



**Daily God Walk
Virtues Series
Love**

**Another Month of Devotions
For Your Journey of Faith**

Daily God Walk
Virtues of the Spirit
Volume One:
Love

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Unless otherwise indicated Scripture quotations are taken from the
New International Version (NIV). All other translations used will be
credited using these abbreviations:

- (KJV) – King James Version
- (NKJV) – New King James Version
- (TLB) – The Living Bible
- (TM) – The Message

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The *Daily God Walk* theme this series of devotions is Virtues of the Christian Life. Each devotional features a virtue of the Christian life taken from Galatians 5:22-23 and 2 Peter 1:5-7. Between these two passages there are 11 virtues that every believer should develop.

For the final devotion of this series the theme is “The King and His Kingdom.” We are looking forward to a wonderful year of inspiration and deepening our walk in the Spirit.

Daily God Walk – Virtues Volume One: Love

Love has many meanings for all of us. There are the activities we love, the friend we love, the spouse or significant other we love... and the list is practically endless.

This month our theme is love from the perspective of our walk with the Lord. We’ll look into the love God has for us, the love we have for him and the love we are called to have for one another.

Each week our devotions focus on a different aspect of love.

Days 1-4 – Love... It’s the Command of God

In these first days of January we are exploring the commands to love God and to love each other. We are also looking at the way love calls us to sacrifice and obedience..

Days 5-11 – Love is more than an act

This week we are looking at I Corinthians 13 and the lessons taught there about how we are love. We explore being a resounding gong and a clanging cymbal. Then we look at how service without love produces little satisfaction. The other devotion titles are; Love is Patient and Kind, Love Forgets the Bad Stuff, Love Rejoices in Truth, Love Protects, Trusts, Hopes and Perseveres, and finally, Love Never Fails.

Days 12-18 – When Love is Tough... When Love is Hard

Some of us have never considered the difference between love that must be tough and love when it is hard. Tough love is when we are holding someone accountable and hard love is when it is not easy to love, but we love anyway.

The devotions this week are titled:

- Tough love is holding myself accountable
- Tough love is holding those under my care accountable
- Hard love is loving the unlovely
- Hard love is loving my enemies
- Hard love is standing strong in adversity
- Tough love is loving friends who oppose us
- Hard love is when it costs more than I want to give

Days 19-25 – Who Should I love?

This week we answer the question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” We also explore those we are commanded to love in Scripture: God, your brother, Love Neighbor as self, Love your enemies, Love your spouse, Love those who despise you, Love yourself as a creation of God.

Days 26-31 – How Am I Commanded to Love?

In these last few days of the month we are looking at the ways we are commanded to love. Scripture teaches that we are to love with our whole heart. We are to demonstrate our love by our deeds and out of love we show respect to others.

Our hope is that the devotions for this month will inspire you to love as God loves, make you stronger in your commitment to him and call you into deeper spirituality.

Day One

Love... It's the Command of God

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" - Matthew 22:37-39

In ancient days people feared their gods. Their life involved appeasing the gods they feared. In fact they created gods and named them after the things that worried them. There were gods of rain, of thunder, Sun, and gods of health and prosperity. People served their gods because they feared what would happen if they didn't and because of what they wanted their gods to do for them. They feared their gods but loving their gods was a foreign concept.

When the Lord God called Israel out of Egypt he began teaching them the concept of serving God out of love for him rather than responding to him out of fear. What was the difference between the God of Israel and the gods of those around them? Why should they serve him from love rather than fear? The answer is so simple, yet profoundly complex.

We are commanded to love because loving another moves us outside of ourselves. It is impossible to be self-centered and love the way God has called us to love. Loving the way God has called us to love requires a knowledge of God, being able to put trust in him and knowing that his desire is to express his love for us rather than to place some judgment upon us.

Prayer: Lord, I tend to use the resources you have given me for my own benefit first. Help me to live to fulfill your purposes. In Jesus name, amen.

Love... It's the Command of God

Message: We are commanded to love because loving another moves us outside of ourselves. It is impossible to be self-centered and love the way God has called us to love. Loving the way God has called us to love requires a knowledge of God, being able to put trust in him and knowing that his desire is to express his love for us rather than to place some judgment upon us.

Affirmation: I have been baptized in agape (God's love) and now I love him with all of my being and I love my neighbor as myself.

Reflection: This devotion speaks of needing a knowledge of God in order to love as God calls us to love. How do we gain that knowledge?

Day Two

Love... So The World Will Know

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

- John 13:34-35

Some years ago my wife and I were involved in a ministry in an apartment complex in Sacramento, Ca. There was one woman who was very resistant to the gospel. Then one day, all at once, she wanted to be baptized. I asked her why she had changed her mind. She said, "I saw the way the children responded to you as you would come on the property. Children know when they are loved and they knew. I wanted that kind of love." Jesus said, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Loving one another is not always easy, but it is necessary. In fact, the only way we can fulfill this command of the Lord is if we look past our own needs and desires to see the needs and desires of others. There is no greater example of this than John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave..." When we love each other like Christ loves his church we will influence the world in a way that we have never seen before.

When I truly love other believers I am not going to quibble over petty things like what church they go to or what denomination they belong to. When I love other believers I am going to serve them just because the Christ in me is the same as the Christ in them. What is your attitude toward those who don't believe just like you?

Prayer: Lord, I sometimes find it easier to love those outside the faith than to love those who claim to follow Christ. Grant me the grace to love all, especially those who call me brother. In Jesus name, amen.

Faith Comes By Hearing The Message

Message: When I truly love others I am not going to quibble over petty things like what church they go to or what denomination they belong to. When I love others I am going to serve them just because the Christ in me is the same as the Christ in them.

Affirmation: The Spirit of God in me draws me to love others just as he has loved me.

Reflection: The passage for today calls us to love other believers, but in another place Jesus called his followers to love their neighbor. Then he identified a neighbor as being anyone in need. How do we begin to love in that way? If loving one another is the true sign of being a follower of Christ, why is there so much schism in the body of Christ?

Day Three

Love... The Command Which Calls Us To Sacrifice

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this; that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. - John 15:12-14

Love that does not call us to invest ourselves in the lives of others is not love at all - it is just a self gratifying emotion. I think sometimes we miss the point of love. We love another, or others, because of what they do for us. Sometimes we look at others and say something like, "I sure do love them, look at how they give." That may be appreciation, but it probably is not love.

Many people fall in love because of the way another person responds to them, but when the other person stops responding in the same way the love begins to grow cold. That is human love. God's love, the Greek word is *agape*, is love that is not about self but it is about other. It is this love that calls us to invest ourselves in others as we sacrifice our own desires and ambitions.

As Jesus was calling his disciples to love one another he explained that to do so would require sacrifice, and it might require the supreme sacrifice; laying down our life for another. That is *agape (love)*. It is not only a willingness to sacrifice for another, but it is the action of giving ourselves to others with no expectation of return for ourselves. It is truly a love that can only come from the one who has already given more than anyone else could ever give for his friends.

Prayer: Lord, all too often I use the word "love" loosely. In fact so much so that it has lost its meaning. Grant me the grace to truly love you and others with the kind of love that is empty of my own desires and ambitions and is focused upon others. In Jesus name, amen.

Love... The Command Which Calls Us To Sacrifice

Message: Love that does not call us to invest ourselves in the lives of others is not love at all - it is just a self-gratifying emotion. God's love, the Greek word is *agape*, is love that is not about self but it is about other. It is this love that calls us to invest ourselves in others as we sacrifice our own desires and ambitions.

Affirmation: Love for others goes beyond self-gratifying emotion. It is a strong desire to help others and to see them blessed.

Reflection: Can you think of some ways the word "love" is used loosely? Do you think the word loses its meaning when it is used that way?

Day Four

Love... Calls Us To Obedience

If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain his love. - John 15:12-14

I have seen literally hundreds of people make a prayer of profession as they are accepting Jesus as their Lord and savior. Sadly, I have seen less than ten percent of those professions produce fruit of repentance. Why is that? I think it is because they want the benefits of being in relationship, but they have not learned that relationship calls for commitment. Jesus said, "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love (or in relationship with me)."

Being in relationship requires a commitment to the one with whom we are in relationship. A husband will give himself to blessing his wife, just as Christ gave himself for his own bride, the church (Ephesians 5:25). A father will give himself in labor, often at great sacrifice, to provide for his family.

Jesus used the word "commands," and it is a good word because it tells us that love can sometimes be demanding. Not that love itself makes the demand, but our love commitment to the object of our love demands that we make sacrifices for the one that we love. Love calls us to serve the object of our affection.

My hope for this month of devotions on the subject of love, and a particular focus on loving God, will draw you closer to Christ and call you to a greater commitment to serving the others in your life.

Prayer: Lord, I confess that I often come to you with selfish motives. Grant me the grace to experience your agape love that is focused on others rather than on myself. In Jesus name, amen.

Faith Comes By Hearing The Message

Message: Being in relationship requires a commitment to the one with whom we are in relationship. Jesus said, “If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain his love.” Loving God and obeying God are twin children of faith.

Affirmation: I am committed to obeying the commands of God revealed through the teachings of Christ.

Reflection: Give some thought to the idea that love must have an object of expression. How do you see yourself expressing love to those around you?

Day Five

A Resounding Gong And Clanging Cymbal

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

- 1 Corinthians 13:1-2

There is a story of a meeting where there were two ministers to speak. One was old, and on the verge of retiring. The other was young and looking for his first pastorate. At this meeting they each were asked to quote the 23rd Psalm. First the young man gave a presentation of the Psalm using his gifts of oratory. The crowd went wild with applause as he finished. Then the elderly minister made his way to the podium, and with a voice toughened with age, and words softened with love and experience, began, "The Lord is my shepherd..."

The crowd was silenced as the elder pastor recited the psalm from a heart seasoned by the joys and grief of many years serving others. When he finished there was not a dry eye in the house and the entire audience sat in silence.

One young man leaned over to the older man sitting next to him and asked what made the difference in the two presentations. The older man responded, "The young preacher knew the Psalm of the Shepherd, but the older pastor knew the Shepherd of the Psalm."

When we have done good deeds to receive the accolades of men that is all the reward we receive. Paul compared that to the hoopla of gongs and cymbals. Serving others out of love, not the expectation of reward, must be the force that drives our good works.

Prayer: Lord, sometimes I find myself thinking of what others will say about my service rather than thinking of how my gift of service will bless them. Grant me the grace to serve out of love expecting nothing in return. In Jesus name, amen.

A Resounding Gong And Clanging Cymbal

Message: When we have done good deeds to receive the accolades of men that is all the reward we receive. Paul compared that to the hoopla of gongs and cymbals. Serving others out of love, not the expectation of reward, must be the force that drives our good works.

Affirmation: I am fulfilling the Two Great Commands; I love God with my whole being and I love others as I love myself and that is my motivation to do good works.

Reflection: This devotion tells the story of two men reciting the Shepherd Psalm. Besides their age, what do you see as the difference between the two men? How can you know the shepherd of the psalm as the older man did?

Day Six

Service Without Love Produces Little Satisfaction

If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. - 1 Corinthians 13:2-3

There are many reasons people give to those in need. During the season when there are Salvation Army kettles in front of every store I find it hard to pass by without dropping something in. I'm not usually thinking of the needy who will benefit by my small gift, but I am thinking about what the person standing there ringing the bell will think of me if I don't put something in his red kettle.

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So, when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full" (Matthew 5:1-2).

The contrast to this "hypocritical" (gulp!) giving is the attitude of Jesus when he saw people in need. One passage in Matthew reads, "When he saw the crowds he had compassion on them..." He saw them, he felt their need, and he responded to their need. That is the love of God.

Doing good works to be seen by others, or out of a sense of duty, will bless the person receiving the good deed, but it will carry no blessing for the giver. When we have the Spirit of Christ our motivation will be love, and all involved, from the giver of the gifts, to the gatherer of the gifts, to the receiver of the gifts, will be blessed.

Prayer: Lord, I have not always given from the correct motivation. Grant me the grace of your love that I might see the need of those around me and be moved with compassion for them. In Jesus name. Amen.

Service Without Love Produces Little Satisfaction

Message: The contrast to this “hypocritical” (gulp!) giving is the attitude of Jesus when he saw people in need. One passage in Matthew reads, “When he saw the crowds he had compassion on them...” He saw them, he felt their need, and he responded to their need. That is the love of God. When we have the Spirit of Christ our motivation will be love.

Affirmation: I give to the work of God, not to be seen by others, but to express God’s love to those who need his grace.

Reflection: Carefully examine your motivation for the good deeds you do. Are you driven by a need to be appreciated, or are you driven the needs of others?

Love Is Patient And Kind

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. - 1 Corinthians 13:4

My wife's sister and her husband have adopted two beautiful children. Recently I had the opportunity to watch them interacting with the youngsters. I was impressed as I watched them using every opportunity to teach the children a small lesson in life. Their love for these two young boys is evident as they selflessly invest themselves in their children. It was easy to forget that the children were of a different race because of the self-less devotion they were shown.

We are called to love and serve out of a pure heart. We are not called to pick and choose who we might love and we are not called to decide how we will love; we are just called to give ourselves in love.

Christ is a very good example of this kind of love. Jesus was the very embodiment of love. No one has had more to give up for love than Christ. Philippians chapter two records the self-less love of Christ; "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant... and became obedient to death."

Another example is the Apostle Paul. In 2 Corinthians he was explaining what motivated him to give himself so completely to reaching people with the good news of Christ. He wrote, "If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. *For Christ's love compels us,*" (5:13).

It is not so hard to be patient and kind when we have taken ourselves out of the equation. When serving is not about envy, or pride, or boasting about what we have done, the love of God can flow through us to others.

Prayer: Lord, grant me the grace to love; simply to love with the love of Christ. Help me to serve others patiently and with kindness. In Jesus name, amen.

Love Is Patient And Kind

Message: It is not so hard to be patient and kind when we have taken ourselves out of the equation. When serving is not about envy, or pride, or boasting about what we have done, the love of God can flow through us to others. The Apostle Paul wrote, “If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. *For Christ’s love compels us,*” (2 Corinthians 5:13).

Affirmation: I am compelled by the love of God to serve, and even to sacrifice, for others and the kingdom of God.

Reflection: In reference to 2 Corinthians 5:13 think of someone you have known who demonstrated that kind of love. What would demonstrate one being out of their mind for the sake of God?

Day Eight

Love Forgets The Bad Stuff

[Love] is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. - 1 Corinthians 13:5

There are some folks I know who pray for the unsaved masses, but the individuals they see on the street are repulsive to them. These folks will cross the street to avoid an encounter with a homeless person and they will respond with an angry, "Get a job," if they are approached by a person of need. Love is not rude and it is not easily angered.

When Paul writes that love is not self-seeking he has hit the nail right on the head. Our natural way is to measure our response to another based upon the outcome we expect to receive for ourselves. The expression of love is not a response to our need for others; it is our response to the needs of others.

Some time ago I was meditating upon the concept of a purpose driven life that has become so popular. While I was meditating I felt the Lord drop the thought into my heart that a purpose driven life can only be effective in the kingdom of God if it is a love driven purpose. Many in the kingdom have been driven by purpose but have missed the component of love and their work has not produced the effect that God had intended.

We need to daily evaluate our love condition. I have an old car that has an oil leak. It's old and to fix it would require more than it is worth so I have found a suitable alternative. I check the oil regularly. Every couple of weeks I have to add a quart. If I wait too long a warning sign will flash on my control panel that says, "Oil Level Is Low."

Paul is giving us a way to measure our love level.

Prayer: I need your help Lord. Too often I find my life more about me and my needs than it is about others and their needs. Grant me the kind of love that reaches out to those who otherwise would be called unlovely. In Jesus name, amen.

Love Forgets The Bad Stuff

Message: Our natural way is to measure our response to another based upon the outcome we expect to receive for ourselves. The expression of love is not a response to our need for others; it is our response to the needs of others. We need to daily evaluate our love condition.

Affirmation: My expression of love does not come from my need to be acknowledged, but rather it is based on the needs of others.

Reflection: This devotion calls us to daily evaluate our love condition. How do we do that? How can we determine if our acts of kindness come from our need to be seen as one who cares, or if the motivation to do works of kindness is driven by love for God and others?

Day Nine

Love Rejoices In The Truth

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

- 1 Corinthians 13:6

This characteristic of love is so obvious that it seems redundant to even address it. Yet, there is an aspect of it that we need to explore. It is not so much about being pleased, or taking delight in the evil others do as it is about not realizing the value of truth and holding those who are under your authority accountable to truth.

I have a friend who is as good as gold. She would help anyone who comes along with a need. But the problem is that she brings people into her house out of concern for them, knowing that they are in need because of their own behaviors, yet she doesn't hold them accountable to what she knows they must do to secure a more productive life. She takes no joy in the truth. The consequence is chaos.

Most of us have had friends who would come around us and take delight in exposing the wrongs of others, or even making mistaken assumptions about the actions of others. We might not be happy about hearing it, but do we rejoice in correcting the person and speaking truth to them?

God is calling us to a walk which is not blind to evil, neither is it a walk that sees only the good - But he is calling us to a walk that clearly sees righteousness and that takes a stand for righteousness in a way which expresses the love of God.

Jesus told us that if we follow him and become his disciples then we will know the truth and the truth will set us free (John 8:31-32). When we delight in the truth and give no place to evil, then the fruit of our lives will be freedom.

Prayer: Lord, I do not want to have any kind of pleasure in evil. Not for myself or for anyone that I am able to influence. Grant me the grace to treasure truth and to rejoice in it, even when the truth hurts. Amen

Love Rejoices In The Truth

Message: God is calling us to a walk which is not blind to evil, neither is it a walk that sees only the good - But he is calling us to a walk that clearly sees righteousness and that takes a stand for righteousness in a way which expresses the love of God. When we delight in the truth and give no place to evil, then the fruit of our lives will be freedom.

Affirmation: I do not delight in evil and I do not fear evil, but I do delight in the truth and it is the truth which has set me free.

Reflection: The message of this devotion is not just to avoid evil ourselves but to identify evil and combat it with the truth. How can you see truth defeating evil when so many seem to be prospering in their evil ways?

Day Ten

Love Protects, Trusts, Hopes, Perseveres

[Love] always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. - 1 Corinthians 13:7

When I was in high school the book by Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, was required reading. One part of the story has always stayed with me. There was a man who was in love with the heroine in the story, but he was the victim of unrequited love. Though she did not return his love, he continued to love her through hardship, rejection and finally to his death. He literally sacrificed his life for her happiness. That is the kind of love Paul is talking about in this passage.

Love is not about self it is about other. When the focus of our affection is others then making sacrifices for the well-being of others becomes the path often traveled. When my children were small I rarely got more than three to four hours of sleep at one time because I would have to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. I never considered it a sacrifice, but it was an act of love. Love always perseveres.

Hope is an intrinsic characteristic of love. In fact, at the end of this chapter Paul writes, "Now these three remain: faith, hope and love." In this trilogy of life - faith, hope and love, love is the component that spawns faith which produces hope. Love is the garden where faith and hope grow. Love always hopes.

This chapter thirteen of 1 Corinthians is reminding us that love is more than an emotion, but it is a concern for others that demands a commitment. I remember seeing a flyer from a boys home years ago that had a picture of a boy carrying a smaller child. The caption on the picture was, "He's not heavy, he's my brother." Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres.

Prayer: Lord, immerse me in your love so that you can love others through me. Amen.

Love Protects, Trusts, Hopes, Perseveres

Message: Love is more than an emotion, but it is a concern for others that demands a commitment. At the end of this chapter Paul writes, “Now these three remain: faith, hope and love.” In this trilogy of life - faith, hope and love, love is the component that spawns faith which produces hope. Love is the garden where faith and hope grow. Love always hopes.

Affirmation: God’s love has given me hope and this hope drives me to persevere through every trial trusting God with the outcome.

Reflection: God’s agape (love) is at the core of all we are and all we have in him. Jesus told us that as his disciples we would be known by our love. Are you known by your love?

Love Never Fails

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. - 1 Corinthians 13:8

Love never fails. What a statement. In fact, it is a very challenging statement. Most of us can think of people that we once felt we loved then through a series of circumstances we came to the conclusion that we didn't love them anymore. I'm not just talking about romantic relationships; I'm also talking about friendships that for one reason or other just fell apart.

In those cases, did love fail, or did we just fail to love? Many of us have prayed, "Lord, increase my love for you and others." I'm not sure that can happen. Love either is or isn't. Care and concern can be measured out, but I'm not sure love can be. If we don't love anymore it is because we chose not to invest care and concern in the relationship anymore. Love hasn't failed, we have failed to love.

Here is something to consider. When Paul relates that love never fails, he goes on to state that even spiritual gifts have a limit; at some point prophecies will cease, gifts of tongues and knowledge will cease *but* love will never cease. Paul wasn't trying to define a time when these spiritual gifts would cease, but he was trying to remind us that our walk with God and work in the kingdom is not as much about our many gifts as it is about whether we love.

If we are not to become resounding gongs and clanging cymbals, then we are going to have to surrender to *agape* - God's love.

Prayer: Lord, too often I have focused on having a word to speak and have missed opportunities to love. Grant me a new baptism of love so that all that I do is bathed in your love. In Jesus name, amen.

Love Never Fails

Message: Love never fails. Even spiritual gifts have a limit; at some point prophecies will cease, gifts of tongues and knowledge will cease *but* love will never cease. In this writing Paul wasn't trying to define a time when these spiritual gifts would cease, but he was trying to remind us that our walk with God and work in the kingdom is not as much about our many gifts as it is about whether we love

Affirmation: I value spiritual gifts, but I also realize that unless those gifts are covered by God's love they become meaningless.

Reflection: Too many today seek spiritual gifts without giving much thought to how they love. Ask yourself if your motivation is to be "gifted" or is it to serve?

Tough Love Is Holding Myself Accountable

Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith. Grace be with you. - 1 Timothy 6:20

Paul loved Timothy as a son. In fact he calls him his “son in the gospel.” As a father he is concerned that Timothy does well. Paul had given Timothy the great responsibility of leading the church at Ephesus and being a concerned father in one place he instructed Timothy to carefully watch his life so that those who are older do not despise his youth. In this passage Paul is teaching Timothy to hold himself accountable to the gifts of ministry and responsibility that he had been given.

We often think of tough love as the love which holds others accountable, but tough love begins with ourselves. Do we love the other in our life enough to commit ourselves to accountability? Are we willing to guard our thoughts and examine them often to see if we are developing patterns of thinking that will affect the way we treat others? Paul warns Timothy to turn away from godless chatter and faulty arguments.

The Message has a great way of presenting this passage; “And oh, my dear Timothy, guard the treasure you were given! Guard it with your life. Avoid the talk-show religion and the practiced confusion of the so-called experts. People caught up in a lot of talk can miss the whole point of faith.”

Hold yourself accountable in your words and your thoughts. That’s a tough job that only you can do.

Prayer: Lord, I like to argue the fine points that sometimes get to the place of splitting hairs over inconsequential issues. Forgive me of that and grant me the grace to focus only on the truly important issues of the faith. Amen.

Tough Love Is Holding Myself Accountable

Message: Tough love begins with ourselves. Do we love the other in our life enough to commit ourselves to accountability? Are we willing to guard our thoughts and examine them often to see if we are developing patterns of thinking that will affect the way we treat others?

Affirmation: I hold myself accountable to God and responsible spiritual leaders so that my thoughts and actions do not contradict what I speak.

Reflection: Does God's love truly move us to accountability? What do you think the Message meant by, "Avoid the talk-show religion?" Give some thought to some signs that you might be avoiding accountability.

Day Thirteen

Tough Love Is Holding Others Accountable

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden for that would be of no advantage to you. - Hebrews 13:17

This passage is a double edged sword. The first application is to each of us as members of the body of Christ. We are to listen carefully to those who are in spiritual authority over us and submit to their wisdom as they are led of the Lord. That would be called hard love. We love our leaders, but it is sometimes hard to follow them.

The other application of this passage is tough love. The writer is not only referencing the responsibility of believers to submit to their leaders he is also pointing out that leaders have a grave responsibility to give account to God for those over whom the Lord has given them authority.

All of us have someone, and some of us have many, over whom we have been given responsibility to lead spiritually. It may be our children, or in the case of leaders in the church, whole congregations. Our responsibility to them is to present the truth then encourage them in the truth while we challenge them to order their lives accordingly.

We have known parents who would tell their children what to do then not follow through with holding them accountable to what they had been told. We have seen how those children turned out. We have a responsibility to hold accountable our children and others we are responsible for because we will have to give an account to God for them.

God has given all of us knowledge of life and we are the caretakers of this knowledge. God has also given us the responsibility of investing this knowledge in others. It is how we invest and how we hold others accountable that God will ask us to account for.

Prayer: Lord, this is not the easy part of serving you, but it is a necessary part. Grant me the grace to do it well. Amen.

Tough Love Is Holding Others Accountable

Message: This passage not only references the responsibility of believers to submit to their leaders it is also pointing out that leaders have a grave responsibility to give account to God for those over whom the Lord has given them authority. Our responsibility to others is to present the truth, then encourage them in the truth, while we challenge them to order their lives accordingly.

Affirmation: I accept the responsibility of being accountable to those who have spiritual leadership over me and to hold those accountable over whom I have the responsibility to lead.

Reflection: Give some thought to the dual responsibility of being accountable and holding others accountable. How can you do that while continuing to manifest Gods' Love?

Hard Love Is Loving The Unlovely

I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. - Matthew 25:35-36

Jesus is describing those here many would call society's outcasts. We see them nearly every day. They're walking down the street with a pack on their back and a bedroll under their arm. Their clothes are dirty, as are their faces, and they probably smell bad. These are the unlovely; those who society tries to hide.

These are also the ones of whom Jesus said, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." Jesus was telling his disciples that they haven't loved him until they have loved these the world calls the unlovely.

I sometimes wonder what would happen to the homeless population of our country if every Christian family committed to care for just one of them. I'm talking about visiting with them regularly, finding out what their needs are; making sure they have food and a way to keep their clothes clean, and in some cases provide a place for them to stay.

I challenge you to read Matthew 25:31-46 every day for a week and every time you read it take the time pray and meditate upon what the Lord is saying. Conclude by asking him how you can answer the call of these, the most needy in our community.

When Jesus looked over the crowd one day (Matthew 9:36) he was moved with compassion for them. Then he told his disciples to pray for laborers. *Pray for laborers.*

Prayer: Father, I confess that I have not loved people of great need enough. I have looked at them as unlovely and have left it at that. Grant me the grace to love them as I love you. In Jesus name, amen.

Hard Love Is Loving The Unlovely

Message: You are challenged to read Matthew 25:31-46 every day for a week and every time you read it take the time pray and meditate upon what the Lord is saying. Conclude by asking him how you can answer the call of these, the most needy in our community

Affirmation: I am committed to serving the most needy in my community. I daily seek God how I can do this in the most effective manner.

Reflection: What were your thoughts when you last saw a homeless person standing on a corner holding a sign asking for help? Jesus was telling us that when we see one of those we are seeing one of the least of his brothers. Think about it.

Day Fifteen

Hard Love Is Loving My Enemies

You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. - Mathew 5:43-44

The Old Testament introduces the concept of “An eye for an eye,” and it is a good system to keep evil in check. However, it only keeps evil in check it does nothing to overcome evil. In this passage Jesus is introducing an entirely new concept. Instead of retaliating for evil done to us we are to love those who perpetrate the evil. That is hard love.

Jesus said, “Do not take revenge, my friends... On the contrary If your enemy is hungry feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Matthew 12:19-21). This can only be done by the grace of God as he puts his love in our heart.

There was a time many years ago when someone had done a very bad thing against me. They didn’t do it once but continued to do it. I started thinking about retaliating in the same manner. You know, “An eye for an eye.” After all, they deserved it. After a little while I began to notice that I was changing. I not only treated that person badly but it was overflowing onto others. I finally realized that my attitude toward that person was making me like them so I changed the way I treated them. I began to treat them with respect and I was courteous to them. I even did kind things for them.

I realized that because of the way I was responding to that person I was being overcome by evil myself, and I didn’t want that. I chose to overcome the evil done against me by returning kindness.

Did that person make amends with me? No, but neither did they change me. Another blessing was that those who were observing the whole thing were able to see the Love of God in action. It’s hard love, but love your enemies; it’s worth it.

Prayer: Lord, continue to give me the grace to surrender my need for revenge to you and trust your love that flows through me. In Jesus name, amen.

Hard Love Is Loving My Enemies

Message: Jesus said, “Do not take revenge, my friends... On the contrary If your enemy is hungry feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Matthew 12:19-21). This can only be done by the grace of God as he puts his love in our heart.

Affirmation: I want to obey this command, but I can only love those who would be my enemy, and do acts of kindness for them when I am immersed in God’s love. God, immerse me, baptize me, in your love.

Reflection: Jesus calls us to do something that is near impossible for us to do in our own power. Loving those who treat us as an enemy and returning kindness for their hatred and anger requires God’s love. Think about it.

Hard Love Is Standing Strong In Adversity

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. - Matthew 5:10-11

A true test of faith and love is how we are affected by adversity and how we handle persecution. Many believers have endured persecution beyond human ability because they were immersed in the love of God and their faith released God's strength in them.

Paul penned these words to the church at Corinth, "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4:8-9). When Paul spoke of these things he knew his subject well because in another place he lists his persecutions; stoned and left for dead, thrown to the wild beasts, five times he was beaten with rods and more (2 Corinthians 11).

The amazing thing about what Paul endured was his attitude, not only about his persecutions, but his attitude about his persecutors as well. In 1 Corinthians he writes, "When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly" (4:12-13). That is hard love.

Our love of God is tested by persecution. Have you been persecuted lately? Have others spoken ill of you for no apparent reason? Have you been misjudged, accused, ridiculed, or just ignored? All of these actions against us are tests of our faith and love. I encourage you to look inside of yourself and see how you handle adversity.

If our hope is in him and his kingdom then our response to persecutions and persecutors will be love without restraint.

Prayer: Lord, I'm not quite there yet. Persecutions and persecutors are still a test of my faith. I ask you for the grace to love as you would love. In Jesus name, amen.

Hard Love Is Standing Strong In Adversity

Message: Our love of God is tested by persecution. Have you been persecuted lately? Have others spoken ill of you for no apparent reason? Have you been misjudged, accused, ridiculed, or just ignored? All of these actions against us are tests of our faith and love. If our hope is in him and his kingdom then our response to persecutions and persecutors will be love without restraint.

Affirmation: It is the love of God in me which gives me the strength, courage and faith to love even those who are persecuting me.

Reflection: “Who are the ones persecuting believers because of righteousness,” is the question we should ask. In Jesus time it was the Jewish religious leaders. Today it is often other believers who have a different denominational or doctrinal orientation. How should we respond?

Day Seventeen

Hard Love Is Loving Friends Who Oppose You

Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him...They had such a hard disagreement that they parted company. - Acts 15:36-41

Paul, and his ministry partner Barnabas, were in Antioch delivering a message to the church there when Paul felt the need to go back through the area where they had been and strengthen the churches there. Barnabas wanted to take his nephew, John Mark, with them, but Paul refused to let him come because he had deserted them in an earlier trip and he didn't think that Mark was ready yet.

These two good friends came to a disagreement that was so strong that they finally split up and each one went a different way. There are times when we are not going to be in agreement with our friends. That doesn't mean that they are wrong, or even that we are wrong; it just means that we each have a different perspective. Our challenge is to keep from making the disagreement a personal issue and allowing seeds of resentment to grow into a harvest of bitterness.

We have all known good friendships that were destroyed because they could not accept the differences of the other. It is a mark of maturity, and of real *agape* to be able to disagree without allowing that disagreement to destroy the relationship.

Even though Paul and Barnabas went separate ways on this issue, they did not allow it to destroy their friendship. Later, when Paul was in prison he wrote to the church at Colossae giving them instructions to receive John Mark and welcome him as a representative of Paul. Even when it is hard we must love our friends when they oppose us.

Prayer: Lord, it is so easy to allow my ego to get in the way of a good friendship when we are in disagreement. Grant me the grace to continue to love even when I don't understand the choices of my friends. In Jesus name, amen.

Hard Love Is Loving Friends Who Oppose You

Message: When we have strong disagreement with our friends or partners it doesn't mean that they are wrong, or even that we are wrong; it just means that we each have a different perspective. Our challenge is to keep from making the disagreement a personal issue and allowing seeds of resentment to grow into a harvest of bitterness.

Affirmation: I am careful not to allow differences of opinion to cause a division between myself and those with whom I serve.

Reflection: People of strong character tend to have strong opinions and often contend passionately for their cause. What are some practical steps we can take to insure that our differences of opinion on non-essential issues do not become cause for strife and division?

Day Eighteen

Hard Love Costs More Than We Want To Give

Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. - Matthew 5:10-11

While Jesus was teaching a very religious young man came to him asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus responded by telling him to keep the law. The young man was very proud of himself because he had been faithful to follow the letter of the law. He answered Jesus, “All these I have kept. What do I still lack?”

It is interesting that this young man had rigidly fulfilled all that his religion asked him to do and he still felt that he was lacking something. What was he lacking? Was it a lack of commitment to his religion? Not at all; he followed the faith to the letter. Then what was it?

His problem was that while he had the discipline to follow the law, his heart was filled with greed and self-aggrandizement. He was willing to do everything but surrender the thing that meant the most to him, his wealth. Even his question, “What thing must I do to inherit eternal life?” demonstrated that his life was all about himself and how he could get the most out of it.

Many of us are like this young man. We want all that God has for us, but it is more about what we want from him than it is about what we will do for him. Love demands that we give ourselves unselfishly without expectation of return.

This man had made room in his life for religion, but he wasn't willing to fully surrender his own ambition. He walked away sad because he realized that the hope Jesus was offering would cost him more than he was willing to give.

Prayer: Lord, I want all that you have to offer, but I struggle with what it will cost me. Grant me a heart to surrender all to you; all of my ambition, all of my desires for wealth and achievement, and all of my desire for recognition. Amen.

Hard Love Costs More Than We Want To Give

Message: It is human nature to grasp for more while we hold on to what we have. We want all that God has for us, but it is more about what we want from him than it is about what we will do for him. Love demands that we give ourselves unselfishly without expectation of return

Affirmation: Giving myself to the service of God is not about what I hope to earn by it. Rather it is what I do because it is the right thing to do.

Reflection: The story of the rich young man could be the story for most of us. We are willing to be religious as long as it doesn't become too personal. His treasure kept him from receiving God's best. Do you have something which is keeping you from experiencing God's best?

Day Nineteen

Love The Lord Your God With All Your Heart

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all you heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. - Deuteronomy 6:4-5

It was the tendency of people in the early days of Israel to worship many gods. They had gods for everything; rain, draught, livestock, love, and the list grew to hundreds. People today are not much different. In India the Hindu people have listed over 3 million gods. Why all the gods?

Religion is a complex thing. People adhere to a religion for two basic reasons; fear and hope. Some out of fear of loss, or fear of death. Others adhere to religion out of hope; hope for a future, hope for prosperity, etc. Both of those reasons inspire people to keep looking for something better and more affective in realizing their purposes for believing.

God was calling Israel to faith in himself as the almighty; the one who stands alone. The challenge Israel had was they had difficulty believing that one God could do it all, and they had doubts as to whether the one God would come through with the promised blessings.

Israel's challenge is mirrored in society today. Religious people today have difficulty putting all of their eggs in one basket, so to speak. People tend to use religion to secure their place in heaven, and some use it for social and other benefits, but they trust other entities for the rest of their life. There is the government, career, insurance, and all the entities of our life that we trust. In Israel's day those entities would be called gods. We should discover who we trust.

Just as Israel was commanded to love and trust God with all of their heart, soul and strength, so we are challenged in the same way today. Love him, there is no other god.

Prayer: Lord, in times of fearfulness I tend to trust my own resources rather than to trust you. Grant me the grace to love and trust you above all things, even my own abilities. Let my fear be in reverence of you and let my hope be inspired by your love. In Jesus name, amen.

Love The Lord Your God With All Your Heart

Message: God is calling followers of Christ to faith in himself as the almighty; the one who stands alone. The challenge we have is the believing that God will come through with the promised blessings. Just as Israel was commanded to love and trust God with all of their heart, soul and strength, so we are challenged in the same way today. Love him, there is no other god.

Affirmation: I understand that there is just one God and I am fully committed to him. He is the Lord God Almighty, and he is manifest to mankind through Jesus, the Christ.

Reflection: This devotion speaks of how ancient peoples tended to ascribe to various gods the responsibility for much of what they faced in life. Do people today have gods in their life which take the place of Almighty God?

Day Twenty

Love Your Neighbor

“Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”
“What is written in the law?” Jesus replied, “How do you read it?”
He answered: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, love your neighbor as yourself” - Luke 10:25-27

“Good answer!” said Jesus. “Do it and you’ll live.”

Looking for a loophole, he asked, “And just how would you define ‘neighbor’?”

Jesus answered by telling a story. “There was once a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. On the way he was attacked by robbers. They took his clothes, beat him up, and went off leaving him half-dead. Luckily, a priest was on his way down the same road, but when he saw him he angled across to the other side. Then a religious man showed up; he also avoided the injured man.

“A Samaritan traveling the road came on him. When he saw the man’s condition, his heart went out to him. He gave him first aid, disinfecting and bandaging his wounds. Then he lifted him onto his donkey, led him to an inn, and made him comfortable. In the morning he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, “Take good care of him. If it costs any more, put it on my bill - I’ll pay you on my way back.’

“What do you think? Which of the three became a neighbor to the man attacked by robbers?”

“The one who treated him kindly,” the religion scholar responded.

Jesus said, “Go and do the same.”- (Luke 10:29-37 The Message Bible)

I guess that just about covers it.

Prayer: OK Lord, I confess. I am not always a good neighbor. There are times I have not responded with kindness to those in need. Forgive me for my selfishness and give me the grace to love my neighbor. In Jesus name, amen.

Love Your Neighbor

Message: Who is our neighbor? Jesus defined our neighbor, according to the story of the good Samaritan, anyone who has a need with which we are able to help; even if that person is my sworn enemy. Notice: Jews and Samaritans considered themselves enemies and had nothing to do with each other. Jesus called them neighbors.

Affirmation: Jesus pointed out that my neighbor is anyone I come across who has a need that I can answer and I am to offer my assistance to them.

Reflection: On how many levels should we see our enemy as our neighbor? The grumpy person next door? That person at work who is trying to get our job? What about those in politics we disagree with? And here is the big one: What about the country that considers us their enemy? Give this some careful thought.

Love Your Brother

If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

- 1 John 4:20-21

Why wouldn't we love our brother? After all, he's the closest thing to God we know... or is he? When God made man he said that he had created him in his own image. Exactly what he meant we're not sure, but we do know that he didn't say that about any of his other created beings.

If we are created in the likeness of our creator, then why is it so difficult to love one another? The point John was trying to make was that we who were created in the image of God are all part of one another - we are literally the body, or temple, of God on earth.

The Apostle Paul speaks of Christ being the head and we, the believers, are the body of Christ. If we, corporately, are the body of Christ, then how can we not love one another as members of the same body? It looks like John was making that point.

I know what you might be thinking. Some people are not hard to love at all, and some people are difficult to love, but there are those that are just impossible to love. Are we given the option of being able to exclude the unlovable from our love list? I don't think so. I am convinced that there was a problem of unlovable people being accepted into the body and that was the reason John pointed out that we can't say we love God if we don't love our brothers and sisters.

It is true. If we can't love our brother that we can see, how can we love God Who we can't see? What about your love list - who have you excluded? Think about it.

Prayer: Lord, I'm not good at being gracious, and I'm even worse at loving those who I don't see as being lovable. I need your grace to enable me to love others the in the same way that I want to love you. In Jesus name, amen.

Love Your Brother

Message: If we can't love our brother who we can see, how can we love God Who we can't see? The point being made is we who were created in the image of God are all part of one another - we are literally the body, or temple, of God on earth. If we can't love our brother, then we are disrespecting the temple of God.

Affirmation: I can say with confidence that I love God because I also love my brother, even when others see my brother as unlovable.

Reflection: Who is our brother? Is it only another believer? Or does it include others who are not yet followers of Christ? Is the question, "Who is my brother" a parallel question to, "Who is my neighbor?" Think on it.

Love Your Spouse

As the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. - Ephesians 5:24-25

When two people are joined together in marriage they are to become as one. Physically, they will always be two, but functionally they are one. That means each is committed to the welfare of the other. Commitment on that level requires selflessness which can only come through love.

Sometimes people get hung up on verse 24, “wives should submit to their husbands” and miss the point. Verse 21 reads, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” In verses 22-33 he explains what he means.

Here is something we might consider. There are three verses that deal with the wife submitting to the husband, but there are nine verses which deal with how a husband is to love his wife. Isn't it interesting that it takes three times as much instruction to put a man in his place than it does for a woman? Just a thought.

The point of this passage from v21-33 is submitting to one another. Culturally, the women of that day had been trained in submitting to their husband so little was needed to be said about that. It was different for the husband however. The man was considered to be the hunter, the provider, but that was not thought of as being submitted to the needs of his wife and family, it was just what a man did.

Loving our spouse means that we are committed to their welfare, security and comfort – and that applies to both the husband and the wife. A Biblical husband is submitted to the needs of his wife just as the wife is submitted to the needs of her husband. Love is seeing the needs of my spouse first.

Prayer: Lord, help me to learn the lesson of being submitted to the needs of my spouse. Grant me the grace of agape love toward my spouse and help me to consider her/his welfare, security and comfort. In Jesus name, amen.

Love Your Spouse

Message: Loving our spouse means that we are committed to their welfare, security and comfort – and that applies to both the husband and the wife. A Biblical husband is submitted to the needs of his wife just as the wife is submitted to the needs of her husband. Love is seeing the needs of my spouse first.

Affirmation: I serve my spouse, not out of a sense of duty, but because of the love I have in my heart.

Reflection: It would be good to read the entire passage dealing with submitting to one another. Ephesians 5:21-6:9 covers most of our relationships: Marriage, children, employer and employee. Read that entire passage and give some thought to how it might apply to you in your relationships.

Love Your Enemies

Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

- Luke 6:35-36

I think this passage carries this love thing just a little bit too far. Love my enemies? How can they be my enemy if I love them? That is a real conundrum. Can a person really be my enemy if I love him?

That may be the point. Others may want to be my enemy, but we make it very difficult for them when we give them kindness instead of responding to their assaults and insults with the same as they give us.

We can all agree that it is very difficult, if not impossible to love those who treat us as enemies. It looks like that is another point Jesus is making. He is giving us a task that is impossible for us to perform in our own ability just to see if we will trust him to work his will through us.

I don't know about you, but I find it impossible to love my enemies. At least in my own abilities. So what is Jesus trying to tell us?

If it is impossible to do this in our natural self perhaps Jesus is trying to tell us that we must depend upon the supernatural nature of the Christ in us. If God is love, as it says in 1 John, and if God truly does live in us, then wouldn't it carry that our new nature, our God-nature, would also be love?

Maybe this whole "love your enemy" thing is a test to see if we are still living in our old nature or if we are living in our new nature. That is something to think about.

Prayer: Lord, all too often I find myself having less than loving affection for my enemies. Grant me the grace of full surrender to your nature so I can fulfill this command of Christ to love my enemies. In Jesus name, amen.

Love Your Enemies

Message: Jesus is trying to tell us that we must depend upon the supernatural nature of the Christ in us in order to love our enemies. If God is love, as it says in 1 John, and if God truly does live in us, then wouldn't it carry that our new nature, our God-nature, would also be love? Maybe this whole "love your enemy" thing is a test to see if we are still living in our old nature or if we are living in our new nature.

Affirmation: I do not have to try and love my enemies, I just have to submit to God's love and he will love them through me.

Reflection: Think of someone you have considered to be an enemy. What would it take to love them as Christ loves them? Here is a good idea: Think of what they should do to show you that they aren't an enemy, then do that to them as if they weren't your enemy.

Day Twenty Four

Love Those Who Persecute You

I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? - Matthew 5:44

An order like this cannot be taken seriously if the one who gave it didn't apply it to his own life. Luke 23:33-35 records, "When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him... Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' And they divided up his clothes by casting lots."

Jesus loved when loving didn't make sense. He forgave when justice would demand retaliation and revenge. How could he? He could because he was the very embodiment of God. The God who inhabits heaven is the God who was in Christ.

The only way we can truly love those who persecute us and who hurl unmerited insults at us is to be immersed in the love of God. It is the God in us who loves those who are not lovely toward us.

Jesus could endure suffering at the hands of his tormentors because he saw beyond himself and saw the kingdom of God.

We must have the same kingdom perspective. When persecuted we must have a kingdom perspective in our response.

Prayer: Lord, help me to have a kingdom perspective and not to respond according to my need, but according to the needs of others and according to how the kingdom of God will be effected. I pray in Jesus name. Amen.

Love Those Who Persecute You

Message: The only way we can truly love those who persecute us and who hurl unmerited insults at us is to be immersed in the love of God. It is the God in us who loves those who are not lovely toward us. Jesus could endure suffering at the hands of his tormentors because he saw beyond himself and saw the kingdom of God.

Affirmation: I respond to persecution with the consideration of how the offender will be affected and how the kingdom of God will be affected.

Reflection: What is the most common consideration when people respond to persecution or an offensive person? It is how we are affected. What if we turned that around and first considered how our response will affect the offender from the perspective of the kingdom of God?

Love Yourself

Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. - Matthew 22:37-39

In this interesting passage Jesus gives three objects of love: God, neighbor and self. We have often emphasized loving God, and that is a correct understanding of this passage. We have also emphasized loving our neighbor which is a noble calling.

It is this third object of love that I want to address today. Some have said that we must love ourselves if we are to love our neighbor, and there is some truth to that, but I don't think that was what Jesus meant.

When Jesus said to love our neighbor as ourselves his emphasis was on the neighbor, not on ourselves. It was a given that people would love themselves and Jesus was saying that we should give the same respect and consideration to others as we expect to get from them.

It is difficult, though, to love another if we do not have a proper respect for who we are as an individual. Sometimes we lose ourselves in serving and become frustrated with the lack of response by those we are serving and begin to resent what we feel forced to do for them.

That is often what comes from not caring enough about ourselves to keep a balance in our life. Even Jesus had times when he knew he needed to get away to recharge his emotional and spiritual energy.

Don't be afraid to love yourself - you will serve better.

Prayer: Lord, I need a healthy love for myself so I can serve others in the way you have ordained. Give me wisdom to serve as you served and to retreat when I need it. Amen.

Love Yourself

Message: It is difficult to love another if we do not have a proper respect for who we are as an individual. Sometimes we lose ourselves in serving and become frustrated with the lack of response by those we are serving and begin to resent what we feel forced to do for them. That is often what comes from not caring enough about ourselves to keep a balance in our life.

Affirmation: I have grown to respect who I am in Christ and it is the person I have become in Christ that leads me love and serve others.

Reflection: There must be a balance of love between God, others, and ourselves. How can we love God and others as we should and balance that with a healthy respect for who we are ourselves?

Day Twenty Six

Love Him and Trust Him

Many are the woes of the wicked, but the Lord's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him. - Psalm 32:10

I have done some thinking along the way concerning the relationship between God and man. In the beginning there was perfect love, perfect unity and perfect trust. Then, a seed of doubt was sown by the evil one and man began to question God.

Man failed the trust test when he listened to the evil one. Even though man failed the test, God still loved him and has since that time shaken heaven and earth calling man back into loving and trusting relationship.

When man failed the test of trust he lost much. He lost eternal life and he lost his home in the garden God had made for him. Among his greatest losses was the peace of God. Man has been trying to find that peace ever since.

It is only when we return to trust God and His love for us that we can truly know peace. The Scripture says, "You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you" (Isaiah 26:3). The peace of God is given to those who will love him and trust him.

The book of Proverbs tells us that, "Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe" (Proverbs 29:25). I have tried trusting man and the problem with that is even the best of men tend to fail the trust test at some point, but God never fails.

Love him, trust him, and He will wrap his loving arms around you and keep you safe in the midst of all that life throws at you.

Prayer: Lord, grant me the grace to love you and to trust you so that you may wrap your loving arms around me and make me secure in the trials of my life. In Jesus name, amen.

Love Him and Trust Him

Message: The Scripture says, "You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you" (Isaiah 26:3). The peace of God is given to those who will love him and trust him. It is only when we return to trust God and His love for us that we can truly know peace.

Affirmation: I have set my hope on Christ and my mind is fixed on him. I have perfect peace because my mind is steadfastly set on him.

Reflection: Among things lost in the fall of man is perfect peace. The primary cause of addictions and other behaviors that are ultimately self-destructive is a quest for inner peace. How do we maintain "perfect peace" as followers of Christ?

Day Twenty Seven

The Love Triangle

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. - 1 Corinthians 13:13

When we think of a love triangle we usually think of an unhealthy relationship getting ready to explode. This devotion is not about that kind of triangle. It is about three components to a healthy Christian walk.

Faith, hope and love are as connected as the three sides to a triangle, and each is integral to the other. When Paul had finished instructing about the importance of love in the life of a believer he concludes with this summary: "And now these three remain; faith, hope and love."

Our relationship with God begins by hearing, hearing leads to believing and believing leads to faith. Faith then is spurred on by hope. Faith is valueless if it is not accompanied by hope.

Faith is the motor which drives hope and hope is the tool which releases love. It is possible to have faith and hope without love, we see that often shown in despotic leaders of nations and people - but it is impossible to have true faith in God and hope in his promises without having his love released into our hearts.

James says, "Show me your faith without deeds and I will show you my faith by what I do" (James 2:18). My question is this: What was driving James to do good deeds? It was the love which accompanies faith and hope.

Here is my question to you: Does your faith and hope produce love for others? What is the expression of that love in your lifestyle? Faith and Hope produce a love driven purpose for our lives.

Prayer: Lord, help me to allow my faith and hope to be driven by your love. I don't want to be a two sided triangle. Release your love into my heart. In Jesus name.

The Love Triangle

Message: Faith is the motor which drives hope and hope is the tool which releases love. It is possible to have faith and hope without love, we see that often shown in despotic leaders of nations and people - but it is impossible to have true faith in God and hope in his promises without having his love released into our hearts.

Affirmation: Faith has given me hope and hope has opened the door for God's love to flow through me.

Reflection: Sometimes we speak of faith in the context of "the faith," speaking of the doctrines we adhere to as Christians. That is different than our personal faith. Can you think of some ways doctrinal faith and personal faith are different?

Day Twenty Eight

The Call to Selfless Love

Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." - John 21:16

Peter had failed Jesus. Jesus had told him that before the rooster crowed declaring the morning had come he would deny Christ three times. Just as he denied Jesus for the third time the rooster crowed and Peter was immediately overcome with shame and guilt.

He was still hurting over his failure when he said to his fellow disciples, "I'm going fishing, anyone want to go?" So they all went out and fished all night, but they caught nothing.

Then Jesus called to them from the shore and told them to throw their nets out one more time. When they did they caught an abundance of fish.

Later, sitting around a morning fire eating the fish they had just caught Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you truly love me?" "You know I do," Peter responded. Then Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." It was no coincidence that Peter denied Christ three times and Jesus asked him to affirm his love three times.

Three times he asked him, three times Peter responded that he did, and three times Jesus called him to a commitment to serve. Jesus seemed to be teaching Peter that love is more than an emotion - it is a commitment to a principle that is greater than ourselves.

Declaring our love for God is not enough. We must show our love by being committed to serving God and others. Is your love of God about what God can do for you or is it about what you can do for him.

Prayer: Lord, help me to love you and service in the kingdom in the selfless way you love me. In Jesus name, amen.

The Call to Selfless Love

Message: Declaring our love for God is not enough. We must show our love by being committed to serving God and others. Is your love of God about what God can do for you or is it about what you can do for him.

Affirmation: Loving God is demonstrated by loving others. I cannot love God without loving those around me. I serve God by serving others.

Reflection: Peter had failed Jesus horribly, yet, Jesus is now asking Peter if he loves him. What was the sign of Peter's love that Jesus was looking for? If God was to ask you how you are showing your love for him what would you be able to tell him?

Day Twenty Nine

The Fruit of the Spirit is Love

The fruit of the Spirit is Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

- Galatians 5:22-23

When we think of the source of fruit we think of a fruit tree, or a berry vine. The picture we get from this passage in Galatians is a tree called Spirit which is bearing certain fruit. We call it "fruit of the Spirit."

This fruit of the Spirit is much different than the fruit of a normal human life. The first fruit mentioned is love. The Greek word translated love is *agape*. This is a word that is unique to Scripture, it is not found anywhere else in Greek literature.

Agape is used in reference to the special kind of love which comes from God. In Scripture it is used for the relationship between the Father and the Son, Between Christ and his church, and between believers.

This fruit of the Spirit, love, *agape*, flows naturally from those who are born of the Spirit and walk in the Spirit. This love gives beyond what is reasonable, as in the example we are given in John 3:16, "For God so loved (agape) the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes upon would not perish but have everlasting life."

Sometimes it is hard to love those closest to us and it is even harder to love those who persecute us and misuse us. It is downright impossible to love our enemies, yet we are called to do just that. How are we to do that?

It is the Spirit in us that loves the unlovely. When we are truly living in the Spirit He loves through us. I suppose a true test of whether we are living in the Spirit is to do a love check-up. Do you love as God loves?

Prayer: Lord, grant me the grace of being saturated, baptized, with agape love. In Jesus name, amen.

The Fruit of the Spirit is Love

Message: It is the Spirit in us that loves the unlovely. When we are truly living in the Spirit He loves through us. I suppose a true test of whether we are living in the Spirit is to do a love check-up. Do you love as God loves

Affirmation: I can only have the fruit of agape, God's love, in my life when I am submitted to Holy Spirit and he is bringing forth that fruit in me.

Reflection: It is the DNA of a tree which produces the fruit it bears. If we are expected to grow "fruit of the Spirit" then we must have Holy Spirit DNA flowing through us. How can we have Holy Spirit flowing through and be bearing fruit of the Spirit?

Day Thirty

Love the Truth

Buy the truth and do not sell it; get wisdom, discipline and understanding. - Proverbs 23:23

Pilate, with Jesus standing before him, asked the question multitudes have been asking for centuries, "What is truth?" And, just like Pilate, the multitudes are not as interested in the truth as they are in figuring out a way to protect themselves.

I ask the question: What is truth? Truth is the absence of falsehood. It is the factual representation of the way something really is. In reference to God it is the actual and factual revelation of himself.

The psalmist declared, "The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold" (Psalm 119:72). When we treasure God's truth more than the riches of this world we will begin to understand his truth.

Jesus had just told his disciples that he was going away, but he would come back and get them. He then said, "You know the way to the place where I am going."

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

Jesus answered Thomas with a revelation that has been a standard to the Christian faith ever since. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:3-6)

Christ is the ultimate truth, the epitome of God's revelation of himself. The only way to the Father is through Jesus the Christ. The only way to the life the Father offers is through Jesus the Christ. Jesus is the truth manifest.

Prayer: Thank you for showing the way to truth and giving us your life - everlasting life. In Jesus name. Amen.

Love the Truth

Message: When we treasure God's truth more than the riches of this world we will begin to understand his truth. Christ is the ultimate truth, the epitome of God's revelation of himself. The only way to the Father is through Jesus Christ. The only way to the life the Father offers is through Jesus Christ. Jesus is truth incarnate.

Affirmation: Jesus Christ is truth incarnate. I have embraced Christ as Lord and Savior, therefore, the truth of God is in me.

Reflection: If I say I have the truth, but I do not love others as Christ loves them, do I really have the truth? Give some thought to the idea of what our life should look like if we have truly embraced Jesus who claimed to be the way and the truth and the life.

The Power of Love

I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. - Ephesians 3:17-20

Paul had a special love for the believers that he had ministered to and the church at Ephesus was special to him. In chapter one his prayer is that they would have a spirit of wisdom and revelation, that they would know the hope to which they were called, their inheritance in Christ and the incomparably great power God had given them.

In chapter three he offers another prayer. This prayer is that these strong believers would be rooted and established in love and they would realize how wide, how long, how high and how deep is the love Christ. Oh, that today we could fully grasp how great is the love God has for us.

Paul often spoke of God in us as our heritage in Christ. In Colossians 1:27 he calls this the great mystery and the hope of glory. In our passage today he links love to being filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

A measure of being mature in Christ is the degree to which his love controls our life. In chapter four of this book Paul speaks of spiritual leaders bringing the body to unity and maturity and thereby gaining the full measure of the fullness of Christ.

As we grow in love we grow in maturity until we reach the fullness of the measure of God in us. It should be our prayer that God grant us the grace to grow in his love.

Prayer: Lord, help me to be fully surrendered to your love that I may grow in maturity and to the fullness of the measure of Christ in me. In Jesus name, amen.

The Power of Love

Message: In chapter four of Ephesians Paul speaks of spiritual leaders bringing the body of Christ to unity and maturity and thereby gaining the full measure of the fullness of Christ. As we grow in love we grow in maturity until we reach the fullness of the measure of God in us. It should be our prayer that God grant us the grace to grow in his love.

Affirmation: I am growing in God's grace and his love. He gives me great power as I mature and grow into the fullness of the stature of Christ.

Reflection: Are you really growing into maturity as a follower of Christ? Give some thought to the idea of what a mature follower of Christ would look like.

Tips for Leading a Small Group

The model for small group ministry is in Acts 2:42-47, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer... Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people."

The components of a successful small group are:

- ✓ Sound teaching material - "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching"
- ✓ Devoted to the fellowship of believers.
- ✓ Devoted to breaking bread together.
- ✓ Devoted to prayer together.
- ✓ Devoted to meeting together regularly.

Next month we'll have some more tips on leading a small group.

To get more insights on leading small groups go to:

www.dailygodwalk.org

If you have any questions, ideas, or comments, feel free to contact us at any time.

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