

Is The Love Of Many Growing Cold?

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In the Olivet Prophecy found in Matthew 24, Jesus Christ answers His disciples' questions regarding the timing and sign of His second coming and the end of the age. In describing the persecution and tribulation that corresponds to the Fifth Seal (Matthew 24:9-14; Revelation 6:9), He gives some specific indicators: "And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved" (Matthew 24:12-13).

In recent years, the indicator in verse 12 about "love . . . grow[ing] cold" has often been cited when a grievance toward a particular church organization or group arose. This verse, however, can easily be misapplied, so it behooves us to more fully understand what it means so that we can know if or when it is being fulfilled.

Understanding the word translated "love" is a vital first step. It is the well-known Greek word *agape*, the love that people have only because God has given it to them (Romans 5:5; II Timothy 1:7; I John 2:5; 4:7-8). The people whose *agape* love is growing cold must have had it in the first place, so it refers to those whom God has called into a relationship with Him (John 6:44).

It is important to differentiate between this *agape* love and the other types of love mentioned in the Bible. *Phileo* love means "to be a friend to" or "to be fond of" a person or object, indicating "having affection for," whereas *Strong's Concordance* notes that *agape* "is wider, embracing especially the judgment and the *deliberate assent of the will* as a matter of *principle, duty and propriety*" (emphasis ours). Similarly, *philadelphia* love means "fraternal affection" or "brotherly love." *Agape* love, though, is manifested first toward God, because it is a dutiful, submissive, obedient love, one that does what is right regardless of how a person feels about it. In other words, *agape* love has a *moral* core rather than an *emotional* one.

The Bible shows that, in general, we show *agape* love to the Father through our obedience and submission, especially to His law (John 14:15-23; 15:10; I John 2:5; 5:2-3; II John 6). We show *agape* love to each other through sacrifice, just as Jesus' example of love—to those around Him and to us—was through sacrifice (John 13:34; 15:12-13; Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:13; Ephesians 5:2, 25; I John 3:16, 18; 4:9-12).

The meaning of Matthew 24:12, then, is that *agape* love will grow cold because of lawlessness, even though there may still be brotherly love, kindness, and human affection. Remember, we show *agape* love to God through obedience—the opposite of lawlessness—so when disobedience increases, *agape* grows cold. An example of this appears in the letter to the Ephesians, where Jesus says that they had left their first love—their first *agape*—and He commands them to repent (Revelation 2:4-5), that is, to turn away from their lawlessness. When there is compromise, or the setting aside of God's standard of righteousness and holiness, then the submissive love toward God and the sacrificial love toward man will begin to grow cold. It is a simple cause-and-effect relationship.

In this prophecy, Jesus Christ is describing an ongoing breakdown in the relationship with God. Since that most important relationship is the source of *agape* love, if it is waning, then it will be evident in other relationships. A symptom may be that sacrificial love toward other people is decreasing, but the real cause is that the relationship with God is cooling off.

A cause of this deterioration is found in the preceding verse: "Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many" (Matthew 24:11). While a true prophet always upholds God's law (Deuteronomy 13:3-4; Isaiah 8:19-20; Romans 8:7), a false prophet is willing to compromise with God's standard of holiness when it suits him. Those following a false teacher will likewise slide into lawlessness, becoming separated from God (Isaiah 59:1-3).

An Incomplete Love

Even though we might fancy ourselves as expert judges, at times it can be tricky to determine by observation whether the *agape* love is truly cooling. This is because the word "love" can be a subjective term, and even the phrase "sacrificial love" is wide open to interpretation.

To illustrate this, suppose I asked you to turn in your Bible to page 949. In my Bible, on page 949, in the left-hand column, about half way down, are Jesus Christ's words, "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Are we on the same page? Technically, we are, but at the same time, we may not be looking at the same passage. My page 949 is probably at least a little bit different from yours—maybe even very different—though, strictly speaking, we are on the same page. My page 949 contains parts of John 13 and 14; the quotation above is John 13:35. Chances are good that your page 949 is not only different from mine, but that it also differs from page 949 in other Bibles you may have.

This exercise demonstrates that, while we are on the same page with regard to sacrificial love and the need for it, the exact application of that love may be different for each of us, even though it is still exercised within the bounds of God's law. How we show love to others and what we look for in terms of love from others will not always be the same.

This is because we each have facets of God's love, but we do not have the totality, the whole, of it. Each child of God resembles Him to a degree, but each of us resembles Him more strongly in some areas than in others. Each of us learns or is directed to sacrifice in slightly different ways. This does not mean that *agape* love is absent. It simply means that *agape* love is not complete in us in the way that God's love is complete.

For example, some people are quite outgoing and excel at making people feel welcome and cherished. They know how to build up, affirm, and encourage people verbally. These are modern types of the apostle Barnabas, whose name means "son of encouragement" or "son of consolation." However, not everybody has that facet of God's love to a significant degree. There was, after all, only one Barnabas among the apostles. Though the other apostles were probably encouraging and affirming in their own ways, only one was named for that aspect of God's love.

Others may not have as much to say, but they will give the shirt off their backs to the needy. They will even have it dry-cleaned first. If it needs to be a different size, they will make sure of that, too.

Some serve behind the scenes, and we may not even be aware of all their sacrifices. They resemble the tireless service of an ox, just as Christ did. Nevertheless, not everyone is able to sacrifice in this way.

Still others have the means to give materially. That may mean giving financial assistance or slipping someone a small token of appreciation or admiration that, even though it does not have much intrinsic worth, stands for a more meaningful sentiment.

As another example, a man I know has a plaque in his office with four short words that explain another facet of God's love. The plaque reads simply, "I teach. I care." But not everyone has that kind of sacrificial love. Other people may instead reflect God's love differently.

On the flipside, because of the way we are as individuals—because our page 949 is not universal—we may not easily recognize the sacrificial love of another if we are looking only for one application of it. Because of the way some people are wired, they may not feel like they are loved unless they receive a hug every time they see you. That is not a shortcoming but simply the way they are. Yet, for others, hugs may make them uncomfortable. We may have to give them more personal space.

Some feel as if they are out in the cold unless they receive an occasional handwritten note. Others may get such a note, but it is not as valuable to them as the sender spending meaningful time with them. Both the card and the time can be examples of sacrificial love, but each means more to one than another.

Some may feel unloved unless the love is verbally expressed to them; for them, "silence is deafening." For others, though, "talk is cheap," and the real evidence of love on *their* page 949 is some form of physical service or gift.

Thus, although we are all on the same page in one sense, we are not all seeing the same thing. If God is our spiritual Father, then we know that His love is poured out in our hearts (Romans 5:5), and it will be evident in some way. However, that evidence will not be identical in every case. If we are only looking for one facet of God's love, we may miss a great deal of His workmanship, His outworking, and His image in His other children.

An Imperfect Love

To compound this challenge, even the aspects of God's love that we do express will be demonstrated imperfectly. The bar is quite high when it comes to love, as Jesus tells a scribe:

Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, "Which is the first commandment of all?" Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:28-31)

The apostle John declares that sin is the transgression of God's commandments (I John 3:4, KJV), including the two great commandments Jesus spoke. The word translated as "sin" literally means "to miss the mark." Combining these principles gives us a very broad definition of sin: *Sin is imperfectly*

loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and imperfectly loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Romans 3:23 declares that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." In other words, all have sinned in the past, and in the present all fall short in reflecting God's love, which is a major part of His glory. Godly love does not have to grow cold for it to be shown imperfectly. It is going to be shown imperfectly when it is demonstrated by God's still-imperfect children. We all are in this state.

Not that we should give up trying to perfect God's love. On the contrary, we have every responsibility to do our utmost to perfect it (I John 2:5; 4:12, 17-18). At the same time, it should not shock us when our spiritual brothers and sisters show God's love to us imperfectly, for we are guilty of the same toward them—and toward God.

Perhaps we find ourselves in a situation where it appears that God's love is growing cold. Maybe we see God's standard of holiness being ignored or compromised, and some form of lawlessness is beginning to show up. We may see little evidence of sacrificial love, and relationships are beginning to be strained. What should we do?

There are two possibilities. The first is that our discernment is correct, and what Jesus Christ foretold is coming to pass, perhaps not in its ultimate fulfillment, but at least in type. The second is that our discernment is incorrect, and that God's love is actually present and not growing cold, but we are having trouble seeing it.

If our discernment is correct, and we truly are in a circumstance where *agape* love is waning, Jesus has already indicated what He wants us to do. Matthew 24:13 says, "But he who *endures to the end* shall be saved." When many are letting their relationships with God deteriorate, the emphasis is on patient, active endurance.

I Corinthians 13 gives a beautiful description of *agape* love, which parallels Jesus' exhortation to endure in several points. Verse 4 says that godly love "suffers long." It displays patience and endurance, even in the face of being loved imperfectly. Verse 7 adds that godly love "bears all things" and "endures all things." However, if we are not showing patience or endurance in response to imperfect love, then we are simply responding with carnality rather than with God's love.

Similarly, verse 5 says that godly love "thinks no evil." True love pays no attention to a suffered wrong, nor takes account of the evil done to it. It does not keep a running list of all the ways it has been offended or loved imperfectly. That, again, would be responding to imperfect love with carnality. So, if we do find ourselves in the midst of a fulfillment of Matthew 24:12, we really have our work cut out for us because we will have to endure patiently and continue to display God's love rather than allow our own *agape* to also grow cold in response.

Conversely, God's love may be present, but our discernment may be incorrect, and we are missing it by looking for *agape* only in one application. We may be continually waiting for a specific type of sacrificial love, and if we do not receive it, we may suppose that God's love is absent. However, as we saw, we are not all the same in how we show love or how we recognize it. We may need to take a step back and look for facets of God's love that *are* present, rather than focusing on what may be absent.

In addition, given that human nature is still present within us, we also have to remember that nothing inhibits or damages our ability to see things clearly like focusing on the self. That is, we tend to evaluate whether God's love is present based on how *we* feel or how *we* are affected, rather than on objectively looking for God's spiritual workmanship in the overall situation.

Remember, even where God's love is present, it will most likely be demonstrated imperfectly, just as we also love God and neighbor imperfectly. Only one Man has ever loved God and man perfectly and completely. Even with all that God has done and continues to do with us, we are pale reflections of that glory. Yet, part of showing God's love to our neighbor is patiently enduring our neighbor's imperfect love, just as we would like God and our neighbor to have similar patience with us as we strive—and yet fail—to show perfect love to them.

Regardless of whether we truly are in the time of Matthew 24:12, our individual responsibility is to work on perfecting God's love in our lives. We do this, in general, by submitting to God and by sacrificing for others. If—when—we are loved imperfectly in the process, whether in our perception or in fact, it gives us the opportunity to demonstrate God's patient love all the more.