

Eight Difficult Ways to Love

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Introduction.

- A. One of the most difficult tests in Scripture is posed in 1 John 4:20. We all know that the greatest commandment is to love God, so of all of Christianity, it's the thing we should be working on the hardest. Sadly, it's easy for all of us to reach the point in our lives where we can say, "I love God" with complete sincerity, yet have ill feelings toward some brother whom we think has wronged us.
- B. The problem with that attitude is that if we claim to love God whom we have not seen, while not loving the brother whom we have seen, likely something else is going on. What's likely going on is that we're able to say we love God precisely because we HAVEN'T seen Him yet. It's likely that if we have not yet learned to love our brethren, if God were to arrive on the scene, we'd be upset at or indifferent to Him for the same reasons we're upset at or indifferent to someone else. Remember, friends—when God did appear on the scene, most people found so much to dislike in Him that they killed Him even though He had done nothing wrong.
- C. Clearly, then, we all need to work on loving our brother whom we do see. This love is not just a warm fuzzy feeling, though it certainly involves that. This is the love that transforms our attitudes and our actions so that we are constantly seeking the other's good. Sometimes, it's easy to think and behave in a loving way. There are just some aspects of love that come naturally to us. Other times, though, love takes work, and those are the times we really need to pay attention to. After all, if we haven't yet learned to fully love our brother, we haven't yet fully learned to love God either. Let's look this evening, then, at eight difficult ways to love.

I. Changes in Attitude

- A. The first of these ways we're going to be considering is **OPENING UP**. For many of us, this poses a tremendous challenge. We live in a culture that is in many ways obsessed with privacy and personal distance. It protects us from those who would hurt us somehow, but it also keeps us from knowing others well enough to love them. We see Paul urging the church in Corinth to live differently in 2 Corinthians 6:11-13. Paul's problem was that the Corinthians' desire to keep everybody at arm's length kept him at arm's length too. It's easy for us to do the same thing to other Christians today. We can easily come into the building five minutes before the assembly starts, respond noncommittally to everyone who asks us how we're doing, leave as soon as the last "Amen" is said, and not interact with any other Christians at all until the next service. It's like we've turned church into a spiritual supermarket, where we make our anonymous transactions with God.
- B. Friends, that's not the way that things are supposed to be. We can't possibly know others and help them until they open up to us, and they aren't going to do that until we open up to them first. With that in mind, let's all embark on an exercise after services. The next time somebody we don't know well asks us how we're doing, rather than responding with the obligatory, "Fine," let's tell them what's really going on. Then, let's ask them in turn how they're doing. It's less efficient, true, but it leads to conduct that is more loving.
- C. After we've done this, we also need to make an effort at **UNDERSTANDING** others. It's interesting that there aren't really that many passages in the Bible that urge us to try to see the world through others' eyes, but there are a bunch that assume that we're already trying to do so. For instance, consider Paul's instruction in Philippians 2:3-4. How can we possibly look out for the interests of others unless we know what those interests are? How can we know what our brethren need and want unless we make an effort to understand?
- D. This is a valuable exercise in many ways. Much of the time, when we get crossways with someone, whether it's our spouse, our neighbor, or our brother in Christ, it's because we aren't looking at things from their perspective. We're too busy thinking about how much they've wronged us to consider how some of the things we've done might appear to them. Usually, friends, once we try to see the world through someone else's eyes, it changes the way we see too. Suddenly, we're not as right, and they're not as wrong. Remember, folks: love is about more than just gritting our teeth and doing the right thing. Love is about doing the right thing because we both know and feel that it's the right thing. Understanding makes love much easier.
- E. Next, it's important that we work on **FORBEARING**. Forbearing is when we could choose to be angry at someone else's annoying-but-not-sinful behavior, but we choose not to be. It's very easy to be overcome by our own righteousness and blast away at someone who isn't living up to our standards, but when we start thinking that way, we need to remember James 1:19-20. That's the problem, folks. When we get mad at somebody else for letting us down or offending us, it's easy to forget that just because we feel right doesn't necessarily mean that we are right. In fact, if it's our standards we're enforcing, we're not right. Only God is the Creator. Only God and those authorities whom He has instituted have the right to pronounce judgment on someone else. When we do, when we get mad at a family member or a brother for irritating us or disappointing us, we're claiming a right for ourselves that only belongs to God. We need to remember that,

and the next time we feel our own opinions poised on the tip of our tongues, ready to jump out and attack someone, we need to keep those opinions to ourselves. Our anger does not approach God's righteousness.

- F. Finally, in this first subcategory of attitudes, we need to learn to be **FORGIVING**, even when it's difficult. The thing that makes forgiveness so hard is that, as Jesus tells us, true forgiveness is from the heart. When our husbands and our wives really mess up, when they sin against us in any of the ways that sin is possible, it's easy to say to them, "I forgive you." It's hard, though, to quell that little voice inside us that asks, "That's it? They've done this horrible thing, they've wronged me, they've trampled all over my feelings, and all they have to do is say they're sorry and expect me to forgive them?" That's the voice that wants punishment, not mercy.
- G. The problem with that way of thinking is that mercy is what God expects. Paul tells us why in Ephesians 4:32. God's way of thinking about forgiveness is totally the opposite of ours. We expect the people who have sinned against us to crawl on their knees and do nice things for us before we forgive them. By contrast, God is the One who is wronged by our sin, yet He has also done all the hard work to make reconciliation possible. We've wounded Him terribly with our unrighteousness, but He loves us so much that He gave up His Son so that we could even have the CHANCE to repent. Next to the way that God has forgiven us, the work that we have to do to forgive others doesn't look so hard, does it? Let's imitate Him and forgive from the heart.

II. Changes in Action.

- A. One of the first ways that we need to put our love into practice is by **CONSIDERING** one another. The Hebrews writer speaks to this in Hebrews 10:24. What this basically tells us, folks, is that we have to pay attention to our brethren and all the others whom God expects us to love. At the most basic level, we have to know who's doing well spiritually and who isn't. We have to notice those who haven't been coming to services much. We have to recognize when people are slacking off in the things they do for God. Conversely, we also have to notice when people are assembling more regularly and working more for the Lord.
- B. Then, once we see how things are going, we need to act as best we can. It may be that we should help a brother get more involved by inviting him to teach a Bible class with us. It may be that we need to encourage a sister whose attendance has really picked up. It may be that we need to make a phone call to a brother who hasn't been around much. In all these things, though, we need to remember the goal. We need to stir one another up to love and good works, so that every brother or sister here is as fruitful for God as possible.
- C. Another important but difficult way to love is by **AVOIDING GOSSIP**. This one can be really hard. Remember, folks: gossip isn't so much about what we say; it's about why we say it. Whenever we are speaking about another with evil motives, we are gossiping. We gossip about our spouses when we complain about their conduct to a sympathetic ear at work. We gossip about our elders when we criticize their decisions and their ability to lead. We gossip about our brethren when we tear them down to a third party in order to build ourselves up. All these things are evil. Look at Paul's command in Ephesians 4:31. His words make it clear that gossip is never an acceptable activity for the Christian. All evil speaking, not just some, needs to be put away. We need to keep watch over our tongues and our hearts, so that we never speak maliciously.
- D. After this, we need to express our love by **FILLING NEEDS**, even when it's not easy. John sets out the basic principle here in 1 John 3:17. Clearly, if we are not imitating the generous example of God, we cannot honestly say that His love abides in our hearts. This begins with physical needs. Thankfully, few if any of us are in a position where we might have to depend on other Christians for the necessities of life. However, all of us need help from time to time, whether it's because we're dealing with a protracted illness and could use somebody bringing a meal by, or because we aren't as young as we used to be and can't get up on the roof to clean the gutters anymore. We should know each other well enough to know when those opportunities for service arise, and we should love each other well enough to help out when they do. However, the needs of the spirit are often as important as the needs of the body. We should also be on the lookout for times when someone needs a kind word, an affectionate note, or just a friend. All of this is difficult because it's easy to be distracted. It's easy to get so caught up in our own business that we don't consider everyone else's. Brethren, we need to be more aware than that. We need to know the congregation's needs and fill them.
- E. Finally, though, we need to be willing to love by **SPEAKING THE TRUTH**. Paul brings this up in Ephesians 4:14-15. As you may have noticed, through all of these, I've been talking about our relationship with Christians, because that's what the Bible is usually talking about. However, all of these things apply to those outside the church too. It's not like we're only supposed to love our brethren while treating outsiders like dirt. This is one that applies with equal force to Christians and non-Christians alike. For one thing, if we do know our brethren well, there are going to be times when we see that they need to be reminded of what the Bible says. They need to be told, lovingly but firmly, "God expects you to do this, but you aren't doing it." Likewise, literally everyone who is outside the church needs to be told or reminded about what God expects of them and encouraged to obey. We don't do these things because we enjoy getting up on our soapbox and preaching down at people. That may be speaking the truth, but it certainly isn't loving. We speak the truth because we do love them, because we earnestly desire their good, and for everyone, obedience to God is always best.

Conclusion. If you need to obey God today, don't wait. Obey His gospel now.