

THE CHRISTIAN'S TASK

1 John 3:11-24; 1 John 4:7-21

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Have you ever noticed how both our experience and inexperience can trip us up? One day a computer technician received a call from a distressed customer. The caller had just sunk a considerable amount of money into a new computer system and it wouldn't work. The technician had the female caller check all of the cable connections. Not a single one was out of place or loose. Finally, the technician asked, "Is the power button on?" The voice on the other end said, "I step on the pedal but nothing happens." The woman's experience with sewing machines colored her viewpoint on computers.

One of the few things I remember from my college chemistry courses is a story one professor told of next-door neighbors who had emigrated from another part of the world. They had heard so much about rhubarb that the mother wanted to cook it for her family. She had cut and discarded the stems and boiled the leaves. That day in class we learned about the toxic chemical reaction that rhubarb leaves have on human beings, and how one bright neighbor saved the lives of an entire family.

Well-intended actions can be embarrassing or even deadly if they lack perspective. This truth is not limited to technology or diet. It is true also of *The Christian's Task*.

Last week, we spoke of the one command Christ gave his followers. On the night Christ was betrayed, he gave his disciples a Maundy, a mandate or "must." He told his disciples: "As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (Jn. 13:34). That command is both the mandate for and the mark of everyone who is following Christ. "By this

all will know you are my disciples, if you love each other" (Jn. 13:35).

Today, I want us to consider what is necessary for us to go beyond the usual misguided but well-intended efforts of believers in fulfilling this mandate.

As believers in Christ, we have grown up in a variety of situations. Some of us come out of very fractured homes. For some of us, alcoholism, temper tantrums, marital spats, deception, and manipulative or callous patterns dominated home life. A whole generation believed that you do not affirm because that will lead to the deadly sin of pride, so many of us had parents who never told us that we did anything well. They experienced that, and they passed that along. Some families rarely showed affection. Some believers have rarely been hugged or told they are loved. Some had parents who never confessed their faults and never forgave anybody else their faults. Some came from homes where violence and sexual exploitation occurred. All of us came from home situations where love was tainted in some way by human foibles and sin. Even as blessings are transmitted from generation to generation, so are destructive patterns. We also lived with peers, associates and friends who demeaned or hurt us. Some believers had physical disabilities or concerns that brought great social pain. Some believers struggled in school, which dominated 70% of their life and their self-image as children.

As human beings we are not only unequipped to carry out Christ's command to love. We are ill equipped because of sin's invasion. The result is that all of us, to some extent, struggle in our relationship with God and in our relationships with one another. We struggle to love as Christ commanded us. It's one thing to be commanded to love. It's quite another thing to do so appropriately. It's one thing to live with the Maundy, the mandate, the must to love as Christ loved us. It's quite another thing to do it. As difficult as it is to believe, we are much like the woman who looked at a computer with a sewing machine mentality. Our uninformed acts of love may be as harmful as boiling rhubarb leaves.

The Bible teaches that to fulfill the love command there first must be a love connection.

We love because he first loved us. (I Jn 4:19, NIV)

In other words, God's love for us enables us to love. It empowers us to love. It motivates us to love. It impassions us to love; and it also shows us how to love.

The love connection with God is a spiritual experience. It is an experience where you taste forgiveness and acceptance. It is an experience where you discover that God values you. God is working on your behalf. The love connection is not a teaching. The love connection is a reception. Paul wrote about this to the Romans. He declared in

chapter five, verse five that God has poured his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, which he has given us.

John writes:

No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. (I Jn. 4:12-13, NIV)

That passage tells us at least three things. *First, God's love hungers to care for people through us.* As we love others, God's love is made complete in us. It's topped off. It's fulfilled. There is a hunger inside you to contribute to the welfare of people. That is God's love. When you love somebody, when you care for them, when you contribute to their life and when you forgive their sins against you, you complete what God's love hungers to do in you. *Second, when you respond to that hunger to care, that hunger to forgive, that hunger to contribute, you are heeding the Spirit of God who is working inside you.* You may think it's just you, but it isn't just you. God's Spirit is a Spirit of love. That Spirit creates a desire to love. That Spirit makes you want to contribute. It's not about you meeting your needs through somebody's companionship. It's about you meeting their needs. That's the Spirit at work. *Third, that very hunger to care is testimony that you have received something very spiritual and powerful.* You've received God's Spirit.

For a long time, I worried that although I asked Jesus to come into my life, he or the Holy Spirit wasn't there. I never realized that my very hunger to know Christ, serve Christ, please Christ and love people was evidence of the Spirit's presence. It was the work of the Spirit of Christ. Christ had come to me. He lived within me. I just didn't recognize his signature.

John wrote:

If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. (I Jn 4:15, NIV)

John is saying that you cannot express faith without God in you liberating and motivating you to such faith. Similarly, you can't truly love without the Spirit of love liberating and motivating you as well. The extent of your love is the extent of the Spirit's work within you.

John continues:

And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. (1 Jn 4:16, NIV)

That's the love connection. We become convinced and rely daily upon love that forgives us, love that protects us, love that directs us, love that values us, love that seals our future and ordains our days. More and more, our lives begin to grasp the extent of God's love for us, and how that love is working within us, around us, and on behalf of us.

Sometimes, however, that connection is blocked. We have trouble receiving and relying upon God's love.

Have you ever felt afraid to let people really know you? Have you ever feared that if people get too close and really see you, they won't love or respect you anymore? I've felt that. I discovered that this very notion, this very feeling hindered my ability to receive love and give love. How could people love me when there were things about myself I didn't like? How could people love me when I really don't feel that lovable? How could God love me when I feel so unlovable?

If you have ever entered a house of mirrors, you will soon realize that depending upon the mirror you look in, you will appear different. Some will make you fat. Others cast you as skinny. Some make you short, and others very tall. Some keep your image straight. Others give you a very crooked appearance. The mirror itself determines the image you see of yourself. In time the mirror that is used most will dominate how you feel about yourself.

Now everyone in life, especially parents, peers and siblings, serves as a mirror for us. Because parents are so crucial in our childhood, the mirror that they offer us often colors the rest of our lives. If they treat us poorly, we often see ourselves poorly. Even if they treat us well, we may see it as pity if another mirror dominates our vision.

Unfortunately, all but one mirror in life offers us distorted images of ourselves because of sin. Only one person has pure love that values us for what we truly are. That is Jesus Christ. Christ and the Bible offer us a picture that is fully dependable. We need to begin to hold that mirror up and believe its image. We need to let go of all the broken mirrors that have convinced us that we are unloved and relearn who we are.

I can't begin to tell you about the extent of healing that has gone on in my life. I'm still being healed. I'm still discovering broken mirrors that hinder my reliance and experience of God's love. However, I'm growing. I'm grasping more and more how loved I am.

My love connection with God has grown through people praying with me, through the ministry of weekends like Emmaus, of summer camps, of home groups, mission teams and small studies and prayer groups. The body of Christ is building me up in love. My own family is an important part of that ministry. They are helping me peer into God's mirror. What's helping you let go of the broken mirrors? What's helping you receive God's love and welcome God's Spirit? What's helping you to love as Christ loved you?