

## **Growing In Love** *Marshall Reid*

Peter concludes his list of characteristics we are to add as we grow spiritually with the virtue that is the most frequently mentioned in the New Testament: love. It is the premiere virtue. It's the defining characteristic of God himself, so it's no surprise that much emphasis is placed on love in the teaching of Jesus and the New Testament authors.

The previous quality Peter had listed, brotherly kindness (*philadelphia*), is obviously closely related, but this term (*agape*) is more broad in application. Brotherly kindness focuses on our interaction with fellow Christians while *agape* is to be directed towards everyone – including our enemies.

Jesus taught, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Matt. 5:43-44). And pay attention to the reason he gives for loving your enemies: “that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (vs. 45). Since God is the embodiment of love (1 John 4:7-8), he sends his blessings upon even those that are his enemies, those who are evil and unjust. If God is that way, Jesus argues, then we are to be that way. That's how we will be sons of God.

As we well know, it's easy to love those who love you. It's much more difficult to love those who hate you. And yet that's exactly what we're called to do by Jesus. “For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matt. 5:46-48). Loving our enemies is one thing that separates us as Christians from the rest of the world. It's what makes us children of God. It's what makes us perfect (complete).

The fact that we're commanded to love our enemies just goes to show that love is not an emotion or feeling; it's a disposition. It requires a decision. It's a choice in behavior. It doesn't waver based upon circumstances. Paul speaks to this in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 when he describes love, not in terms of emotions, but by how it acts. He says that love is longsuffering, kind, not envious, doesn't boast, isn't rude, isn't selfish, isn't resentful, doesn't rejoice in wrongdoing, rejoices in the truth, and bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things. None of those descriptions have anything to do with a warm, fuzzy feeling towards someone.

As Jesus pointed out, one way our love is manifested is in the way we respond to our enemies. But another way we show our love for others outside our spiritual family is by showing our concern for their souls. God demonstrated his love to us by Christ dying for us while we were sinners (Rom. 5:8). If this is the extent that God will go to in order to save us from the consequences of our sins due to his love for us, and since we are to emulate the characteristics of God, then we need to show that same love for people's souls.

In Luke 15, Jesus tells 3 parables about things that are lost – a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. These parables were told in response to the Pharisees and scribes complaining about Jesus receiving sinners and eating with them (vs. 2). Jesus' point? Not only is God concerned with the souls of the tax collectors and sinners, but the scribes and Pharisees should have been concerned too! Jesus was the shepherd going out looking for the lost sheep, but they should have been doing the same. God is the Father who rejoices and welcomes the lost son back, and they should have been joyous of the sinners who were repenting, too.

Are we making the same effort as Jesus did? Do we have the same love for other people's souls? Are we like Jesus or like the scribes and Pharisees?

There's not one person God doesn't love and wouldn't receive if they repented and placed their faith in him. Everything he has ever done and continues to do is a demonstration of his love for each individual. God commands us to love just as he has loved. It's not limited to our brethren. It's not limited to those who love us. It's not based upon circumstances. It's not an emotion. And it's a characteristic that we must have if we're going to expect an entrance into the kingdom. It's something God expects us to grow in and abound in. If we are to be like our Father, we are to love.