

# Love One Another

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How do people around us know that we are Christians? How do our friends, family, and neighbors know that we are a follower of Jesus? Is it because we believe in a specific set of doctrinal beliefs and understandings? Some people think the Sabbath is the sign by which non-Christians will know we are Christians. Specifically they cited Exodus 31 verses 12-13, 17: "And the LORD said to Moses, 'You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, 'Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. . . . It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.'"" (All scriptures quoted are from the *English Standard Version* unless otherwise stated). The Sabbath is a sign between God and His people, but it is not necessarily a sign by which the world will know we are Christians. Yes, people will notice that we keep the Sabbath, but this does not prove anything. The followers of Judaism also keep the Sabbath, and they are not Christians.

According to Jesus, how will people know we are His disciples? By loving one another: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). The love Christians show one another is a sign to "all people," believer and nonbeliever, that we are Jesus' disciples. Obviously, the Sabbath is important. When someone comes to understand the necessity of keeping the Sabbath they will look for a congregation of believers that also keep the Sabbath. But after a while, if they do not see these people showing godly love for one another, they will move on, seeking a congregation that does.

The love we show fellow Christians is a sign to "all people" that we are Jesus' disciples. This article will examine Jesus' command to us, His disciples, to love one another. We will seek to understand better how to love one another, and the importance God places on this. There are at least twenty-one New Testament references to loving one another, scriptures that tell us how to love one another in a godly way (John 13:34, 35; 15:12, 17; Romans 12:10; 13:8; Galatians 5:13; Ephesians 4:2; 1Thessalonians 3:12; 4:9; 2Thessalonians 1:3; 1Peter 1:22; 4:8; 5:1John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11, 12; 2John 5).

## A Command

On the night of Jesus' final Passover before his crucifixion, He commands the apostles, as well as us today, three times to love one another: "A new commandment I give to you,

that you love one another" (John 13:34), "This is my commandment, that you love one another" (John 15:12), and "I command you, so that you will love one another" (John 15:17). Towards the end of the first century, the apostle John reminds the recipients of his first and second letters of Jesus' command to love our fellow disciples, "this is his [Jesus'] commandment, that we . . . love one another, just as he has commanded us" (1 John 3:23), "this commandment we have from him [Jesus]: whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:21), and "now I ask you, dear lady— not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning— that we love one another" (2 John 5).

Jesus' command to love one another does not mean we are not to love nonbelievers. Jesus, as well as other New Testament writers, show us that we should love our neighbors (Matthew 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8), and we are even to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27, 35). The relationship we Christians have with each other is one of family, a spiritual family. God is our father (Romans 8:14-17; 1 John 3:1-2), and Jesus is our elder brother (Hebrews 2:10-18). It's a family joined together by the Spirit of God, not flesh and blood. The apostle Paul in writing to the Galatians recognizes the uniqueness of this family relationship among the Jesus followers when he writes, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Galatians 6:10 *New International Version*). As a family of believers, we have a special obligation to love one another.

### **Laying Down Our Life in Service**

Jesus tells the apostles, as well as us today that we must love one another, just as He loved us, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. . . . This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34, 15:12). How did Jesus love us? By laying down his life for us. He says, "Greater love has no one than this that someone lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you" (John 15:13-14).

Like Jesus, we show our love by laying down our lives for one another. The apostle John writes more about this laying down of life in his first letter, "By this we know love, that he [Jesus] laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers" (1 John 3:16). John is not speaking of literally dying for someone else as Jesus did, but rather of laying down our life in service to others, as the following verses show, "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth" (verses 17-18). The apostle James writes something similar in his letter, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily

food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (James 2:14-17). Loving others is an action, not some sentimental feeling.

The apostle John continues in his letter, telling us how we can know whether we are indeed a disciple of Jesus, He says, "By this [loving in deed and truth] we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him [God]. . . . Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in him, and he in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us" (1 John 3:19-24). Not only does loving one another allow others to know we are Jesus' disciples, but it also helps each of us to personally know we are His disciple.

### **Kindly Affectionate**

In the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans Christian, he tells them to "Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another" (Romans 12:10 *New King James Version*). The *Good News Bible* has, "Love one another warmly as Christian brothers, and be eager to show respect for one another." According to *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, the Greek word translated as "affectionate" is *philostorgos* (Strong's 5387), "a natural family love or tender affection. Loving with that natural affection that characterizes members of the same family (Rom. 12:10)." How much love do we have for our brothers and sisters in Christ? A love that eagerly moves us to show them honor and respect?

### **Ongoing Debt to Love One Another**

Later in Paul's letter to the Romans, he writes about an ongoing debt that Christians have to love one another. "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not covet,' and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:8-10 *New International Version* (2011)). We express Godly love by loving others as ourselves; a debt we will never be able to repay.

### **Serve One Another**

In writing to the churches of Galatia, Paul says, "For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but

through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' (Galatians 5:13-14). Paul's basis for serving one another in love is Jesus' teaching of loving our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 19:19, 22:39, Mark 12:31, Luke 10:27).

As Christians, we are to serve one another, following Jesus' earthly example of serving others: "A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves'" (Luke 22:24-27).

In Paul's letter to the Philippian Christians, he tells them to have the same servant mindset Jesus had when He gave up "the form of God," and came to earth as man in "the form of a servant," "So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:1-8). We need to be on guard against the attitude of wanting fellow Christians to serve us. We should approach our involvement in our congregations from a perspective of what we can give to the members, not what we can get from them.

### **Bearing with One Another**

In Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, He tells them, "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3). The following is a selection of various Bible translations rendering "bearing with one another in love" (verse 2), ". . . showing tolerance for one another in love" (*New American Standard Bible* NASB); ". . . making allowance for each other's faults because of your love" (*New Living Translation* NLT), ". . . putting up with one another's failings in the spirit of love" (*Revised English Bible*).

As Christians, we must show a tolerant love for each other's idiosyncrasies, eccentricities, peculiarities, personality quirks, and habits we might find a bit odd. We have to put up with each other's shortcomings and personal faults. Times may arise when someone's behavior is unacceptable, requiring us to take action. The Bible gives us instructions on how to confront a brother or sister in Christ, about their unacceptable behavior (Matthew 18:15-20; Galatians 6:1-2; James 5:19-20). This is not what Ephesians 4:1-3 is talking about. These verses are talking about the day-to-day ways we rub each other the wrong way, and the need to accept and make allowances for one another in love.

### **Increase and Abound in Love for One Another**

In the opening portion of Paul's, first letter to the Thessalonian Christians. He expresses his longing to return and visit them, concluding this section with, "Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints" (1 Thessalonians 3:11-13). Not only does he want to visit them, but he also wants the Lord to make them "increase and abound in love for one another and for all [people]." Paul tells them, the result of this growing in love for others will "establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints," or as the *Common English Bible* has it, "May the love cause your hearts to be strengthened, to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his people." Increasing and abounding in love for believers and nonbelievers will spiritually strengthen us, preparing us for Jesus' second coming.

Our love for one another can grow and increase. This increase in love comes from God through the Holy Spirit. In writing to the Roman church, Paul says, "hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Romans 5:5). To receive more of the Spirit, we need to ask for it. In teaching His disciples about the importance of persistence in prayer, Jesus says, "And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:9-13).

Fire is one of the images, or metaphors used to describe the actions of the Spirit of God, for example, the tongues of fire on Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). We can extinguish or quench the Spirit's influence in our life. As Paul writes in the conclusion of his first letter to the

Thessalonians, "Do not quench the Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 5:19). In Paul's, second letter to his assistant Timothy, pastor of the church in Ephesus he writes, "For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control" (2 Timothy 1:6-7). Like Timothy, there are times we must fan the flame of the Spirit and, and in so doing, stir up Godly love in our lives. Love is a fruit or by-product of the Spirit working in our lives: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness" (Galatians 5:22). The ability to love others in a Godly way comes from God. We must ask for this love, and once receiving it, use it.

### **Love Even More**

As we have seen, Paul's desire for Thessalonians was for their "love for one another and for all people grow and overflow" (1 Thessalonians 3:12). Paul later in the same letter, writes, "But we don't need to write to you about the importance of loving each other, for God himself has taught you to love one another. Indeed, you already show your love for all the believers throughout Macedonia [Macedonia is the region where the city of Thessalonica is located]. . ." (1 Thessalonians 4:9-10 NLT). God taught them to love one another by giving them His Spirit, through which they received the ability to love others (Romans 5:5). They also learned about Godly love through reading the Old Testament (the only scriptures they would have had at the time), which taught "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18).

Nevertheless, Paul appeals to them to do even more ". . . Even so, dear brothers and sisters, we urge you to love them [all the believers of Macedonia] even more"(1 Thessalonians 4:10 NLT). He shows them how to do this, "Make it your goal to live a quiet life, minding your own business and working with your hands, just as we instructed you before. Then people who are not Christians will respect the way you live, and you will not need to depend on others" (verses 11-12 NLT). Paul is telling them that they can show even more love for others, believers, and nonbelievers, by not being a burden to others by being a good neighbor.

### **Love Can Grow and Overflow**

In Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, he praises them for their flourishing faith and that their "love for one another is growing" (2 Thessalonians 1:1-3 NLT). In his first letter Paul encouraged them to let "the Lord make your love for one another and for all people grow and overflow," and "dear brothers and sisters, we urge you to love them even more"(1 Thessalonians 3:12; 4:10 NLT). Their love for one another was growing, teaching us that our love for one another is something that can grow and overflow. This Godly love comes through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). We need to ask God for more of that

Spirit, which He will give us (Luke 11:13). Once given the Spirit and love of God, we have to put it to use.

### **Fervently Love One Another**

Peter in his letter to the Christians "scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia," modern-day Asia Minor (1 Peter 1:1 NASB), writes, "Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart" (verse 22). Paul explains to them that spiritual purification comes through "obedience to the truth." This purification then makes it possible for them to have "sincere love of the brethren." Because they have this ability, Peter tells them to "fervently love one another." One receives the impression that these Christians were not fervently loving one another. This difficulty in showing love might have been the result of the trials they were experiencing (verses 6-7). Unfortunately, trials can sometimes cause us to focus on ourselves and what we are going through and neglecting the people around us. As Christians, we must remember that we should fervently love our brethren, no matter what we are going through.

### **Love Covers A Multitude of Sins**

Towards the end of his letter to the Christians of Asia Minor, Peter tells them to "keep fervent in your love for one another." He goes on to say that this fervent love can cover a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8 NASB). There are at least two ways we can do this. First, we can keep our mouths shut about the sins and shortcomings of others, "Hatred stirs up strife, But love covers all transgressions" (Proverbs 10:12 NASB), and "He who covers a transgression seeks love, But he who repeats a matter separates intimate friends" (Proverbs 17:9 NASB). Just because it happened, and we know about it, does not mean we have to tell others. We can also cover over a multitude of sins by helping a spiritual brother or sister to understand that their actions and behavior are wrong, "My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins" (James 5:19-20 NASB).

### **We Are the Children of God**

The apostle John writing in, 1 John 3:10-16, tells us how we can identify who is a child of God, and who is a child of the devil, "By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother" (verse 10 NASB). This is similar to Jesus' statement in the Gospel of John, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples if you have love for one another" (John 13:35 NASB). In 1 John 3, the apostle goes on to say in his letter, "For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another [see John 13:34; 15:12, 17]; not as Cain, who was of the evil one and slew his

brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous. Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (verses 11-16 NASB) [see John 15:12-13]. Loving our brethren is a sign by which we know we are the children of God.

### **Loving One Another a Condition for Answered Prayer**

In chapter three, John continues to write about the importance of Christians loving one another, "Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight. And this is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us" (1 John 3:21-23 NASB). John tells us there are two conditions for receiving answered prayer. The commands to have faith in Jesus as our savior and loving one another. Loving our brethren is one of the requirements for answered prayer.

### **God Abides in Those Who Love One Another**

Continuing in chapter four, the apostle John tells us that the love we have for one another is evidence of God abiding in us. "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. . . . Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has beheld God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit" (1 John 4:7-13 NASB). As the apostle Paul wrote the Roman Christians, "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Romans 5:5 NIV). We know God abides in us through the Holy Spirit, by the fact that we love one another.

### **The Old Commandment to Love One Another**

In John's second letter, addressed to "the chosen lady and her children," he writes, "Now I ask you, lady, not as though I were writing to you a new commandment, but the one which we have had from the beginning, that we love one another. And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, that you should walk in it." (2 John 1:5-6 NASB). John is referring to the command Jesus gave him, and the other apostles during their last Passover together, to love one another (John 13:34, 35; 15:12, 17). We express love for one another by obeying the commandments of God. It is through the Law of God, the letter,

and intent that we express love to others, especially those of the faith. This ties in with what Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, "Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet, and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love therefore is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:8-10 NASB).

### **Conclusion**

In this article, we have seen that the Bible makes numerous references to the need for Christians to love one another, as well as the importance God places on brethren loving one another. This brotherly love becomes a sign to the world and to ourselves that we are Jesus' disciples.