifices which people employ in an attempt to get Christians to adhere to one another or to their group. When any work to form a group of believers is initiated by man, it is always necessary for human means to be used to hold that group together.

But, as we also have seen, the true glue which should hold the body of Christ together is this supernatural love. The true bond of Christianity is love (Col 3:14). It is the love of God which fills our hearts and causes us to serve, have fellowship with and meet with other believers.

It is when we are walking "in the light" that we have genuine "fellowship with one another" (I Jn 1:7). This implies having a constant, transparent intimacy with God. This intimacy then produces the fruit of love in our lives. The result of this love is the expression of the living church, the habitation of the Most High God.

MANY CHALLENGES

When we decide to walk in love, we will encounter many challenges. Our commitment to love will be tested again and again, in many different ways over many years. As we walk with the Lord, we will experience a variety of

circumstances. We will encounter a great many Christians with all kinds of personalities, sins, weaknesses, failures and problems. These dear brothers and sisters will impact our lives in ways of which we perhaps have never even dreamed.

Some Christians might take advantage of you financially. They might cheat you out of some money. Some might steal from you. They may borrow from you and never pay you back. They might even ask for some money "for the work of God" and then spend it on themselves.

Others might take advantage of you emotionally, perhaps romantically capturing your heart, dating you and then leaving you. Some may marry you and then cheat, breaking their marriage covenant. You might experience a divorce. You might be slandered, mistreated and have false rumors spread about you.

While you are trying to serve God, you may have people misunderstand you and your motives. You might be criticized, ridiculed and even hated. Brothers and sisters with whom you thought you had a good relationship may turn against you. Then they might work to turn others against you also. The very people whom you trusted and to whom you opened your heart might betray you.

Christian leaders whom you respect may bring you into bondage to their programs and works. They may even beguile you into an illicit sexual relationship or urge you to do something illegal to help them. The number of ways in which Christians can and do sin against each other is endless. These thoughts are only intended to give a small example of what can and does occur when we are in relationships with other people.

So how then can we continue to live in love? How can we overcome the emotional trauma and pain which is caused by these many believers with whom we interact in our lives? What is God's solution to the anguish, heartache, distress and suffering which comes to us as we try to walk in communion with others? How can we continue to live in love. This is an essential question which every believer needs to know how to answer.

THE MOST POWERFUL CURATIVE

In our struggle to overcome the hurt and disappointment which we will inevitably encounter in our relationships with other Christians, God has made available to us a very powerful medicine. It is a kind of remedy which is powerful enough to treat the worst kind of emotional pain. It is a restorative that can heal our inner man in ways that we might think impossible. This spiritual medicine is called "forgiveness."

When we are wounded by others, through whatever ways or means, this frequently produces various emotional reactions. First we feel pain. Next, we tend to become angry. It is only natural to begin to want to strike back at that person, physically, verbally or by trying to hurt them in a roundabout way. One common technique is to want to tell others about how that other person abused or hurt you, intending to turn the others against the offender and thereby gain some sense of retaliation or to extract some sympathy.

It is common for this hurt to continue working in our hearts for a long time, even many years. This gives rise to resentment, bitterness and often a desire for revenge. How many times have Christians actually prayed to their heavenly Father to judge, smite, wound or even kill another Christian because of what they have done to them? Obviously, this is not what is known as "walking in love."

The solution for all these very human reactions is forgiveness. That's right, we need to forgive the offender. Our forgiveness will heal our inner man. It will medicate our emotions. Forgiveness will take away bitterness, anger and strife. Our liberating forgiveness for the other person who offended us will actually turn out to be the best help we could ever get. It will do much more for us than we could ever imagine. Forgiving someone else might seem like doing something for them, but in reality, it will do much more for us. It will bring us an emotional healing in a way which nothing else can do.

Genuine forgiveness will set us free from bondage to our self, our old nature, our precious feelings, our God-given “rights,” and our natural disposition. It will renew our love for God and that other person. It will bring a supernatural balm which will treat our wounds so that we do not notice them so much any more. It will liberate us from our “self” which is really part of the old creation and needs desperately to be denied – to die.

Forgiveness is one of the great secrets of successful Christianity. Without it, we will never succeed in walking in continual intimacy with Jesus. You see, God loves forgiveness. It is part of His nature. He sent His only Son to die in our place to forgive us and then to save us. Therefore, in order to remain in sweet communion with Him, we must become forgivers too.

Jesus teaches us: “And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses” (Mk 11:25). The expression “whenever you stand praying” indicates that we are attempting to enter into the presence of God.

At that moment, we must not be holding a grudge or unforgiveness against our brother. If we are, then this will impede our relationship with our forgiving Savior. We will find it difficult to enter into and stay in the presence of Jesus. Since He died to forgive this person, then we too must forgive them. Living in such forgiveness will help us in our search to live in the one true church which is in the presence of God.

We also learn that our forgiving others is a prerequisite to receiving our own forgiveness. Jesus says: “But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses” (Mk 11:26). If we continue to demand “justice” by refusing to forgive others, then we too will receive true justice. However, no one who has any understanding of their own sin would really want such justice for themselves. If we want others to get what they deserve, then we also will get what we truly deserve. For your own sake I urge you, don’t seek this.

Further, we are taught that if we do not forgive, this will result in personal torment and being in a kind of emotional or even physical prison. Perhaps it is worth the time here to review a parable Jesus taught in response to a question from Peter, which teaches us this truth.

“Then Peter came to Him and said, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, ‘Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’”

“Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’ So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt.”

“So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?’ And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses” (Mt 18:21-35).

You see, unforgiveness will get us into trouble with God. If we do not forgive, He promises to deliver us over

to the “torturers” who run the prison. This means that as time goes on, we will find ourselves in spiritual bondage and even intense emotional or bodily pain. Forgiving others will release us not only from our emotional suffering, but also from many other ailments, possibly even physical ones, which are binding us. It will bring emotional and physical healing. It will also save us from who we are and transform us into the image of Christ. It will restore our relationship with God.

It is interesting to note that it is not the offender who is disciplined by God. Instead, it is the victim who refused to forgive. Perhaps by our way of thinking the one who gives offense is the one more deserving of castigation, but in the heart of our Father, the refusal of forgiveness seems to be even more worthy of judgment.

When we fail to forgive our brothers and sisters when they sin against us, not only do we suffer individually, but we cause a breach in the unity of the body. It is a great stain on the garment of the bride of Christ. Our lack of forgiveness destroys the communion inherent in the true church experience. Such a failure can quickly spread to others if we “share” our problems with others and try to get them to take our side in any difficulty.

WHEN A BROTHER SINS AGAINST US

The biblical teaching is quite clear. When a brother or sister sins against us we are to go to them ourselves and confront them about their offense (Mt 18:15). This means that we do not go to everyone else. We are not to share our problems with all the others first. The offense must remain between us. If the person refuses to hear our complaint, then we are allowed to take along someone else to help us explain the problem to the offender.

If they still refuse to listen then, and only then, are we allowed to “tell it to the church” (Mt 18:17) so that the body as a whole can lend a hand to resolve any conflict. It is only if they reject the testimony of the entire church that we are allowed to limit our contact with that person.

However, this does not mean that we should not forgive them. Even if they are unwilling to acknowledge their sin, we should never be bound by unforgiveness. Such failure to forgive will poison our own souls and retard our spiritual progress. Although we may not enjoy the same spiritual communion with them which we had previously, we must never allow unforgiveness to impede our relationship with Jesus and our spiritual development.

You will know when you have genuinely forgiven someone when you can talk about them to others without expressing any anger or bitterness. You will know you are free when you can lovingly converse about someone or some past situation without a certain amount of bile creeping into your tone and attitude. You can be sure that you are free when you can love that other person with a pure heart.

Forgiveness may not be something which comes easily to you. You may not experience a huge wave of emotion impelling you to forgive. Yet forgiveness is just based upon a simple decision. We must decide to obey God and forgive. Once we turn our will in this direction, the supernatural supply of God will follow. His grace will assist us once we have chosen His way.

It may be that we need to forgive someone over and over again. It may be that it is only little by little that we release our hold on our hurt feelings. It may be very difficult for us to open our hearts and let go of our pain. But as we make this decision, perhaps deeper and deeper each time, the love of God will fill the void which was once only emotional "hamburger."

So often people cling to their hurts, using them to try to strengthen a flimsy emotional barrier which they have erected to attempt to protect themselves from future harm. They hold onto their hurt feelings, hoping that the other person will feel bad, that they can somehow punish them this way, or that by staying shut up emotionally, they will be safer.

All of this is simple human foolishness. Such emotional gymnastics will in no way protect us or solve the prob-

lem. The only solution is in Jesus. We must forgive others as He has forgiven us. This is His unique and wonderful cure for all emotional pain, bitterness and anger. You will be so happy when you obey Him.

One part of this picture which many seem to miss is that God uses the things which happen to us for our own good. He has allowed certain things to happen in our life. Perhaps to us they seem terrible. But from His vantage point, He sees areas of our soul which need transforming. Perhaps it is our temper. Maybe it is our selfishness and self-centeredness. Possibly we have areas of sin which we think we are hiding from Him or from ourselves.

I cannot imagine all the different possibilities here. But there is one thing which is abundantly true. God is using all our circumstances for our good (Rm 8:28). If and when we learn to obey Him in them, we will gain tremendously. We will no longer be the same natural person we were before. When you learn to forgive everything and anything in the name of Jesus, someday you will worship Him for the work which He has done in your life through these events which at one time seemed like something from hell. You will thank Him for being merciful enough to allow you these experiences, seeing how much of His nature you gained through them.

THE OTHER SIDE

There is also another side to the question of forgiveness. What about those who have committed a sin or offense? If and when we are walking in the light of God, we should become ever more sensitive to when and how we have offended others. If and when a word or deed of ours is not done in love, we should have the conviction of sin in our conscience. Due to our intimacy with Jesus, His Spirit will trouble our conscience until we admit our guilt and repent before God and to those whom we have injured.

This willingness to respond to the sensation in our consciences of wrongdoing is an essential element to a

truly spiritual walk. When we refuse to acknowledge our error, when we resist the Holy Spirit speaking in our spirit, when we harden our hearts against the need for repentance then we begin to damage our relationship with our Lord.

In order to admit sin, we must humble ourselves. To repent to our brothers or sisters whom we have offended requires revealing our weakness and errors. When we are too proud or stubborn to do this, when we instead insist upon our own rightness in any situation, then we begin to lose our intimacy with God. When we only justify ourselves and make excuses for our actions and words, this reveals our lack of humility and meekness. These attitudes of pride and self-justification work to exclude us from God's presence. He will withdraw Himself from people who cling to and express such dispositions.

God resists the proud (Jn 4:6). This means that when we refuse to humble ourselves, He will resist our efforts to enter His presence. It will become difficult to find Him and His answers to our needs. His grace to endure many situations will become scarce and our lives will become more and more burdensome.

This loss of communion with Him means that we no longer find it easy to walk in the spirit. Without such an essential element, we then begin to lose the experience of genuine church which is only found in the Holy Spirit. The inevitable result of such hardening of our hearts is that we begin to walk more in the soul, being motivated by the natural man. Self-justification in any situation where another has been wounded by us will only cause us to lose our joy and communion.

In many situations both parties to any sin, quarrel or misunderstanding may have erred. It may be that all involved did not act completely in love. Consequently, all need to repent and ask forgiveness from the others. The fact that someone else may have sinned against you does not relieve you from your guilt of having sinned against them too. Perhaps you also have something for which to ask forgiveness in any given situation. Far too many times,

people excuse themselves for their sins by pointing to the errors of the others. Such excuses may serve to justify ourselves in our own minds, but they do not work to justify us with God.

It may be that in some situation or other someone has sinned against you and you reacted by sinning against them. Possibly, they refuse to admit their error. This does not relieve you of your guilt. You are not allowed to wait until they see their faults first. In order to maintain your spiritual relationship with Christ, you must humble yourself and repent before God and the other person, even if they insist that they are right. Their sin against you will never excuse your error against them. In addition, it is just possible that your humbling of yourself will help them to do the same.

These two things: the failure to forgive and the failure to admit guilt and ask for forgiveness will impact your enjoyment of and participation in the one true church. If such sins go untreated they will disrupt your fellowship with God and other believers. With the passage of time, your failure to obey will relegate you to a position outside the intimacy of the true church and to a life which is largely governed by the soul instead of the Spirit.

SERVING OTHERS

When Jesus came to this earth He came for a specific purpose. He came to serve others. His goal was not to serve Himself or to be served, but to dedicate His life to minister to the needs of others. His great love for mankind impelled Him to this lifestyle. After Jesus began His ministry, all His waking hours were involved in this service. Where He went, to whom He spoke, the subject of His prayers, whether He ate or slept, His whole life was committed to meeting the needs of others.

Therefore, it is evident that if and when we are walking in His love our entire life will also be dedicated to serving others. This is a very important point. This is where "the rubber meets the road" in our Christian life. If we are

walking in love then there will be some evidence of this in our activities. It will be obvious to all those around us that we are committed to serving Jesus by serving His body.

The service to Christ's body may take very many forms. Usually, it is related to the exercise of our spiritual gifts. In fact, God has given all believers a gift or several gifts for this very purpose: to serve one another. We are to use the spiritual abilities which Jesus has given us to benefit other Christians and even people who do not yet know Him.

It may be that we spend much time in prayer for the needs of others. It is possible that God has called us to focus upon meeting physical necessities. Perhaps we are anointed to teach, to counsel or to prophesy. Possibly we have a gift of healing or miracles. It is conceivable that giving financially is our primary focus. The variety of ways in which God might call each one of us to serve is endless. It is impossible to name them all.

But one thing is very clear. No one is called to do nothing. No one member of the body of Christ is free to simply serve themselves and their own family. Each and every one is required by God to use his time and talents to serve others. In the same way in which Jesus made the service of others His focus, His goal and His life's ambition, so we too must dedicate ourselves to minister to others. This is the true expression of divine, AGAPE love.

LOVE AND THE CROSS

Such a devotion to others is not natural. It is not something in which the fallen soul delights. So when we begin to speak about love and service, the cross of Jesus comes into view. In order to live a life of service, we must deny ourselves. We will need to die to our own desires, pleasures and needs. This will necessitate the death of our old life and nature so that Christ's life and nature can predominate.

When Jesus walked on this earth, He had one final destination – the cross. He came to serve us and His dedi-

cation to this service was so extreme that He was ready and willing to die for us. This willingness to die was the ultimate expression of His love. So, if and when we are disposed to live His life and serve His body, this will become our destination also.

In I John 3:16 we read: "By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." You see, in order to love with Jesus' love, we must also lay down our own lives. We must die to ourselves. We must give up our rights to live for and to serve ourselves. Instead, we must use our time, energy, money, gifts and attention to minister Jesus Christ to others. This is true Christianity. In fact, it is the only true Christianity.

The denial of our self and abnegation of our "rights" to a self-serving lifestyle, is a result of divine love. God's love within us will impel us to put aside our own interests and pleasures and use our resources and energy for others instead. His love will cause us to use all that He has freely given us, not to please our carnal desires, but as tools to serve others. Once again, we are not to use our liberty which He has given us to serve ourselves but instead "...through love serve one another" (Gal 5:13).

Those who are walking in love will be seeking every opportunity to serve others. They will be attentive to the Holy Spirit and to those around them, seeking how and when Jesus would want them to be useful to others. Since their life is dedicated to this, since it is their goal and focus, they will be ever more sensitive to the impulses of the Holy Spirit in being of service in His kingdom (I Jn 4:16).

We must be clear here that this service is something which is led by our spiritual Head. This is not simply a legal demand. As with all the other aspects of the body of Christ, this part too must be spiritual. This means that our service must be led by and accomplished through the Holy Spirit. Simply trying harder to be some kind of servant will not be enough. We must learn to live in and by the Spirit so that our lives and service will be of eternal value. Of course, service is not something which is expected of

babies. In fact, the lack of a dedication of service to others reveals that a person is still in spiritual infancy. When and if serving others is not our focus and delight, this shows that we have not made much progress spiritually. As we mature in Christ, our desires will increasingly reflect His. Our heart will more and more express His own. So, any lack of devotion to Christ's body simply exposes that there is also a great lack in our spiritual maturity.

Naturally, our "ministry" will grow along with our spiritual man. The more we grow, the more effective our service will be. When we mature, we sense more easily how and when Jesus would like us to serve. Further, our service becomes much more efficacious, since it is more and more in tune with the will of the Heavenly Father.

It is worth noting here that our spiritual gifts were not given to us so that we could impress others. They were not bestowed upon us so that we could be seen and heard. We did not receive gifts so that we could attract a following, appear to be more spiritual or to rise up in the church in a manner that begins to require that others serve us. Our "ministries" were not given so we could use them as a means to exalt ourselves.

A servant or slave in any household occupies a humble position. His function is to make life easier and better for the others. Any time someone is using what God has given him to serve himself, this is a sure sign of spiritual immaturity. It is a sure indication that that person is not walking in intimacy with Jesus who came to be the servant of all.

LOVE IS...

Love is God's nature. Therefore, the genuine expression of this love has certain characteristics which reflect this divine nature. There is a certain "flavor" or "aroma" about someone who is walking in supernatural love which is perhaps hard to define yet very real. There is about them a certain something which is an exhibition of Christ's divinity.

Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians details many of these characteristics so that we can be able to identify them. Not only can we recognize them in others but we can use these details to weigh our own lives. From these verses, we can examine our lives to see how much or how little of the nature of God we are exhibiting. Each of these characteristics defines an aspect of Christ's nature which should be in evidence in every one of us.

To begin, we read that "Love suffers long, and is kind" (I Cor 13:4). In our walk with the Lord, we will encounter many situations which cause us to suffer and sometimes suffer severely. Many of these occasions are caused by other people. It is very easy, when someone else is causing us pain, to have an unkind reaction. This is especially true when this suffering goes on for an extended time. Perhaps this time is one year, or two years, or ten years or even thirty years.

In such situations God's love suffers patiently and continues to be kind to the other person who is causing our pain. Human love can never do this. It runs out and usually runs out quickly. But the supernatural love of God continues to love and be kind, even when faced with long-standing suffering. His love is the only love which behaves in this way.

It might be that your suffering is not caused by anyone else. Perhaps you are sick or in pain. But the expression of kindness still must be yours. If we become crabby, impatient and difficult because of our pain, then this is evidence that we need much more intimacy with the source of real love, which is Jesus.

We are told that "Love does not envy" (I Cor 13:4). Since Jesus is very humble, His nature in us is not to be jealous when others have more than we do. Those filled with His life don't mind if someone else has more money or worldly goods. They are not frustrated when others succeed and they don't. They are not striving to have as much as or more than someone else. They are not troubled when another person is more noticed, more used by God, more praised and or more recognized. They do not become bit-

ter when others are benefitted and they are not. Their joy is to see that someone else is being blessed because their hearts are beating in harmony with their Creator.

We learn that “love does not parade itself” and that it is “not puffed up” (I Cor 13:4). This means that those who are walking in God’s love are not seeking recognition. They are not proud of what they have in terms of material things. They are not full of themselves because of their intelligence, personal beauty or other human advantages. They are not arrogant due to their spiritual gifts or about the ways in which God is using them. These people are not seeking opportunities to be seen and heard. They are not looking to impress others in any way. Instead, the flavor of true humility permeates their life and their ministry.

Love “does not behave rudely,” it “does not seek its own” (I Cor 13:5). Godly love is not pushy. It is not demanding its “rights” in any given situation. Those filled with love are not offensive to others, insisting that their ways and desires are right and need to be fulfilled. They are not demanding that their ideas and opinions are the only correct ones. They are not using others for their own benefit. They are not seeking to satisfy themselves in any situation, but rather to make sure that others are being blessed.

Those who walk in love are “not [easily] provoked” (I Cor 13:5). They are not easily offended. When they are poorly treated, when they are ignored, when they are misunderstood, when someone sins against them, they do not instantly get irritated and angry. Since they are humble, their pride is not quickly hurt. These loving people do not react humanly to provocation. They do not try to retaliate when others misuse them or hurt them. They don’t fight back. Instead, with the eyes of the Spirit, these people see beyond their outward situation and sense the loving heart of God for these people who abuse them.

People filled with God’s love are very innocent and even somewhat naive. They are living out a love which “thinks no evil” (I Cor 13:5). They are not quick to impute wrong motives to others. They don’t spend time judging

the thoughts and intentions of other believers. They don't waste time imagining that others think badly of them or imputing various sins to everyone else. Truly there is a pure attitude, a kind of "holy innocence" toward evil which permeates the life of one who walks in love.

Obviously, love "does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth" (I Cor 13:6). Loving people are not happy when someone else falls and sins. When evil things happen those who oppose them and have done things to hurt them, this does not make them glad. They are not pleased to see that that person is "finally getting what they deserve."

Instead, they pray for their enemies. Their love for them does not permit them to enjoy the pain, difficulty and failure of others who have misused and abused them. They are glad when they see others growing spiritually. They rejoice when others are enlightened and blessed. They are joyful when the work of God goes forward and the darkness is beaten back. Their joy is not when evil happens to others, but when others are brought into more intimacy with God.

Love "bears all things" (I Cor 13:7). Believers who are full of God's love will have a supernatural endurance. They don't give up on other people easily. One thing has become quite clear to me over many years. That is that in God's sight people are not disposable. We are not free to simply get rid of people we don't like or who offend us. It is inevitable that, in our walk with the Lord and our contact with others in His body, many problems will occur. People will sin. They will err. They might do and/or say things which hurt us, possibly in very profound ways. Yet, in spite of all this, we are not free to simply discard them. Love "bears all things."

It is very easy for us to lose faith concerning our own situation and the condition of others. Yet Paul teaches us that love "believes all things" (I Cor 13:7). We can be sure that when God begins a project, He has the intention of finishing it. When He enters a person's life, He already knows what He will do to complete His purposes. Therefore,

when we are walking in intimacy with God, we will sense His eternal persistence. We will receive faith from Him to continue to believe that His will shall be accomplished.

This faith which God gives generates within us a hope (I Cor 13:7). This hope is that God's glory will be reproduced in us through all the difficulty and tribulation through which we pass (Rm 5:2). Those walking in communion with God have the hope that they are being transformed into His glorious image. We know that some day, this vessel of earth will break open and the glorious work which God has been doing within us will shine forth as the sun (Mt 13:43). Through our faith, we see into the future. We glimpse what true glory is and we have been captured by and are held by that vision. It is our intimacy with our Creator which gives us this hope.

Love "endures all things" (I Cor 13:7). It is our confidence in God's love that causes us to persevere. We are enabled by His love to endure any and all hardships and trials. It is only through our communion with Him that we can receive this endurance. Without such intimacy, our human strength runs out. We feel that we can take no more. But when we succeed in entering into His presence, there we find the supply to continue to endure to the end (Mt 10:22).

In God there is an endless supply of His love. It is unlimited. It "never fails" (I Cor 13:8). There is actually no way any human being can live in the ways described above. Only the life and nature of God can fulfill this most lofty goal. So, in order to live in this way, we must be continually connected to the eternal Source. If we are to transmit His nature, if we are to exude the sweet aroma of His character, if we are to be an accurate demonstration of His feelings and thoughts, we must cultivate and maintain an intimate, loving, communion with Jesus Christ.

Those who are walking in love become living exhibitions of the divine nature of Christ. They are filled with kindness, gentleness, patience and sweetness. Others will sense in them something very attractive which will cause them also to desire a greater intimacy with their Savior.

This display of Christ is something which the Holy Spirit of God does within us. It is not a result of human dedication or effort. Simply deciding to try harder will fall short. There is nothing in the natural man which can adequately imitate this. Therefore, to show forth this wonderful nature, we must walk in ever increasing intimacy with God. We must abide in Him, continually receiving the flow of Divine Life which will transform us into His image.

THE HOUSE OF GOD

If you were required to live in a house with a number of other people, where would you choose to live? Would you like to be with those who constantly argued and fought amongst themselves? Would you enjoy an environment where there was always an undercurrent of hatred, tension, animosity or fear? Would an atmosphere of pride, envy, contention and strife attract you? Of course not! You, no doubt, would choose a place where people loved one another. You would look for a home where there was peace and harmony. You would seek a place where you would be accepted and warmly welcomed.

This same thing is also true of God. Where will He be pleased to dwell? Among whom will He be satisfied to live? With which group of people will He establish His eternal dwelling place? Without a doubt it will be among those who love one another. This loving environment, which reflects His own nature, will no doubt draw Him. He will be attracted to people who live in love and unity. This certainly is where He will live. This is His true house. This is where He has planned to live forever. We will all do well to occupy our time constructing just such a house for Him.

Once again we read: "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard, the beard of Aaron, running down on the edge of his garments. It is like the dew of Hermon, descending upon the mountains of Zion; for there the Lord commanded the

blessing – life forevermore” (Ps 133). This atmosphere of loving unity is “good and pleasant” for us and for God Himself also.

We have tried to define here in this chapter, in some small way, just what divine love is. Perhaps to many readers this standard seems very high and unattainable. It may be that they realize that they frequently fall short of this high calling. Yet we must not become discouraged and simply try to be content with what little we have.

So again, we must remember that God Himself is the source of this love. It is not something which we can produce ourselves. Our work is simply to abide in Him. We must establish and maintain an intimacy with Jesus. We must learn to enter into His rest. Then, we will find an unlimited supply of love for one another.

A SERIOUS CONSIDERATION

Finally, we come to a very serious consideration. If we do not walk in love, if the manifestation of the divine nature is not seen in us, if we do not love our brother, then this is an indication that our Christianity is bankrupt. When we do not love, then this is proof that we have lost our contact with God. If we do not exhibit love, we are walking in darkness and have lost our spiritual way (I Jn 2:9). If we do not love our brother whom we can plainly see, how can it be true that we love God who is invisible (I Jn 4:20)?

Far too many believers today are not really walking in intimacy with God. Their spiritual progress is stalled or impeded by many factors. Perhaps they are not forgiving their brothers and sisters their offenses. Possibly, they have not repented for things they have done in the past. This would include not only repenting before God, but also repenting to anyone and everyone against whom they might have sinned. It would also include restoring anything stolen or wrongfully taken from anyone. A thorough repentance to everyone and a restoration of everything is an essential ingredient for spiritual progress.

It is possible that some are stuck spiritually because they still love this world. Their heart is divided, not being fully fixed upon Jesus. In this situation, they have difficulty receiving anything from the Lord (Js 1:6,7). Their spiritual life is frustrated due to the division of their affections and attention.

The number of possible causes of a failed or stalled spiritual life are innumerable. But the evidence which exposes this condition is the same. Anyone who does not love their brothers and sisters is in serious spiritual trouble. They are far from God. They are not walking in intimacy with Him. Their Christianity is really a farce. Any supposed "walk with the Lord," which does not manifest His love, is only an empty show – a pretense. When we do not love, then we have strayed far from God's path.

We must not look at others around us and measure ourselves by their standard. The fact that many others may not be loving, that they might not be expressing God's nature, that they might be regular church attenders, but still walking in the flesh, cannot be the model for our spiritual life. The one touchstone which will expose whether or not we are truly walking in God is whether or not we love our brothers. The expression of this supernatural love is the evidence of a right standing before God.

SPIRITUAL GIFTS ARE NOT ENOUGH

We must never judge our spiritual condition by the fact that we manifest spiritual gifts, have an anointing to preach or teach or that we have a lot of revelation. All these things, although they are gifts from God are not directly related to our spiritual growth or right standing before Him. Only the evidence of divine love is the true test of our spiritual condition.

Many mistake the fact that they experience an anointing, gift or revelation to be an indication, or even *the* indication, that God is pleased with them. Instead of true, godly love being the standard, they rely upon the fact that they have and use spiritual gifts to prove that they are right

with God. Yet this is not the true test. It cannot be thought of as evidence of God's approval.

In I Corinthians 13 we are taught even if someone might have tremendous gifts (for example, healing the sick, raising the dead and even moving mountains), without love this is empty. Further we read that some can understand glorious things from the Bible thus allowing them to preach in an extremely impressive manner. Possibly many are awed by their ministry. But without God's love our all gifts and ministry is merely like the sound of a musical instrument which is heard for a moment, but then vanishes away like the wind.

There are many men and women of God today who have strayed from an intimacy with Jesus and have even fallen into sin. Some are even committing adultery. Yet, their gift or ministry still "works." Thus, they delude themselves into thinking that God is still pleased with them. Since some "anointing" is still there, they cannot be too far wrong. Yet, the only true test of right standing before God is that we manifest His love to all, unselfishly. This virtue can only be obtained by a continual, intimate relationship with Jesus.

Therefore, we must seek this with all our heart. We must ask our Savior to expose anything within us which is hindering this flow of divine love. We should pray and fast if necessary so that God can cleanse our life of all impediments which are hindering the flow of His love. As we begin to walk in increased transparency and intimacy with Jesus, His love will express itself through us to the church and the world.