

Love'S Greatest Challenges

Using God's Love in Our Lives

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Given 27-Mar-93; Sermon #066

I have been purposefully going through this series on love just prior to Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread so that we would have ample opportunity to examine ourselves before taking the Passover this year. Because when all things are considered and push comes to shove (as we might say), the most important thing of all to us is whether we are exemplifying God's love in our lives.

We saw last week that the *agape* love can be done in a cold and a calculating way, as in loving one's enemies. We certainly do not feel disposed to love our enemies in the sense of having a warm regard for them. But yet we have to love our enemies. And so we have to set our will to do what is good and benevolent on behalf of them, and yet our feelings may not be good toward them at all. And yet we can love, by its strictest definition, in our attitude and in our actions toward them.

But we also found that, in its true form, *agape* love has a very positive emotional dimension. God has a warm and tender regard, a deep concern, for every aspect of His creation. We are called the apple of His eye, which means that we are the focus of His attention. And it is not done meanly at all! It is done with loving concern—that He has His eyes on us. He feels for us. He has compassion and mercy and pity toward us.

We find that we ourselves—our emotions—are so distorted as a result of our experiences in this world that they too must undergo a conversion. The conversion of our emotions takes place through (or in) the process of our fellowship with God, and through this we will really come to know Him. But there are challenges to this. I mean there are things (if I can put it this way)—factors, forces—that work against the continuation of the fellowship. We might call them roadblocks that get in the way. They work to destroy this fellowship and keep us from having the love of God perfected in us.

So today we are going to be considering love's greatest challenges. What is it that keeps us from being more loving? What is it that keeps us from having, or making, a better witness for God? What is it that keeps us from being used to a greater extent by God?

There may be quite a number of factors that we might examine. We might say, "Well, it's just human nature." Now that is a true answer, but I also think that it is quite a broad answer. We might also say, "Well, it's a lack of knowledge." And, indeed, this is a big

factor because God Himself says that His people are destroyed by a lack of knowledge. How can one be expected to exemplify God in his life if God Himself has not even revealed Himself to them? So, it is true. But it is also true that there are large numbers of people who have a great deal of academic knowledge of God, but they are not growing Christians. Now, saying that the answer here, or the problem, or one of the challenges is closer to the right answer [is true], but I think it is still much too broad.

What we are looking for are personal factors. Even if we have a great deal of knowledge, all of us are still going to face these challenges. Now we might say, "Hey, it's Satan, the Devil. He's the reason. Does not the Bible warn us that he goes about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour?" Oh, yes. That is true. But that really dodges the issue, because it deceitfully shifts the blame for our wrong choices to someone else. I do not think that it is going to please God that we are irresponsible and deceitful.

No, brethren, I think that we have to get to something that is even more specific and personal, something that all of us have to battle. I think that it comes down to just two qualities—two factors, or elements. And perhaps even these two can be refined down. Love's greatest challenges come from *laziness* and *fear*. There is nothing esoteric or abstract about either one of them. They are challenges we all face in our relationships with God and men every day. And I mean it—every day!

We're going to begin this sermon in Matthew 7, because I think at the very beginning something has to be established in regard to work. Laziness impacts on work. If we are lazy, we are not going to work.

There is a misperception in much of what passes in this world as "Christianity," and here in Matthew 7 Jesus admonishes by saying:

Matthew 7:13-14 "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way [Did you catch that? *Difficult is the way*] which leads to life, and there are few who find it."

Do not ever let anybody convince you that Christianity is not a religion of works. Christianity is hard work! That is what your Savior said. It is difficult! It is hard work. And it is hard work because its direction and purpose run counter to human nature. Confusion about "works" enters the picture when people wrongly try to associate "works" with "salvation." We are saved by grace through faith. There is no argument

with that biblical fact. Works enter the picture as a necessary part of the process of growth within God's purpose—not salvation. Salvation is, in a major sense, an already finished work of Jesus Christ. That is why so many statements in the Bible in regard to salvation are written in the past tense. "We are saved ... [past tense]".

Now let us continue to explore this thing about "works" with scriptures that I know we are familiar with. We need to establish this—that laziness plays a large part in why we do not grow. We are expected by God to work, and we are not going to earn salvation by it. We are going to grow *because* of it. Overcoming problems is the stuff by which growth occurs. And if we are too lazy to work at overcoming things, though we may be in God's Kingdom, we are not going to grow very much.

God is looking for His children to grow. I know that there is not a parent within the sound of my voice who does not want his child, or children, to grow. Every parent wants his child to become a mature adult able to take their place in society, able to live independently of the family and still be connected in a loving way to it, able to stand on their own feet. God sets the pattern, and He wants His children to grow as free and independent, moral agents. But we are not that way when He finds us. We are not that way when He reveals Himself to us, and reveals His way to us, and leads us to repentance. But He wants us to grow into what He is.

Genesis 1:26 And God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

God gives everybody who reads His Book very early indications that work is going to play a major role in what He has created. Dominion! That is "rulership", or maybe a better word would be "management". Management of our own personal environment requires work. (We will show why a few scriptures down the way here.) Let us go to chapter two and verse 15, where He reinforces this concept of dominion.

Genesis 2:15 Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it.

"Tend" and "keep"—we might say "embellish" and "guard," "add to" or "keep from deterioration." Anybody who has taken care of a piece of material equipment of some kind—a garden, a house, an automobile, clothing, it matters not what it is—knows you

can embellish it, you can dress it, and that takes work. And it also takes work to maintain, to guard it from falling into a state of disrepair.

We know that God's real purpose here has something to do with the material things of life, but God is looking upon something that is much greater than that, and that is the spiritual. And He is indicating to you and me that the things that are spiritual in our lives are also going to have to be embellished, added to, dressed; and they too are going to have to be kept from deteriorating. And so they are going to have to be guarded, and there is work involved in those things. There is work in the proper management, or dominion, over the things that God has put within the scope of our authority. So both of these are indicating work.

Genesis 4:6-7 So the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it."

Or, it could say, "You shall master it." Or, it could say, "You shall overcome it." This is a vivid metaphor in which sin is pictured as a wild beast, eager to be at us and to consume us, and it needs to be tamed. Now, I think that you would agree that, if you were faced with a wild animal, there would be a great deal of effort expended, first of all, in anxiety. The very emotion of the thing would drain you of a great deal of your energy. And you know it would be pretty hard work just to keep control of yourself in such a situation. If you were going to bring that animal under your dominion, you would have to be working with that thing, would you not?

God uses very vivid metaphors. But what I want to get across to us is this concept that, right at the beginning of the Book, God is laying down principles by which His purpose is going to be guided. And anybody who becomes a part of that purpose is going to know and understand that this purpose that He is bringing him or her into is going to require hard work to fulfill it.

Let us go back into the New Testament to I Corinthians 3:8-10. Here is a different metaphor; but, again, it is one that shows that God expects a great deal of energy to be expended.

I Corinthians 3:8 Now he who plants and he who waters are one [Paul says], and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

That is so clear, is it not? Reward and labor—we are talking about a process of growth here. It is not talking about salvation. It is talking, though, about producing things within one's life.

I Corinthians 3:9-10 For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it.

Here is yet another clear example of work associated with God's way of life. Building is hard labor, physically and mentally. Now if you can just conceptualize the building of a house or even a chicken coop for that matter, or the building of anything, you have to know that when you are building something like that, first you have to dig out a footer. And that is hard work, especially if you are doing it with a shovel and a pick and all kinds of rocks in your way.

But even before you get to that place, you have to do some mental exertion to plan the thing out. Draw up some plans. Go to an architect, work it through with him. You are thinking, "How can I put this together so that when I am done I am going to have produced something there that is in line with what I am about to embark on—so that it will fit my uses?"

After the footer goes in, then goes the building on top of it. And you do not just do it any old way. The whole way through the process, the apostle Paul is indicating here, we are working mentally and physically to produce the best that we possibly can. That is why he warns, "let each one take care how he builds."

Am I getting to you so that you understand that there is a great deal of labor connected to what God has called us to? And if we are lazy, nothing is going to be built. If we are lazy, indeed maybe we will still yet be saved, but we will not have built anything, and we will not have fulfilled that portion of God's purpose. And we will not have pleased Him in the way that we could, because every parent wants his children to grow.

II Timothy 2:3-6 You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself in the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier. And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. The hard-working farmer must be first to partake of the crops.

All three of these metaphors that Paul uses involve a great deal of labor—whether one is a soldier, is in athletics, or whether one is a farmer. Each and every one of them involves a great deal of work.

What is the problem? What is it that we are fighting against? I do not think that it is a lack of knowledge, because God takes care that His people hear what He wants them to do. I do not think that, for His people (His spiritual people, His church, the Israel of God), God has failed to provide the kind of knowledge that people need to have.

It is very easy though for us to respond that the problem is human nature. And that is a true answer. But I still think that we need to get more specific than that. One thing is sure: many of us were never taught good work habits by our parents, and that was probably because they had poor work habits too. They had the same problem, and so they passed their problem on to us.

In addition to that, many of us were fed the line that all one has to do to be saved is to believe in Jesus Christ. And, although that has a smidgen of truth to it, it gives a distorted picture, an incomplete picture. And thus the discipline required to overcome is not in us, because we are hit on both sides. Our parents did not really discipline us and teach us good discipline. Besides that, many of us were part of church organizations that played down the idea of "works" in terms of Christianity.

Hebrews 1:10-11 "You, LORD, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You remain. . .

Look carefully at the wording here. God, in the beginning, laid the foundation of the earth. Not only that, but the heavens. "They will perish, but You remain." The apostle is making a comparison between God and the material creation that we are able to see and are a part of. One will perish. The other remains. There is a contrast being made between God and the material creation.

Hebrews 1:11 . . . And they will all grow old like a garment. . .

Everything that we wear wears out. Everything that we wear becomes threads, eventually, once again. It gets worn and torn and fades and eventually the threads begin

to separate until finally we cannot wear that thing anymore.

Hebrews 1:12 Like a cloak You will fold them up, and they will be changed. [Things never stay new.] But [on the other hand] You [God] are the same, and Your years will not fail."

God never changes. There is the contrast. God never grows old. Nothing about Him ever wears out. Nothing about Him ever deteriorates, degenerates, or declines. He is as sharp now as He was twenty billion years ago, and twenty billion years before that. That is hard for us to conceive, but that is the way He is.

What we are looking at here (in Hebrews 1:10-12) is a very simple statement of what scientists call "the second law of thermodynamics." We are looking at what they term as 'entropy'. Entropy came into the English language through the Greek, and it means to turn or to change. Now, I will give you a longer definition—the degradation (that means the breaking down) of the matter and energy in the universe to an ultimate state of inert uniformity. What that means is that everything, every material thing that God has created (including you and me) is eventually going to come to the place where we are back to nothing more than atoms and molecules—and in a disorganized state, at that.

Or, another definition—the steady degradation (or breaking down) or disorganization of a system or society. Is that not an interesting one? That comes out of *Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary*. What they are saying is that organizations, institutions, have a tendency to do the same things that the material things do in this universe, and that is to move in a direction toward disorganization.

Remember God's instruction at the very beginning of the Book, to Adam and Eve? How He told Adam and Eve—and, of course, now us—that we are required to 'dress' and to 'keep'? There is a very logical and scientific reason for this, and that is that all matter has been designed to run down, to oxidize, to deteriorate, and to disintegrate. It must be maintained. It must be kept. And that, we just found out, includes organizations and relationships.

Is there anyone here who will argue with the concept that marriages, if they are not worked at, will run down? That they will move toward a state of disorganization, of deterioration? Now, what does it take to keep something like that going in the right direction? It takes hard work!

We have the encouragement from God that we can actually embellish it. We can make

it better. We can dress it. But that is going to take hard work. So we can begin to see that it is going to take a certain amount of work just to hold it in place. If it is not held in place, it is going to deteriorate and degenerate, because the laws of entropy—the second law of thermodynamics—are going to be working inexorably to pull it into a state of disorganization. But, if we work even harder, smarter, better we can actually make the marriage, or the relationship, better. But it will not just happen. The right things have to be done.

Remember that word, entropy. We will call it the law that is working in the whole material creation that moves everything into a state of degeneration and disorientation. Please go to Luke 5. Jesus is the speaker and He says:

Luke 5:37-39 "No one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved. And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, 'The old is better.'"

Here is another factor at work. What we are looking at is, again, a very simple statement of what the scientists call 'inertia'. That came into the English language from the French, and it is the property of matter by which it remains at rest, or in uniform motion in the same straight line, unless acted upon by some external force. Let me simplify that. A body that is at rest will remain at rest. A body that is standing still will continue to stand still unless some external force works on it to move it. Or, another way of doing it is this—a body that is moving will tend to continue moving in the same direction unless some external force either stops it or moves it from that direction.

Let me simplify it even further and put it into the area of human relationships: Jesus is saying that we are inclined—we are disposed—to continue living as we are now living. We, by nature, do not want to change! It takes work to change! We want to stay in the old rut, where we are comfortable. We even resist good changes, because of this feeling of comfort and security with the old.

Now, both of these forces are working at the same time. Entropy is pulling us toward disorganization and deterioration, and it has to be worked against. At the same time, inertia wants to keep us going in the same direction that we are. "Don't bug me, buddy. Just stay out of my way. Stay out of my life. Stay out of my hair. I just want to keep going in the direction that I am, because it feels good."

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Both of these forces require effort just to maintain the current position. Now, remember that we are responsible to love God and our fellow man. Love is something that is done. If we were never taught to discipline ourselves to carry out responsibilities, it is going to require considerable effort to overcome one's inertia and resist entropy in one's relationships—a *lot* of effort!

Let us explore this thing of laziness for a bit.

Proverbs 24:30 I went by the field of the lazy man [the slothful], and the vineyard of the man devoid of understanding.

A person who is lazy does not have any understanding. He does not know what's going on.

Proverbs 24:31 And there it was [the field], all overgrown with thorns [What he was supposed to dress and keep.] Its surface was covered with nettles; its stone wall was broken down.

You can see that this guy is not keeping things. And so what is happening? Entropy is pulling it into a state of disorganization. That is the way of all material things. Neither is he overcoming inertia.

Proverbs 24:32-34 When I saw it, I considered it well; I looked on it and received instruction: A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest; so shall your poverty come like a prowler [that is, it will steal up on you step by step, it will come marching in on you], and your want like an armed man [or like a soldier marches, step by step].

Proverbs has very much to say about laziness. It matters not whether the laziness is directed towards physical or spiritual endeavors. The point here is that little or nothing is going to be produced by the person who is slothful. Now many people conquer laziness concerning physical things, such as their business matters. Yesterday, I heard a broadcast in which a man was being interviewed on the radio. The man was a millionaire many times over. He had become a millionaire through a scheme that he had. Maybe somebody else taught him about it, but he really took advantage of it. It was perfectly legal—nothing wrong with it that way. But he really took advantage of this way, and he became very rich. This man said, in response to a question that somebody

phoned in, "You don't become rich being lazy. It takes hard work." That is what this Proverb is saying.

We want to be spiritually rich. We want our relationships to be rich. We want them to produce the right things. So it is going to take a good deal of effort on our part. People out in the world learn these principles. They put them to work in business, and they prosper as a result of it. But they avoid making the same effort in regards to spiritual things.

In the church, do you know what this produces? Laodiceanism. That is what the Laodicean's problem is. He says he is rich and increased with goods, which means that he is doing all right in the business world. He is okay. But he is not paying any attention to the spiritual. He is not using the same principles in regards to spiritual things that he does to physical things. So, he becomes reasonably well off physically, but God says, spiritually, he is wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked. This sermon is right up-to-date. We need the instruction that is here, because what we are talking about produces Laodiceanism, unless it is fought against.

Now the lazy person has a number of specific characteristics. Stay in the book of Proverbs, and let us go back to chapter 6. This is right in the midst of this lesson about the ant, but we are going to look at verses 9 and 10.

Proverbs 6:9-10 How long will you slumber, O sluggard? When will you rise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep.

The lesson here is that one of the characteristics of a lazy person is that he will not begin things. Now, let us understand that not everybody has all of these problems. But they will be a problem with some, and probably all of us have a little bit of all of them. None of us is devoid of all of them completely.

Point #1 is that a lazy person will not begin things. Do you see what it says? "How long will you slumber?" Well, the sluggard does not know. All he knows is his delicious drowsiness. Sleep is so good, and he revels in it.

"Sleep" is just being used here as a metaphor for failing to stir oneself up. And so what does he do? He procrastinates. He thinks about how hard the work is. And he deceives himself about the smallness of his surrenders. "Oh, it's just a little thing. It doesn't matter all that much." And so what happens? By inches and minutes, his opportunities slip

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away, because life never stops until you die. Time marches on, and it waits for no one.

For another characteristic of a lazy person, we will go to Proverbs 12.

Proverbs 12:27 The lazy [slothful] man does not roast what he took in hunting, but diligence is man's precious possession.

Point #2: Here is the other end. He will not finish things.

The picture that is given here is that the slothful man did begin to hunt. He got so far as to where he actually trapped or shot his quarry. Then he just ended it right there, and never cooked what he had brought in. He never took advantage of what he had done. There are times, then, when the slothful does overcome his inertia and he begins something. He may begin it with a great feeling of, "I'm really going to accomplish something this time." But then his enthusiasm dies, and he rarely finishes what he starts.

Do you know any people like that? There are hundreds of things, sometimes dozens, sometimes scores of things they get started, but they never get them done. So he says, "Well this isn't worth all this trouble." And he gets easily distracted by something that is for the moment more entertaining than what he is currently doing, and he goes off in a tangent, never to get back to what he had already begun.

For the third point we are going to string three scriptures together.

Proverbs 20:4 The lazy man [sluggard] will not plow because of the winter; [therefore] he will beg during the harvest and have nothing.

Proverbs 22:13 The lazy [slothful] man says, "There is a lion outside! I shall be slain in the streets!"

Proverbs 26:16 The lazy man [sluggard] is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly.

Point #3 is that the sluggard will not face up to the difficulties of accomplishment.

All work—I do not care what work it is—puts us to some measure of hardship or discomfort. The farmer has to face the weather. The mechanic, who works on automobiles, has to face trying to get nuts and bolts off—difficult things, difficult areas to get a wrench in. It tries his patience to reach around things that might be hot, like exhaust pipes. You see, he is working on the car, or the truck, or whatever it is, and there are disagreeable things all over.

Every job has disagreeable things, but the sluggard will not work through those things. So, what does he do? He makes excuses. "Huh, there's a lion in the street!" You see, "I can't go out there." And what does he do? He takes the easy way out, because he believes his own rationalization.

We will not turn to this, but you can write down the scripture Proverbs 15:19. In this case he is compared with somebody who is upright. It indicates that the lazy person is fundamentally dishonest. He is deceiving himself. He is lying to himself that it really does not matter. Oh yes, it does.

Proverbs 13:4 The soul of a lazy man [the sluggard] desires, and has nothing; but the soul of the diligent shall be made rich.

Proverbs 21:25-26 The desire of the lazy man [the slothful] kills him, for his hands refuse to labor. He covets greedily all day long, but the righteous gives and does not spare.

Point #4 is that the result is (and this is sad) that the sluggard is continually restless because of unsatisfied desires. He feels helpless in the face of his tangled web of affairs because his life is going to be disorganized and get all confusing. And he feels useless, because deep down he knows that he is not producing much of worth for everybody concerned.

This feeds right back into what I have been telling you in the last three sermons: Much of our sense of well-being, many of our feelings of confidence and that things are right, comes from knowing that we are doing what is right (I John 3:17-19; John 15:9-10).

It is difficult to conclude which of these two major challenges—laziness or fear—is the greatest. Both of them are difficult to deal with, but it is my personal opinion that love's greatest challenge is the second one—fear. Let us go back to a scripture that we have been spending a great deal of time in.

I John 4:18 There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.

It has been said that there is nothing so disintegrating to life as fear. Fear is so pervasive that psychologists feel that it is one of the few instinctual qualities that we humans are born with. Fear takes on a large number of forms. They begin (in childhood) with fears such as being left alone, the fear of falling, and the fear of what might happen in darkness. The fear of death begins to grow on us as we age.

Most of us are familiar with what are called phobias. They are so pervasive that one out of every eight American adults harbors some kind of phobia. It almost seems as though the whole country is mentally ill to some degree.

All fears share common reactions. The only difference is the degree or intensity of the reactions. Those under the power of fear feel a sense of anxiety, or even painful agitation, caused by the anticipation of danger or a sense of loss, which either immobilizes them or motivates them to flee. Fear forces a person to concentrate on himself, and therein lies its challenge to love.

Undoubtedly, phobias are the most intense form of fear. *Newsweek* magazine, in its April 23rd, 1984 issue, had an article entitled "The Fight to Conquer Fear". Here is a quote from this article:

It is a paradox that phobias will loosen their grip so readily, because, untreated, they are one of the most powerful forces in the human psyche. They draw their energy from the bottomless wells of self-protection, in those primitive regions where the ego broods in solitude. [Listen to this] A phobia is fear looking at itself in the mirror. It looks at fear and it sees something fearful and it can't get away from its own reflection. Robert L. Dupont, director of Washington's Center of Behavioral Medicine, calls phobias 'the malignant disease of the what-ifs'; the exponential growth of imaginary disasters that can choke off rational thought.

Yet the fear phobics experience is no less real even though it is irrational. They do not imagine that they fear, they *are* afraid! It is not imagined—they really are afraid. Regardless of what they are afraid of, it immobilizes them and they will not challenge what they fear. And thus, the acrophobic will not challenge high places, the agoraphobic will not challenge open places, so they stay inside where they feel a measure of comfort

and security. The claustrophobic will not challenge close places.

I have gone through this about phobics for a good, specific reason because fear in the Bible ranges from a simple apprehension to outright sheer terror. It shows man afraid whenever a threat arises against his security. The fear is that if we venture forth from where we are now we will lose what we already have. I want you to begin to apply this to love.

In the case of the context of I John 4:18, the threat of loss of some kind immobilizes us from loving either God or men as we should. Remember, love is the keeping of the commandments. Let us see this in action.

Mark 10:17-22 Now as He was going out on the road, one came running, knelt before Him, and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" So Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. You know the commandments: Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not defraud, honor your father and your mother." And he answered and said to Him, "Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth." Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me." But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

It is not hard to determine that he feared the loss of his wealth. That is where his security was. It kept him from loving Christ. Covetousness and idolatry reared their ugly heads and stopped him cold in his tracks because he feared the loss of what he already had and he would not venture forth.

John 12:42-43 Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.

These men feared that if they committed themselves to loving God they would lose the approbation of their religious peers. If they stepped out, if they committed themselves, they would lose what they already had. So it kept them from loving God and, of course, then kept them from loving man too because God would have given them growth if they

had continued yielding to Him.

Luke 14:25-27 Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciples. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.”

This covers much the same principle of the preceding verses but in more personal relationships. This time it is right in the family. The loss of family ties, loss of family traditions—like Christmas dinner or exchanging gifts at Grandma’s house on Christmas. There could be quite a loss to extend oneself to love Christ.

All of us faced, at one time or another, the keeping of the Sabbath. There is a possibility that we could suffer the loss of an entire career in business because the Sabbath might cut right straight across what has taken us years to develop in a business, a job, or responsibility in which the Sabbath is an integral part. And the company does not shut down on the weekends. So you have 20, 30, 40 years in a company and there is a possibility of losing it all.

Do you see the principle that is at work here?

Ephesians 4:25 Therefore putting away lying, “Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,” for we are members of one another.

Why do we lie? Generally we do it to make ourselves look good to gain advantage over another. We lie because of the fear of discovery, the fear of losing status, reputation, power, or money. And you see what it does? It puts us behind the eight ball when it comes to loving other human beings. The fear of loss keeps us from keeping that commandment which says, “You shall not bear false witness.”

If we tell the truth we may look bad in that person’s eyes because we did something pretty despicable. So, we protect ourselves from discovery by telling a lie. But we have not loved.

Ephesians 5:1-3 Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma. But fornication and all

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uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints.

Do we fear the loss of some clandestine pleasure? In fornication or in adultery? Do we fear the loss of a friendship? Do you see what is involved here? Fear plays powerfully in what we do.

Ephesians 5:21 Submitting to one another in the fear of God. [And it goes on to the marriage relationship.]

What do we fear when we will not submit to one another? Is it the loss of control, that we will lose power? Do we fail to make peace with an offended brother because we are afraid of losing face? You see, pride keeps rearing its ugly head causing us to feel that something is about to be lost and this is why humility is shown in the Bible to be a choice. The fear of loss to our ego has to be challenged and overcome. Overcomers are conquerors, and it is because of this that the overcomers are going to be in the Kingdom of God. The overcomers challenge inertia. They challenge entropy. They challenge this fear of loss.

This verse in Ephesians 5:2 also contains within it a seed of the reason of why love is so difficult. Notice it says Christ *gave* Himself. Love requires sacrifice. Sacrifice is painful. Facing fear is painful. Making oneself diligent to doing work is painful, so the sacrifice is paid in overcoming laziness and fear. Sometimes, brethren, the discipline required to loving an enemy is awesome.

I John 4:17-18 Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment [now is the day of judgment, brethren]; because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.

Consider the principle that John is espousing because it contains much of the answer we need for overcoming fear. Think of this: humanly, the more two people love each other, the less they fear what the other will do. Why? Because they know the other person, inside and out, we might say. John is trying to get us to know God, inside and out. And the reason they do not fear is because trust, confidence, in each other grows. The more perfected in love, the less anxious we are about loss before people because

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our trust is in God and His reaction, and our trust is in the truth of His Word. And we grow then because we know He is going to approve and give us strength.

Fear is the most self-centered of all emotions. The cure for fear lies partly in removing external threats to our security. And we do that. We lock the doors to our house. We make sure that when we are walking in certain areas we walk in the light, or we walk by the safest route that we can possibly find. So we do move to try to remove threats to our security physically.

But the real cure is eliminating excessive consciousness of the self. This is the principle that John is espousing. Love does this because the essence of love is self-denial and self-surrender. Love casts out fear because it gradually casts out self-consciousness.

The "fear involves torment" in verse 18 is contrasted to "boldness" in verse 17. In this context, love and fear are opposites. Love's closest companion is confidence, boldness. When we are completely confident we do not fear that we can do what is required of us. That is the way two people in a marriage who really love one another are. They know each other so well they are absolutely confident of what the other's action, reaction, words, thoughts might be. Right confidence is there. Maybe even boldness.

In relation to God, if we really know God and we are really loving God, we are not cutting ourselves off through fear, but we are challenging the fears and we are overcoming because of it and our relationship with God is growing closer and closer. The problem here is that we are not yet perfected in love, so we fear.

The only way to meet and overcome our fear is to grow. Each day we have to take advantage of the opportunities to exercise ourselves in small acts of love. Just as a musician practices every day, an athlete practices every day, artists practice every day, a person becomes confident in his speaking ability because his skills grow little by little by doing a great deal of speaking before groups. We are talking about the principle here that practice makes perfect—taking advantage of each day's little opportunities to show love. Our practice is aimed toward becoming skilled at living God's way of life. As we practice extending ourselves in love to others, the fear of loss or suffering or rejection begins to lessen. Our confidence in God and His truth will build until we can even become bold.

II Timothy 1:7 For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

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Love, power, soundmindedness. Love's greatest challenges are to overcome laziness and fear. There is no way around them. They must be met and conquered and God has given us the Spirit to enable us. But we have to be willing to put ourselves on the line, to stir ourselves up, and risk losing some part of this human nature. Quit protecting it.

In Hebrews 13:5 it tells us that God will never leave us, never forsake us, that He is always our helper. We are admonished, then, to be content. Did you know that contentment has its foundation in knowing God? We can never reach that point unless we put ourselves out to love Him and challenge this fear and overcome the inertia and entropy that is working in everybody's life. That is where the hard work comes in. Challenging the fear and challenging the laziness.

I can guarantee you on the authority of God's Word that if we are willing to do this on a day-to-day basis and put aside our fear and make the effort, our confidence in Him will grow and the fear will dissolve and the diligence will cause discipline to appear and we will meet our responsibilities in loving God and loving men.