

# Our Challenge – Loving Others and Ourselves

By: Randy Blackaby

We've learned previously that the concept of love defines God's nature, that the commands to love summarize all of God's laws, and that love is an action and not merely an emotion. But all that said, learning to love others and ourselves as we ought is a great challenge. It challenges us to rise above mere humanity and partake of the divine nature.

While the majority of people don't love God, it should be relatively easy when we contemplate His love, grace, and mercy toward us. But it is more difficult to love our fellow human beings. Our enemies care nothing for us. Our neighbors occasionally treat us badly. Even family members and fellow Christians often disappoint us greatly.

All that being true, we are still enjoined by God to love them all. But how do we develop the requisite attitudes to accomplish that? Maybe the place to begin is in our understanding of the nature of human beings. God creates each and every person "in the image of God." (Genesis 1:26-27) Each person is a product of God's own creation and therefore, no matter what his weaknesses or sins, is extremely valuable.

*That fact becomes all the more apparent when we consider that "God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16)* Love is possible only when we see value in a person. If we judge someone to be worthless or useless, we won't deem him or her worth our loving effort.

A second necessity to active love is putting another's welfare ahead of our own. This appears to be what the Apostle Paul was saying when he wrote, "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others." (Philippians 2:3-4) Jesus' willingness to sacrifice Himself on the cross for our sins is the supreme example of Paul's directive.

But how do you and I accomplish such unselfishness? Satan, in speaking to God about Job, spoke a general truth about human beings. He said, "All that a man has he will give for his life." But our fellowship with Christ compels us to rise above the level of general humanity. Jesus declared, "Greater love has no man than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends." (John 15:13)

We read of parents who, in snatching their children from peril, perish during the effort. We cry when we think of soldiers who die for comrades and countrymen. Indeed, this is the highest achievement of normal human love. Yet we are challenged to go even beyond this--to go beyond loving our friends and families. God's love went further. Romans 5:8 tells us, "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." He loved us and died for us while we were His enemies, made so by our sinful behavior and rejection of God.

So, it is obvious that when Jesus urged us to "love our enemies" he was calling upon us to be and do more than average humanity. He wants us to be "sons of your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:43-48)

Loving others isn't just sentimentality. Many fail to understand the "how" of loving others. Love doesn't suggest some sort of anemic sentimentality that overlooks wickedness and error as though they do not exist. God loves us, but He will not tolerate rebellion. If the Old Testament teaches us anything, it teaches us that.

Peter declared: "Love covers a multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:8) By that, he wasn't implying that we should ignore sin. Rather, Christian love is always eager to forgive when the sinner seeks forgiveness via the divinely appointed means (Luke 17:3).

Imagine how different this world would be if everyone loved as God does. There would be no more war, no more divorce, no more prisons, and no more crime.

Not only does Jesus' story about the Good Samaritan identify all men who are in need as the objects of our love, it also demonstrates "how" we express that love. It is expressed by action, by doing what is beneficial and needful for the other person, whether we know him or not.

Loving ourselves isn't wrong. This seems obvious from the command to "Love your neighbor as yourself." The challenge to Christians is not to be selfish, not to be so self-centered that we think only of ourselves. Such self-centeredness actually defines the opposite of love. Yet we must apply to ourselves everything we have said about loving others. Each of us is made in God's image and has value to Him and to others.

Some of us have difficulty loving ourselves because of past sins, the manner of our births or upbringing, our race or economic status, or some abuse we may have suffered earlier in life. Trust what the Lord said about your life. He declared every human soul or life to be more valuable than the whole world (Matthew 16:26). And don't ever forget that He died for you. The purchase price of your redemption testifies to the value of your life.

Your life has value, and God has a purpose for your life. You were redeemed to shine the light of the gospel and the love of God to a world that feels unloved and in darkness.