

LOVE

Book Three of a three part series - Faith, Hope, Love

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LOVE AN INTRODUCTION

God doesn't ask you, "How many hours did you spend in church work this week?"

He asks: **"Do you love my Son?"**

Do you **love** Him enough to walk in
His steps out there in the world
where I've placed you to work?

Do you **love** Him enough to reflect
His goodness toward the people who
live in your neighborhood?

Do you **love** Him enough to visit the
sick, clothe the naked, and feed
the hungry?

Do you **love** Him enough to confess
Him before other men?

We all wish we could be doing more to build up
the Church.

...but it's not all our "doing" that
builds up the Church.

Peter, the "Rock" upon whose confession
and faithfulness Jesus Christ began to
build His Church, was not given a set of
blueprints and told to go to work....

One thing was needful:

"Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?"

**"Yea, Lord; thou knowest that
I love thee.""Feed my lambs."**

When you can say with all your heart, "Yea,
Lord; thou knowest that I love thee," He'll
tell you what He wants you to do.

Make Love Your Aim

“If I speak with 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 understand 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.”

I Corinthians 13:1-3

This is a favorite scripture for many of us. We hear it read at weddings, we see it on wall plaques – Inspired words about love.

Of course, Paul didn't just sit down and decide to write a poem about love... “Wouldn't it be nice to write a poem about love that people could hang on their walls, something suitable to be read at weddings.” No. These words poured out of him as he was dictating a letter to his problem church: the Corinthians.

The believers at Corinth had a lot going for them:

- there was power in their worship,
- healings were taking place,
- there was enthusiasm,

but beneath all these great signs of life, something was going on that disturbed Paul.

The people speaking in tongues felt superior to those who didn't. Factions were forming over who had the most gifts of the Spirit. So Paul dictated this letter which we call “1 Corinthians.”

Paul is pacing the floor talking. Silas is writing it all down and here comes this long stretch of advice you can read in 1 Corinthians 12 –14. Advice about gifts of the Spirit, especially about speaking in tongues. And right in the middle of all the advice comes this eloquent passage about love, to show that if you have the gifts of the Spirit without the fruit of the Spirit which is love, you have nothing.

You have the gift of tongues? Fine, but;

**“If I speak with tongues of men and of angels
but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal...”**

You have the gift of prophecy? Good, but;

**“If I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries...,
but have not love, I am nothing.”**

You have the gift of special faith? Excellent, but;

Remember that that faith is useless without love.

If the gifts don't produce fruit, they are wasted on me.

The thing the Spirit wants to produce in us is God's mind, God's nature...which is a special kind of love - agape love. Love that just gives.

Here's what it's like:

**“Love is patient and kind; love is not arrogant
or rude. Love does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice
at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears
all things, believes all things, hopes all things,
endures all things.”** 1Corinthians13:4-7

And we say, “Whoa! That leaves me out! Patient, kind, not irritable, not resentful - I could never be like that!”

Those Corinthians were just like we are. They too considered it normal to be impatient, irritable, critical, suspicious. After all, we're only human! As it says on the bumper sticker, "Christians aren't perfect - just forgiven." But if you are forgiven by the blood of the Lamb, my friend, and if the Spirit of God is actually at work in your life, you can't go on living the way you used to live.

You can't.

You're going to change.

The tree is going to be changed into a good tree so that it can produce good fruit.

That's why God gives us his Spirit. To empower us to live like we could not live before. Specifically he gives us the power to love. God's kind of love - agape love.

If you are a disciple of Jesus, this is not an option, this is a command!

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, you also must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples,..." John 13:34-35

- not because you have spiritual gifts,
- not because you heal the sick,
- not because you speak in tongues or prophesy,

but because you have love for one another."

When Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthians, there were no chapters or verses. Silas just kept stringing all those great words together. Centuries later, they divided it into chapters and verses.

Chapter 13 ends with,

"So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

Chapter 14 begins with,

"Make love your aim,"

and that's really the clincher.

"Make love your aim." So you're not perfect - make love your aim. Keep working on it. Now we're going to take this love passage of Paul's that's hanging on the wall in a beautiful frame, we're going to bring it down from the wall, and make it the rock on which we build our lives.

It's a description of what we become as Christ is formed in us.

It's what we aim at in our daily lives:

"Love is patient and kind; love is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Why do we aim at this?

Because it's the only thing that works - the only thing that lasts.

"Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away." 1 Corinthians 13:8

ONLY LOVE NEVER FAILS.

THIS ISN'T A PRETTY LITTLE POEM.
IT'S THE DOORWAY TO LIFE.

“Make love your aim.”

Four things we need to know about “making love our aim.”

1. There has to be a point at which you decide to do this. You decide from now on you’re going to make love your aim. It’s not going to come over you like a trance. At some point I have to decide, “Am I going to yield to God’s will in this matter or my own?” And I need to renew this decision every day. This is how I’m going to live now. I’m going to make love my aim - at home

- at work

because this is the life I’ve been called to by God.

2. Once you decide to make love your aim, open your heart and you will get supernatural help. It’s like a wind comes behind you on your journey. The love of God is shed abroad in your heart by the Holy Spirit.

- You find yourself accepting people you would not accept before.

- You begin to see some of the hard cases in a new light.

- You find yourself not insisting on your own way.

- You’re willing to yield, and it’s not so bad. It doesn’t have to go my way all the time.

3. Once you make love your aim, God will start sending some exercises your way in the form of people. In dealing with these people you are going to develop patience as you learn;

- How to yield to them in love.

- How to rejoice in someone’s success instead of envying them.

- You’ll find yourself loving your wife, your husband, your child in a better way.

- People in the church that seemed hard to figure out will now be seen as brothers, sisters, co-workers.

These people who are sent into our lives are opportunities for us to learn how to love.

4. We’ll begin to see that learning to love (and we will make progress) is the best contribution we can make to the growth of our church. Just as you can walk into a home and feel the atmosphere,

- Maybe it’s a war zone.

- Maybe it’s cold and sterile.

- Maybe it’s radiant with warmth and kindness.

- Maybe it’s a house of peace.

You can feel it, so it is when you walk into a church. You either feel like you’ve come home or you’re out of place. If there’s an atmosphere of love, even if the worship is different and the music is unfamiliar, you still feel at home. This is the vestibule of heaven!

You can have a car with a 400 horsepower engine. It can climb any hill. It can maneuver any terrain. But that car will only go where you aim it. If you aim at the ditch, that mighty engine will get you there!

God sets us free from our old bondage and gives us his Spirit to empower us to live a new life. But we still do the steering. We go where we aim to go. If we make love our aim, that’s where we’ll go. We’ll get there, but only if that’s our aim.

So Paul’s advice to the Corinthians is the Spirit’s advice to us as well.

“Go for the spiritual gifts,” he says, “especially that you prophesy with a word from God.” Ask God to give you power from on high - the power of the Spirit to live this new life, **but make love your aim.**

See the people who come bursting into your life,
- whether it's with kindness or harshness,
- whether it's with encouragement or anger,
as just what you need, to learn how to manifest the Love of God because:

“Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.

So faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. Make love your aim...” 1Corinthians 13:8-14:1a

Much Forgiveness Much Love

From Ezekiel 11:17-20

“Therefore say, ‘Thus says the Lord God: I will gather you from the peoples, and assemble you out from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel.’ And when they come there, they will remove from it all detestable things and all its abominations. And I will give them a new heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will take the stony heart out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God.”

No doubt we all would agree that the beginning of this prophecy’s fulfillment, the getting of a heart of flesh for a heart of stone, takes place on Calvary.

There is only one thing in all the world that is able to pull out that heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh and that’s the death and resurrection of the Lamb.

But what bothers us is that we **are** followers of the Lamb.

We’re gathered in His name.
We partake of His Body and His Blood.
We’ve committed our lives to His service.
We’re dependent upon His Spirit for our life.

And yet, when we look into our hearts, we still see stone instead of flesh.

Who of us here can honestly say that our heart of stone is gone and now we are ruled within by a mercy,
and a kindness,
and a generosity,
and a compassion
which comes from God all the time.

Who of us doesn’t have to admit that time and time again people who don’t even know the Lord put us to shame by their kindness, and their generosity, and their willingness to give of themselves.

“Lord, why am I so indifferent, so callous, so hard? I’ve been following you for years. I pray to you. I pray for other people. I call on your name. And yet, this rock is still here. What does it take to get it out? And what will it take for me to get a heart like yours, Lord?”

Surely, the blood of Jesus is sufficient to give us a new heart.
It’s not that it can’t handle our sin.
It can take care of this problem very well.

The Son of God hangs on that cross and the blood runs down that body, gathers in a pool at the foot of the cross... overflows as a stream that soon becomes a river. The river of blood flows out over the earth down through the generations. People gather on its banks and gaze at this and ask, “Where does this river of blood come from?” And the Spirit answers,
“From the broken, dying heart of God himself.”

“But why is God’s heart broken?”
“Because God suffers with every creature of His that suffers.
He bears the weight not only of the suffering,
but of the sin that causes it.

And so His heart breaks unto death and we have this river.”
“But what good does it do?”, we ask.
And the Spirit answers,
“Anyone who plunges into this river and bathes, with a

contrite heart, is given a heart of flesh for a heart of stone.”

Suddenly the Spirit lifts you up, just like He took Ezekiel, and carries you to a place where you can look down upon a town loaded with churches, churches everywhere.

And here comes this river of blood flowing right down the middle of it. You are informed by the Spirit that there is not a soul in the whole town who hasn't been baptized in that river of blood.

“What a wonderful town that must be,” you say. “Everybody in town has a heart of flesh for a heart of stone.”

“Would that it were so,” answers the Spirit. “If only what you say were true.”

“But didn't you just say that everybody in the town bathed in the river?”

“Yes.”

“Well, doesn't that bring about the change?”

“No, it's possible for people to bathe in the river of blood, but if the blood doesn't get below the skin to the heart, the heart still comes up stone.”

“You mean,” you ask, “that those people in their churches right now, praising the blood of the Lamb, may still have hearts of stone?”

And the Spirit answers,

“Look at the poor in the shadows of those churches that are getting no attention. Watch how they back bite with each other. See how the ones who have food hoard it while the other ones over there starve. Their doctrines seem to be right, but their hearts are made of granite.”

“But why,” you ask. “Why didn't you do anything for them when they bathed in that river?”

And the Spirit ends the conversation with a very strange answer,

“He who is forgiven little, loves little.”

Then He whips you off to another place, beyond that town of churches, where the river of blood flows by some rusty old railroad tracks. And there, a group of social lepers are gathered around the fire for their evening meal. There is a sharing,
and a kindness,
and a warmth among those people that makes it clear that they no longer have the burden of a heart of stone... they have hearts of flesh.

And you are told by the Spirit that every single day that group is growing as they move out to the wilderness by the tracks and pull in more of those lepers, bringing them down to the river.

And everyone comes out with a new heart.

“How come it happens so quickly for them, so easily?” you ask.

And the Spirit answers,

“He who is forgiven much...loves much.”

From Luke 7;

One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house, and took his place at table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wipe them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.

Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what

sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.” And Jesus answering said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” And he answered, “What is it, Teacher?” “A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he forgave them both. Now which of them will love him more?” Simon answered, “The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more.” And he said to him, “You have judged rightly.”

Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.” And he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” Then those who were at table with him, began to say amongst themselves, “Who is this, who even forgives sins?” And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Jesus could tell by observing this woman that she already has a heart of flesh for a heart of stone. Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. Much love was flowing with those tears and through those hands that were caressing Jesus’ feet with her hair.

Love that was pure.

And love that was unselfconscious --- didn’t care what those Pharisees sitting there would think. And that much love is evidence of much forgiveness.

Does this mean that the Pharisee doesn’t need as much forgiveness?
Obviously not!

His need is just as great as that woman’s.
The only problem is that the man hides his need from himself.
On the surface he looks okay, but down inside he has thoughts that would curl anybody’s hair. And he has a hardness that is conveying death to the people around him.

And he knows this.
But it is so easy to cover it all over with respectability,
a few good deeds,
forms of piety.
The fact that the man loves little, is evidence that he has been forgiven little.

Now forgiveness was available to him. All the forgiveness he needed for the mess inside his heart was there, but he wasn’t letting it happen.

Now let’s suppose after Simon the Pharisee listens to Jesus’ words... he begins to see himself in a new way. Suddenly he realizes he’s not Simon the Righteous,
but he’s a hopeless mess,
and he’s an evil, ugly man inside.

He needs help.
And there in front of all his fancy Pharisee friends,
Simon begins to weep.
He calls his servants and asks them to go out and try to find that woman.
“Bring her, beg her to come back so we can treat her the way we should.”

Then he gets up from the table and falls on his face at Jesus’ feet and cries out for help, “Lord, help me. Forgive me as you forgave that woman even though I am far, far worse.”

And Jesus stretches out his hand and touches that man and declares him forgiven.

Instantly all his Pharisee friends, like an army, rise up from the table and stomp out.

The next day, Simon receives notice that he has been excommunicated from the synagogue. But he has one thing that really matters and makes all the difference in his life. He now has a heart of flesh for a heart of stone.

He who is forgiven much...loves much.

And if there is anything you and I need, it's much forgiveness.

We Christians, we Spirit-filled, true disciple-type Christians, need much forgiveness. And to get that "much forgiveness," we don't have to go out and commit that great big sin, all we have to do is open our eyes and see what's really there.

"Lord, show us the shape we're in. Help us to see that our sin is not just theoretical, something we deduce from scripture...

'All have fallen short of the glory of God'; therefore I must be a sinner, not just theoretical, but real sin. My sin."

Sin that grieves and breaks the heart of God,
and wounds the lives around us,
and leaves behind a whole trail of discouragement and desolation as
we have pursued our own happiness.

- The Lazarus who sits by our gate right now, still full of sores,
we don't even see him.

- The people with needs of body and soul that we have to brush
by every single day and we do it so we don't have to touch them.

That's what Jesus died for -- our sin.

God help us to cry out for the much forgiveness that we need.

When is the last time you admitted you needed much forgiveness?

Not five years ago when you got saved...but now.

Not Aunt Susie or Uncle Ned...but me.

When we cry for much forgiveness, we get much forgiveness.

When we come to the Lord's table desiring forgiveness, much forgiveness that we need, we get much forgiveness.

"This is my body given for **you.**"

As if only for you.

"This is my blood shed for **your sins.**"

Not the theoretical sins...the real sins.

And the real disposition that's in there.

And when you and I begin to live before God as men and women who have received much forgiveness, the hearts of stone will at last begin to melt.

Our disposition,
our outlook,
our attitude,
our thought life, will change.
Our walk will change.

And all that self-consciousness and that reserve will melt away like it did for that woman and we'll break out of our shell and begin to live for God lives that are ruled by His love.

“And I will give them a new heart, and put a new spirit in them; I will take the stony heart out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God.”

Three Stages

"He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him."

John 14:21

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. This I command you, to love one another."

John 15:12-17

In these simple words to his disciples ... not just the eleven gathered in the upper room ... but to all disciples of all time, Jesus explains how we can enter into the life of the kingdom of God here on this earth.

We enter the life of the kingdom in three stages:

First,

"He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me....."

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

It starts with commandments ... words ... from Jesus,
that call us to radical love,
radical trust in him,
radical purity.

We don't really know Jesus yet, we just hear these words and we know they come from God. And we take hold of these commands which are so high and so wonderful ... so far above where we are ... and struggle to do them. Even when we fail and fall short --- still we know that this is the way we have to go. And as we keep struggling to do Jesus' words we arrive at the second stage: friendship with Jesus.

Second,

"He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him."

"You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you."

.....friendship with Jesus.

Suddenly, in the midst of our struggle to obey his commands, Jesus comes to us and manifests himself to us as our friend. He's not just our Master --- he's our Friend who opens his heart to us and leads us into the very heart of God. Now the kingdom of God becomes for us much much more than a set of wonderful commands.

- It's fellowship with God the Son ... heart-union with Christ so rich and so comforting that all our fears are driven out by this burning love of Jesus.

And in the power of that love we begin to love each other and to reach out to the wounded world. Which is the third stage: fruit bearing.

Third,

"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give it to you. This I command you, to love one another."

So now in union with Jesus,

- we're bearing fruit,
- we're asking the Father for life for others...
and getting it,
- we're loving each other with the love of God.

Our friendship with Jesus moves us out into the world with

- life,
- healing,
- prophetic words,
- signs of hope,
- power to overcome evil,
- power to set the captives free.

Three stages:

1. The commands of Jesus.
2. Friendship with Jesus.
3. Bearing fruit in the name of Jesus.

In describing the kingdom life in this way we're not ignoring the cross. The cross of Jesus was the event which made these things possible ... the fountainhead from which all this life springs. And as we walk with Jesus we learn to know him --- not only in the power of his resurrection, but in the fellowship of his sufferings we become like him in his death as we lay down our lives.

But we only begin to see the power of Jesus' death and resurrection as we come to know Jesus himself in these three stages.

"You keep talking about Jesus as if it's possible to know him in a personal way here on earth, yet scripture tells us that Jesus is at the headquarters of the universe in heaven ... that we are to look for his return. So how can he be 'here' and 'there' at the same time?"

"I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

John 16:12-15

Jesus promised that he would send the Holy Spirit to stay on this earth until he (Jesus) returns and that the Spirit will convey

Jesus' presence,
Jesus' life.

Where the Spirit is, Jesus is.

So it is the Spirit, the living, burning Holy Spirit of God, who brings us along on these three stages as fast and as far as we allow.

- It is the Spirit who wipes away the distance between earth and heaven, who opens our eyes and enables us to see the unseen.
- It is the Spirit who brings us into the first stage by causing the commands of Jesus to burn with fire in our hearts.
- It is the Spirit who brings us into the second stage by enabling us to truly know Jesus as our friend.
- It is the Spirit who leads us into the third stage by anointing us with power to bear fruit in his name.

So the first stage becomes the call of the Spirit.

The Spirit calls us through the words of Jesus.

"It is the Spirit that gives life. The flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you, they are Spirit and they are life."

So we hear Jesus' words spoken by someone, or we read the Sermon on the Mount in the Bible, or we wake up in a crisis and recall one sentence or one phrase from his mouth. And we grab hold of those words.

"That's what I want! I want to make those words real in my life!"

We may not realize it at the time, but this is the Holy Spirit calling us out of darkness into God's light. The Spirit is quickening the words of Jesus to our minds and wills. And as we struggle with those words trying to do them ... and perhaps failing ... and wondering how in the world he can ever expect us to live them, we're starting to love Jesus---*starting* to love him.

The second stage becomes the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

The baptism of the Holy Spirit is when we are flooded and filled and overwhelmed by the love of Jesus ... when we really begin to know Jesus as our friend.

To them he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God. And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me, for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

Acts 1:3-5

And when they were baptized with the Holy Spirit they knew the friendship of Jesus from within ... they knew Jesus as they never knew him before.

And for anyone reading this to whom this hasn't happened yet,

- you should expect it,
- ask for it,
- open your heart to receive it.

John baptized with water ... Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit. He floods you with the life of God and specific

things begin to happen to you.

- Suddenly Jesus is right there and you know that he's your friend ... he's with you, he loves you, his hand is on you.
- And with that wonderful awareness of the presence of Jesus, the scriptures open. Things in the Bible that never made sense before now begin to fit together.
- Prayer begins to flow from you with a freedom and a power you never knew before.
- Your tongue is set free and you find yourself giving testimony to Jesus.

Perhaps there are some people reading these words to whom this all happened some years ago, but now it's like a fire that has almost gone out.

- Stir it up!
- Put some kindling on it.
- Get down on your knees and coax it until those coals which are almost out begin to glow once more and burst into flame.

The Holy Spirit was given to you so that you could know Jesus and love Jesus and serve Jesus, not just for a year-and-a-half, but forever.

The third stage becomes walking in the Spirit.

"If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit," says Paul.

- You've been baptized in the Spirit,
- You've been brought into union with Jesus,

so now you can do those commands which before were impossible.

You can love your enemy,
you can go the second mile,
you can be pure,
you can get rid of your grudges.

Now it's not simply friendship with Jesus out in the desert away from the hassles, now it's friendship with Jesus in the midst of the pressures, confusion, and trials of life.

"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bring forth fruit and that your fruit should abide. So that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give it to you ... even power to obey the commandment to love one another."

And so we go out into the world in unity with each other.

- We go out with prayer in our hearts.
- We speak those same gracious words of Jesus that drew us into the kingdom.
- We speak those words under the authority of the Spirit.
- We speak them as friends of Jesus who are

walking with Jesus and know Jesus.

And people are drawn just as we were drawn ... we bear fruit.

Each of us may be in the kingdom of God at one of these stages right now.

- At very least we can take hold of Jesus' commands and start to do them by answering the call of the Spirit.
- We can enter into friendship with Jesus by opening our hearts to the power of the Spirit.
- We can get under the yoke with Jesus and start to bear fruit by walking in the Spirit.

Consider these words from John 15 one more time ... remember that these words of Jesus are addressed to us today. And as we respond to them we will certainly experience the life of the kingdom of God.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.

This I command you, to love one another."

John 15:12-17

With All Our Heart

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord your God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that he is one, and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

Mark 12:28-34

The first time it happened no one seemed to notice. But soon it became an epidemic. It began one Sunday afternoon around three o'clock... a fine new suburban church building simply collapsed. There was no fire and no explosion...it just crumbled together as if a huge unseen foot had stepped on it. Some urban believers were slightly amused when they read about it in the paper. The following Sunday an inner city church suffered the same fate ...the magnificent architecture which had drawn tourists for generations became rubble in a few seconds. This caused some gloating among some non-institutional Christians who took pride in the fact that they never met in church buildings. The following Sunday these "New Testament" Christians had barely emerged from their house meeting when the house fell to the ground.

As the investigators began to probe, they learned that in each instance the congregation had been visited on the day of their building's collapse by an elderly man who was described by witnesses as having "wild looking eyes." Was it Elijah? Congregations began to watch the door apprehensively, wondering if today this strange visitor would find his way to them.

One Sunday morning the elderly man with "wild looking eyes" turned up before the service at a church which had a reputation for laying heavy emphasis on total commitment and discipleship. One of the brothers in the flock approached the stranger.

"Sir, we're all petrified. We know what has happened to the building of every congregation you've visited. We know this is some form of judgment ...but for what? Where were they found wanting?"

"They were judged," answered the stranger, "for their mediocrity. Mediocre prayers ...mediocre lives ...lukewarm hearts ...lazy minds. The living God has given these people his very best. In love, God has given them all he has: his only begotten Son ...purchased them back from the curse of the second death with Jesus' blood. And what do they give back to God? ...their scraps ...their leftovers. Would that they were either hot or cold. But because they are lukewarm he spews them out of his mouth!"

"Well," answered the Christian from the 'total commitment' church, "on that basis we should pass the test. There isn't a church in town that preaches a tougher message on commitment than ours."

At 3:00 p.m. the church collapsed like all the rest.

....and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength

Of course the judgment which has already begun at the house of God does not concern itself with buildings of brick and steel ...but it does concern itself with the kingdoms we build which are not the Kingdom of God at all. It is possible for me to be very earnest about building a name for myself, or a new form of religious community, or a reputation for my church ...while my heart toward God remains lukewarm. One day all the things I have built out of earnestness for myself, (while my inmost heart for God was lukewarm), will indeed come down.

Suppose the Master of the house returns to the servants to whom he has given talents to find the five talent man in high elation ...he has a surprise for the Master. Instead of delivering five talents more for the five he had received, he says,

"Master, come into the yard, I have something wonderful to show you. You gave me five talents. I amassed fifteen more. With the twenty talents I made this..."

He pulls out a chord and unveils a bronze statue of himself holding a Bible. The Master orders him into outer darkness.

The vast bulk of all the things we like to think we have done for the Lord were done, not for him, but for ourselves. Consider how in our thought life, our prayer life, our business life and family life, whatever is excellent is reserved for ourselves ...God gets the mediocre.

Cain brings an offering which may appear acceptable to every eye but God's. God sees this offering as the expression of a lukewarm heart. And this mediocre offering is not an offering even as mediocre prayer is not prayer. Any half-baked mediocre thing we bring to God is worse than if we brought nothing ... it is blasphemy.

When the merciful and living God decided to deliver us from the curse of death and the bondage of Satan, he did not go to the spiritual junk yard and look for the wreckage of some ruined angel. He took the best he had ... the Son who lived in his very bosom ... his supreme joy and only treasure ... his best ... to redeem us. And when the Son of God appeared clothed in human flesh, did he yawn and say to himself, "Well, what else can I do? I'll shuffle through this somehow." He put himself into it with all his heart, soul, mind and strength ... everything he did was quality.

If you have doubts about the person of Jesus, read the Sermon on the Mount in any language. How can any thinking person doubt that this is the most beautiful and penetrating arrangement of words ever to touch this earth? And when Jesus healed he made sure the healing was complete. The blind man whose vision was imperfect after the first touch was touched again. When Jesus fed the multitudes he fed them with abundance. When he laid down his life he laid it down with all his heart. And when we ask Jesus to touch our lives, his touch is perfect.

**Who forgiveth all thine iniquities.
Who healeth all thy diseases.
Who redeemeth thy life from destruction;
Who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies.
Who satisfieth thy mouth with good things;
So that thy youth is renewed like the eagle's.**

But the blessing has to be received as it is given ...with the whole heart.

Nothing Jesus has done for you will have any lasting effect until you take hold of it with all your heart ...with all your soul... with all your mind and with all your strength.

And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that he is one, and there is no other but him, and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

If we want to live in God's kingdom now ... as opposed to our own religious kingdoms which will surely crumble ... here are three simple things to keep in mind:

1. **Put your heart into receiving God's mercy.** The mercy of God cannot flow into a half-opened heart. Yet how many times when the Son of God knocks on the door we're afraid to open it more than a crack. "What if he puts his foot in?" Have no fear. The Lord will not force his way in ... he will not enter until you open the door wide and bid him welcome.

This opening of the heart to receive the Lord's mercy needs to be done daily ... hourly ... until it becomes our

second nature to draw our life and our strength from him who is the incarnation of divine mercy.

**My soul thirsteth for thee. My flesh longeth for thee
in a dry and thirsty land where no water is.**

2. **Put your heart into your daily prayers.** Some of us pray with our mouths ...some of us put in the time while our minds wander the earth. How easily for all of us to slip from prayer into a journey through the past, or into some pressing anxiety, or even into sleep. And the reason is that we are not approaching the Throne with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. We need to put our best into it even if we have to begin by saying; "Lord, I don't know how to pray ...help me!" When such a cry begins to rise from the heart, the answer is already on its way.

3. **Put your heart into showing mercy to your neighbor.** How often we find ourselves half listening to someone who is pouring out his soul ...we simply are not putting our heart into it. Or, we catch ourselves going through the motions of good deeds while our hearts are tepid. What a change takes place in the quality of our work in the vineyard when we approach our neighbor's need with a merciful heart ... an alert and thoughtful mind.

Perhaps we feel that we have been placed in a rather boring corner of the vineyard. The people who come to us with their needs seem to be so uninteresting or so hopeless. "Will they ever come out of their rut? Will they ever change?" But what a refreshing wind begins to blow through these relationships when we put our hearts into them and begin dealing with these people as before the eye of a Lord who loves them with the same unspeakable love which has transformed us. When our hearts are in it, God is in it ... redemptive grace flows in abundance.

God who gave his best ... his everything ... his Only Begotten ... to redeem us and make us his children waits for us as we are right now, (for all our hang-ups and problems), to love him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to show our appreciation for the death and resurrection of Jesus by loving our neighbors as ourselves ... by showing mercy.

If we will do that, when Elijah comes, the structure will stand.

Lazarus

There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, full of sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table.

Luke 16:19-21

If we seek power for the sake of being able to say, "Look at us! We bear the authentic marks of the apostolic church! Look at the power!"...

If we seek the power to heal and cast out demons,

- for the sake of keeping all the critics off our backs,
- for the sake of being able to say, "Look to yourself brother! We have the power of God around here,".....

then all the power of heaven will do us little good. For our hearts are far from Christ.

On the other hand, if in our attempt to be faithful to our Lord we go out seeking the lost, preaching the good news to the poor, setting the captives free, and discover that we just don't have what it takes to bring God's healing grace to bear upon the troubled lives we meet, then we can turn to our Father and ask for the needed power and know that it will come.

Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey and I have nothing to set before him."

Luke 11:5-6

We have a friend. And we can go to him at midnight and ask ... and receive. God will pour out his power on a body of people who are committed to his Son, who truly want to minister his grace - of this there is no doubt.

There has never been a time, since the Church of Jesus Christ first came to birth, that the Son of God has failed to pour out his Spirit upon the saints who have cried to him for bread at midnight.

"If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will and it shall be done for you."

"If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"

"When I sent you out with no purse or bag or sandals did you lack anything?"

"Nothing, Lord."

Jesus teaches us that when we go out there with nothing to rely on but his power, his power is there. At every point where we experience the power of God moving, it's when we're trusting nothing else.

But what if while we're praying for the power, and incidentally while we're feeding sumptuously everyday on God's word, and while we're clothed already in the purple and fine linen of manifold blessings from God, there's a beggar at our gate named Lazarus who isn't asking for something we don't have. He's asking for a few crumbs from the well-furnished table we do have. We're praying to God for more power while Lazarus is praying to us for a few crumbs from our table.

In each of our lives, without exception, there is a Lazarus. And the most important issue of our lives, the issue that will decide whether the mercy of God in the Lamb's blood will really avail for us on the other side of death is: what are we doing with our Lazarus?

When we stand before the judgment seat of Christ, as each of us will, we may be inclined to point out to our Lord

the mighty works we did in his name.

- "Lord, we prophesied in your name,
we cast out demons in your name,
we did many mighty works in your name."

And he will answer,
"But what did you do with Lazarus?"

"Lazarus? Who's Lazarus? I never knew anyone named Lazarus."

Suddenly he will cause to come before our mind's eye the face of a man, a woman, or even a child who reached out to us a thousand times...

not for prophecy,
not for miracles,
not for profound teaching,
but for a little love, just a few crumbs of material help.

Let's not talk about the five or ten people for whom we have responsibility. Let's talk about that one special person who now waits at the gate.

- It may be one of your children.
You're running around doing work for the Lord and never hearing the cry that comes from that neglected heart.
- It may be an old friend who's going through hard times.
- It may be someone at work who has, so far, attracted no more notice from you than a piece of furniture.

Maybe you don't "feel led" to do street work.

Maybe you don't have time to write a dozen letters a week. Maybe your schedule doesn't permit you to visit convalescent homes. But Lazarus is right there. You don't even have to go out looking for him.

- He's staring you in the face every day.
- Or he's calling you on the phone.
- Or perhaps God is causing the cry of his heart to reach your mind in some other way.

"Wait a minute! I'm not sure who my Lazarus is. There are so many people, so many needs. I don't pass by just one beggar on my way home, I pass a hundred, a thousand, which is my Lazarus? Which one among all the needy people is the one God has really put at my gate?"

Surely the God, who will bring Lazarus to our minds when we stand in judgment, will bring Lazarus to our minds now, if we pay attention.

There are several things we can be pretty sure of about our Lazarus, whoever he or she is. Like the beggar in our Lord's parable, he's probably poor. In other words, there is no way he or she can repay any favor we would do for him. He has nothing to offer that we need - not even gratitude or a smile - he may never join our church.

He's probably helpless. Lazarus wasn't standing at the rich man's gate, he was lying there, he was so weak. And this person whose heart is crying out to us isn't able to help himself ... like so many old folks, and so many little ones, and so many sick people, and so many discouraged, beaten souls, they can't do for themselves - someone has to do for them.

He's unwanted by the world. Only the dogs come and lick his sores. Multitudes walk by him and don't even see him.

He hath no form nor comeliness, and when we shall see him there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men. A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid as it were our faces from him.

Isaiah 53:2-3

He is hungry. Perhaps for food.

Maybe for some attention, or for a friend. Whatever it is that he is hungry for we have in abundance on our table. All he wants is a few crumbs.

And what does it take to minister to Lazarus? Power? Gifts of miracles and prophecy?

No. It takes one thing: LOVE.

And don't say you don't have any love to give him. The love of God has been shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. But, are we dwelling in that love?

God is love and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God and God in him.

And to dwell in love is not to wallow in some syrupy emotion, but to do something concrete for Lazarus.

- How much strength does it take to get up, go to our cupboard, and get a loaf of bread?
- What does it take to reach down into our pocket and give the woman some money for rent?
- Or to stop what we're doing for a little while and listen to the man's complaint?
- Or to drop by for a minute, or an hour, and see how that lonely old soul is getting along?

How can our heavenly Father believe that our cries for power to cast out demons, and deliver the oppressed, come from hearts that care, when Lazarus still waits at our gate?

Step number one for this flock, and no doubt for all other assemblies who are crying to God for power to heal and deliver the oppressed souls that are coming to us in such numbers these days, is to begin with Lazarus.

God will bring to each of our minds one person who needs some of the good things that are already piled on our table. If each of us will concentrate during the coming week just on Lazarus,

- even if we have to let some of the more exotic ministries go,
- even if we have to miss Bible study or fellowship,
- even if some of the brothers and sisters misunderstand,

and give Lazarus the royal treatment in the name of Jesus, then God will know that we are trying to make love our aim and that our earnest desire for the spiritual gifts is built on that love.

We don't ascend into heaven to bring Christ down to us, or descend into the depths to raise him from the dead.

- God has already sent him down.
- God has already raised him up.

All we have to do is start loving that unloved person whom God has placed at our gate and we will meet our Lord Jesus, alive from the dead, in a new way.

In the despised and rejected Lazarus we will meet the despised and rejected and glorified Jesus afresh. Then the Spirit of the Lord will,

- anoint us to preach good news to the poor,
- release to the captives,
- recovery of sight to the blind,
- to set at liberty those who are oppressed.

Built On His Love

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Romans 8:35-39

These closing verses of Romans 8 are a favorite passage at funerals. When we're looking at the death of a loved one and, through that death, contemplating the moment when we too shall leave this familiar world, what a comfort to be told of a love that goes right through that door of death with us and still holds on to us! The love of Christ which passes knowledge...love that never lets go, never dies out, never becomes stale, never withdraws from us in disgust. Love that holds on to us and keeps us sane even when the whole world is falling apart, when everything else we were ever sure of turns out to be a myth. Love that remains, though the earth be moved, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea.

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand." John 10:27-28

That there is such a love and that it does such things is the whole meaning of the gospel. Until you taste that love you can't possibly understand who Jesus is, or why He laid down His life for His sheep. Nor can you possibly believe that He rose from the dead. You have to hear His voice calling you by name and experience what it means to be led by Him beside the still waters and to have your soul restored by the breath of His Spirit. You have to taste that peace which comes over you like a flood when Jesus tells you personally that He has taken care of your sins. Your sins are forgiven ... your life is healed.

If there is a reader who hasn't tasted this love, be sure of this: Jesus who opened the eyes of the blind, healed the sick, cleansed the lepers, and cast out demons wants to do no less for you. His desire is that you might experience some sign of His love, that you might know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that your God does love you and that He has given His only begotten to be your life. So Jesus sends out His call. And it goes to believers, unbelievers, seekers, hypocrites, sinners, phonies... everybody!

"Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest."

"If any one thirst let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water'."

"Draw near!" "Call on my name!" "Open your heart!" "Confess your sins." "Tell me your needs!" There's not one of us who doesn't need to be touched by that love. And there's not one of us who need go away empty.

"He who comes to me shall not hunger and he who believes on me shall never thirst."

Jesus meets us where we are, deals with us according to our present need, manifests God's love to us in terms that we can surely understand.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

But so often at funerals where this magnificent passage is read people overlook an important fact. They overlook the fact that to be so held and preserved by the love of Christ it's understood that you have given yourself to that

love. You've said yes to it with all your heart. You've surrendered to it.

To stand by the coffin of a man who all his life spurned that love, and read, "**Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?**" is meaningless. How can you talk about being separated from something to which you were never joined? Yes, Jesus' hand is a hand of love that never lets go. But to be held by it you first have to surrender to that hand. You have to answer when He calls. You have to come when He invites. You have to put your life into that hand by doing the things Jesus tells you to do.

"Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it." Matthew 7:24-27

You cannot say to the house built on sand, "**Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?**" since the house isn't built on the love of Christ, it's built on sand. As long as the weather's good you can't see any difference between the house built on sand and the house built on rock. For all you know, beneath that lovely lawn is a foundation of granite. Nobody would dream that that life is anything but a solid, dedicated, true disciple. He appears to be doing the will of Christ. He's going through all the right motions and saying all the right words. Ah, but when the storm comes when the rains fall, and the floods come, and the winds blow and beat against that lovely house it falls, and its fall is great, because it was built not on God's love but on the sand of self.

To be more than conquerors through Him who loved us so that nothing can separate us from that love, there is one thing we have to do: we have to build our lives on that love by doing His word.

Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock...

Isn't it strange how often we think that doing Jesus' word is something hard or unpleasant, something that's going to wear us out and dry us up.

Whereas the doing of Jesus' word is the gateway to life, the threshold of constant joy.

A few things to keep in mind:

1. Everything Jesus tells us to do, He tells us because He loves us. "Stop being anxious about your life," He says. Why does He say that? Because He loves us. He's the best friend we ever had. "Stop being anxious, it isn't doing you any good." "Judge not." Why does Jesus say that? Because He knows what judging does to us ... how it warps and twists and sours our hearts. "Give to him who needs. Love your enemies. Don't practice your piety before men." These are the words of One who cares about us.

He's telling us to do things that run contrary to our nature, but what miracles start happening in our lives when we do them. The best proof of who Jesus is, is to notice what happens to you when you start keeping His words.

2. Everything Jesus tells us to do is based on the fact that we have been forgiven. You don't take the Sermon on the Mount and lay it on a man or woman who hasn't been to the cross. How can a person whose heart is crushed with guilt be expected to love his enemies or forgive men their trespasses? First, you take that person to the cross. You show him the Author of the Sermon on the Mount hanging there for the sins of the world. You show that woman the blood which cleanses her from all sin. You call that man to repentance and offer him peace with God through the blood of the Lamb. Then you bring that person to the Sermon on the Mount and say, "Now you can do these things because God has freed you from your past and given you a new heredity. This is how Jesus calls His forgiven ones to live, who are born of His Spirit."

3. The things Jesus tells us to do are not legalism, but life. He's not a tyrant spitting out rules and regulations to make your life complicated. He's your friend, giving you truth that will set you free, raising you from the

dead with His spoken word. Even when you hear words from Jesus that seem impossible, or don't make sense to you, just remember that the One who speaks them is closer to you than your beating heart. And He will absolutely make clear how those words apply in your case ... what He wants you to do.

Notice how Jesus always connects His words with Himself. They are not some impersonal body of truth, they are part of Him and He is in them.

"Every one then who hears these words of mine..."

"If any one keeps my word he will never see death..."

"If you abide in me and my words abide in you..."

"The words that I speak to you, they are Spirit and they are life."

And when we take hold of these words we find again and again that we are taking hold of the living Christ Himself.

4. Everything Jesus tells us to do is watched over by the Spirit of God.

"If you love me you will keep my commandments and I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever, even the Spirit of Truth."

The Holy Spirit goes where the word of the Lord goes.

The Holy Spirit undertakes where the word of the Lord is obeyed.

The Holy Spirit moves with power where the word of the Lord is believed.

The words of Jesus are never allowed to drift out there on the sea of this world unattended. Wherever those words are, the Spirit hovers above them, ready to come down and confirm them to any heart that receives them.

If the words that you now hear are truly from the Lord, you can be sure that the Spirit of the Lord is hovering above them and the minute you open your heart and receive them, and make them part of your life, and act on them, the Holy Spirit comes in behind like a mighty rushing wind to help you do them.

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any thing else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The question is, have we been building our lives on that love? If we have, the storms that are approaching will do us no harm. If we haven't, may God give us wisdom to listen to the words of Jesus as we've never listened before. And may God give us grace to do them. For it is only in the doing of Jesus' words that we come to know that love which never lets go.

Those Who Love God

For we know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:28

It's amazing how quickly we believers can revert to our old way of thinking that the world revolves around us, secretly in our hearts to believe that God is lucky to have us in His Kingdom. How would He ever get along without us? We think of ourselves as the elect, the chosen ones, in a way that's dangerous indeed. Now there is a people on the earth who are known by God as His elect, His chosen ones. But they never think of themselves as insiders. And there are many people on earth who think of themselves as the elect who are in for an awful surprise.

Sometimes we look around and see how wicked everyone is and think, "God will have to keep me in His Kingdom whether He likes it or not. Where's He going to find anyone better? I may not be perfect, but God better jolly-well hang on to me for the rest of the world is far worse."

Don't be too sure!

Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father." For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

Luke 3:8

When the Pharisees on Palm Sunday told Jesus to rebuke His disciples for calling Him King, Jesus answered, "**I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.**" God is going to have a people for His name... for His praise. Jesus is going to have brethren walking this earth whose very bodies shine with His splendor.

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Romans 8:28-30

God is going to do this if He has to turn stones into sons of God. If He says it will be, it will be. And it will be done by His sovereign act, with or without us. Make no mistake about it, God has an elect people. From the day Adam fell God looked down through the eons and saw those who would respond to His 'yes' of forgiveness with a 'yes' in their own hearts of love for Him. And from that hour God sent out His call to them - foreknew them, predestined them, called them, justified them, glorified them, before they were ever born.

The awakening that spread across the Roman world and down into Africa those first centuries after the resurrection of Jesus, was it a work of man?

Did men sit down and plan it? To this day there is no explanation for it but that God did it. God raised up people. God put His word on their lips. God confirmed it with signs. God drew multitudes into His Kingdom. Now, as the end draws near, He's going to do it again for the last time.

Suppose that in the very near future an awakening of faith in Jesus Christ begins in the least likely spot on earth, the place where no religious professionals will be able to swoop in and take credit for it. Thomas, the last of the apostles to believe, is said to have headed into Asia with the gospel. Since his day there have been many efforts to set fire to the Orient with the gospel of Jesus but every time the fire was largely put out by western bigotry and violence. Suppose that this time when the fire starts in Asia, it is started, sustained, spread by Asian disciples. It becomes an awakening to faith in the living God such as this planet has never seen. We aren't going there to preach. We are going there to listen and learn. This time we aren't the missionaries; they are! The awakening spreads back across Europe, Africa, the Western Hemisphere, and finally circles in on the Middle East.

And it would then be obvious to any one with eyes to see that God did it. No man planned it. No group of evangelistic hot-shots engineered it. It was a pure work of the Holy Spirit, and it is God's final 'yes' to the Planet Earth.

“For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we preached among you, Silvanus and

Timothy and I, was not 'yes' and 'no'; but in him it is always 'yes'. For all the promises of God find their 'yes' in him. That is why we utter the Amen through him, to the glory of God. But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has commissioned us; he has put the seal upon us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.”
II Corinthians 1:19-22

Does this mean that all the people who seem to come to life during these awakenings are numbered among the elect of God? Not at all. After every manifestation of God's outpoured grace there is a sifting, a shaking. The wind starts to blow and the earth quakes and the sun hides its face. Fires of trial begin to burn, and pretty soon those multitudes that were praising God and worshipping the Messiah are gone and only a handful remains.

What happened to those first century churches in Ephesus, Sardis, Laodicea? In time, darkness rolled in over them and quenched their zeal. And you can be sure that the world-wide awakening we will soon see (wherever it begins) will be followed by a final shaking which will sift the numbers right down.

And people will say, "Wasn't God serious when He called those multitudes? Was He just going through motions? Why didn't He predestine them all to salvation?" God opened the door to all. His offer went out to all. When He said, "Yes" to those multitudes, it was not "Yes" and "No," but really "Yes." But there has to be a response to God's 'yes'. We have to say, "Yes" to God with our hearts in answer to His 'yes' to us. And until our 'yes' to God is a constant reality in our hearts, God's 'yes' to us is always followed by an 'if'. Romans 8, as no other chapter in scripture, stresses God's 'yes' to man.

There is therefore: now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?

But in Romans 8 we also find God's 'if'.

... if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live.

Satan is trying to make us forget that 'if'. He wants us to hear the 'yes' without the 'if' and think our souls are secure, that no matter what we do we're the elect.

True, God reached down and without any merit or worthiness in us declared us forgiven. Without any help from us at all God took away our blindness and caused us to see Jesus and to hear His voice. But listen to what this same God now says to you:

"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you."

"If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love..."

We share in Christ if we hold our first confidence firm to the end.

God doesn't start out by saying 'if'. He starts out by saying 'yes' to our need. To the sick who cry for healing He says, "Yes" without strings. To the sinners who cry out for forgiveness He says, "Yes, your sins are forgiven." For people reading these pages who have problems they can't cope with, you cry for help and God answers, "Yes," and help comes.

But for God's 'yes' to us to become permanent, to be forever, there is one 'if'. Listen:

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are

called according to his purpose.

Those who love God. How can God take us by the hand and lead us on into glory unless we love Him enough to let His hand lead us? Of all the lives Jesus touched during His flesh-and-blood ministry, only a handful responded to His love with love: The woman who washed His feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair; the one leper out of ten who turned back praising God and giving Jesus thanks. And so Jesus says to Peter who denied three times that he knew his Lord, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me?" "Feed my sheep." "Do you love me?" "Do you love me?"

Don't waste time trying to figure out whether you're predestined, whether you're one of the elect. Ask your inmost soul this simple question: "Do I love God?" If you love God you will see God's son, you will honor Him, you will be drawn to Him, and you will serve Him with all your heart.

God's 'yes' to us is to reveal His Son to us, as He is doing now. Our 'yes' to God is to love Jesus with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. If we love Jesus we will keep His word, we will obey His Spirit and we will be out there doing His will in that needy world. We love Him with our whole life. The way we treat our wife, husband, our child. The way we treat our brothers and sisters, the lost, the hard and the haughty. The way we handle our money. The way we use our time. The way we do our work. If we love Jesus it will show in all these things. And if we don't love Jesus, it will show in all these things.

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; for those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Who are the predestined ones? Very simple. Those whom God foreknew would love His Son. Those who love Jesus now with all their hearts in their daily lives will still be loving Him when He comes. Nor will any storm or trial or glitter of earthly things draw them away from Him between now and then.

The question Jesus asks each of us is: "Do you love me?" And by the answer we give Him with our lives, we show whether or not we belong to God.

Back To Our First Love

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear evil men but have tested those who call themselves apostles but are not, and found them to be false; I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent... '"

Revelation 2:1-5

The Spirit in which the Lord speaks to this church at Ephesus is one of great kindness. He speaks from the position of absolute lordship, holding the seven stars in his right hand. But he also speaks as one who stands down among them (walks among the golden lampstands), and who sees and appreciates what they're going through.

"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance.

I appreciate how you keep alert and have not been misled by false prophets. And how you keep bearing up under the strain for my name's sake.

But I have this against you: you have abandoned the love you had at first."

Now this kind,

compassionate,
self-giving Lord, who has already laid down his life for these people, gives them a warning of what will happen to them if they don't return to the love they had at first.

"Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent."

If they are going to survive as a light in that city, the love they had for Jesus at the beginning, which drove them to do his will with great joy, will have to burn in their hearts again and keep burning in their hearts to their dying day.

Most of us consider it almost inevitable that with the passing of time the love which we had for Jesus Christ in the beginning will cool somewhat. How can you sustain that blaze of devotion for years and years?

When a man and woman marry, who expects the kind of love they have for each other on their honeymoon to last for forty or fifty years? God does!

God created them male and female and gave them to each other for as long as they both shall live.

And in his order, their love for each other should not fade and become dull with monotony and with the injuries they inflict on each other. It should increase as they learn to forgive and help one another.

When a woman gives birth to a child, she loves it with self-giving love.

- If she has to get up five times through the night to attend to it, that's all right.
- If she has to do without basic necessities for herself to provide for the child, she does it gladly.

Now the child is twenty or thirty does she love it any less?

In those early days when Peter first began to walk with Jesus he came to love Jesus with a love which was willing to do anything for his master -- even to die for him. But later, when the opportunity came to show that love ... the night when Jesus was arrested ... Peter fell apart. He found himself cursing and swearing that he did not know the man.

After the resurrection Jesus says to him, "**Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?**"

"Lord, you know that I love you."

"Feed my lambs."

So Peter went back to his first love ... feeding the sheep and tending the flock of the Lord out of love for Jesus. Years passed and this love for the Master increased to the point where Peter laid down his life for Jesus. Peter was able to die on a cross for his Lord because he returned to his first love and stayed there.

In those weeks following our rebirth how glad we were to do anything that we felt Jesus wanted us to do.

- How easy it was to forgive if Jesus said forgive.
- How easy it was to give away whatever we felt Jesus was telling us to give away.

Then we moved out of our infancy with the Lord into the wilderness. We ran into trials and obstacles where we stumbled. But he was still there... standing by our side. We kept traveling on, still trying to be faithful to his name, still toiling and enduring, down to this moment. But for most of us that first love is no longer there.

- We're enduring.
- We're bearing up.
- We're still around.

But that love for Jesus we once had no longer burns with a clear flame. So he says to us:

"Remember then from what you have fallen. Repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place ... unless you repent."

- What does it mean to return to our first love?
- What is Jesus asking for when he tells us to repent and do the works we did at first?

1. Our first love was a direct, personal love for Jesus himself.

"Simon, son of John, do you love me?

Not my blessings,
my attributes,
my power,
my promises but me?

If you love me you will keep my commandments."

The life of the Kingdom of God is only possible this feast of victory we eat is only real, when we fix our hearts on Jesus and love him ... really love him.

To return to our first love we have to climb down from our high horse of pride, become poor in spirit, lowly children and love Jesus without shame or self-consciousness.

- God bring us back to that lowly,
simple
childlike,
unpretentious love of Jesus!

2. Our first love was a joyful giving of our life to Jesus.

And he said to all, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."

Luke 9:23

What does this mean but a giving of our very lives to him? ... a joyful giving of our lives to him. We deny ourselves, take up our cross daily and follow Jesus, not with tears of regret for what we leave behind, but with great joy knowing that he is our life.

"For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels."

Luke 9:24-26

We lose our lives for his sake. We are unashamed to tell the world straight out that Jesus is Lord, even if it means, as it always does, that we are rejected along with him.

3. Our first love was deeds done out of love for Jesus.

We do what we do not because it's our "Christian duty," not because of our belief in certain "Christian principles," but because Jesus has commanded us to do these things. We do them at his word because we love him.

If I try to forgive someone because forgiveness is a "Christian principle," I will soon find it hard, if not impossible, to forgive. But if I try to forgive someone because Jesus tells me to forgive, doing it out of love for him, it becomes easy.

If I try to keep my eye single, or give to people in need, because it's the Christian thing to do, I'll soon run out of steam. But if I return to my first love and do these things out of love for Jesus, I'll never run out of steam.

Shortly before he left this earth to return to the Father, Jesus met Peter on the shore of Galilee and called him away from his fishing and his nets... back to his first love.

**"Do you love me more than these?
Do you love me. Do you love me Peter?"**

**- Feed my sheep.
- Follow me to the cross."**

For us too the hour is late. There is much to be done. But the most important issue of our lives is what kind of relationship we really have with Jesus.

- Do we love him more than all these other things?

Today, Jesus calls us back to our first love.

"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear evil men but have tested those who call themselves apostles but are not, and found them to be false; I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have

abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.”

Revelation 2:2-5