

LEARNING TO LOVE HIM

By Anna Rountree

What does it take to love God with your whole heart, soul, mind and strength as the Scriptures command?

Among our friends in ministry is one who literally died, appeared before Jesus in Heaven and was sent back to Earth to complete his service to our Lord. Now he touches untold thousands for Christ.

In relating his death experience, he says that he found himself in Heaven in a line of people who were standing on a moving path. One by one each person in the line appeared before Jesus. All those on the path were dressed in white and were exceedingly happy.

On a parallel path moving toward the Lord were people who were exceedingly unhappy. These were clothed in that to which they had devoted their lives. Each was given the opportunity to look at Christ and He at them before the path turned downward.

When our friend appeared before Jesus, he was asked the one question that everyone in the line had been asked: "Did you learn to love?"

The Lord had not asked "Did you do?" or "Did you go?" -- but "Did you love?" In other words, our friend was asked if, while he was on Earth, he had fulfilled the two greatest commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength" and "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31, NKJV).

UNABLE TO LOVE. Until I heard the story of my friend's experience, I did not realize that I was to seek to fulfill these commandments above all else - and the first one above all. However I was not able to correctly answer the "test" question put to all believers when they appeared before Christ. Not only was I aware of my failure in this area, but I knew that I was incapable of loving God with my whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. I confessed to my husband that I was unable to obey this most important commandment. "Of course you can't," he answered calmly. "God must fulfill this through you." I sighed inwardly because I didn't understand his answer. I saw that I couldn't keep the first commandment but I didn't know how God would accomplish it through me either.

One day I stumbled upon the answer. Christianity is a way of life of supernaturally receiving that which we do not have and will never have in ourselves. Our Lord and Savior is to "be" and "do" everything within and through His disciples (see John 15:5; Rom. 15:18-19).

Only the Father can love the Son completely. Only the Son can return that love fully to the Father. Neither the Son nor the Holy Spirit has His own love.

They love the Father and each other with the one divine love issuing from the Father. Only God can love God. His love has no limits. It was before all time and will be forever. We ask that this eternal love of the Father for His Son be brought forth in us. We cannot originate it. But we experience it as if we did. Such is the mystery of God.

OBSTACLES TO LOVE The heart is the spiritual organ that may be flooded with the love of God or be cold and distant toward Him. That is the reason it is named first in the greatest commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with ALL YOUR HEART" (Mark 12:30, emphasis added). Ultimately God's love cannot be hindered. But we can slow the flow of it through us if we allow any of the three obstacles described below to prevent our hearts from being filled with love for Christ.

1. **UNBELIEF** The beginning point of our falling in love with Jesus is to trust the Holy Spirit to put Christ's own faith within our hearts to believe the Scripture. The primary word Jesus spoke concerning our falling in love with Him is John 17:26: "I (Jesus) have made You (Father) known to them (the disciples) and I will continue to do so, in order that the love You (Father) have for Me may be in them and so that I also may be in them" (Good News Bible). Faith must always be the first aspect of any spiritual advance. We cannot love Jesus until we trust Him to be in us what He requires of us (see 1Cor 1:30). Christianity is not a way of life in which we "do" more and more and therefore appear to be more Christ-like. Christianity is a way of life in which we get out of the way more and more and allow Christ to manifest Himself through us (see 2Cor 4:10-11). Faith and love are bound together in the Word.

Faith works through love. "For in Christ neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but FAITH WORKING THROUGH LOVE" (Gal 5:6, NKJV, emphasis added)). Fortunately faith and love are gifts given to us because we are in Christ Jesus. Therefore we ask the Holy Spirit to bring forth Christ's faith in the Word concerning this divine love available to us, so "that Christ may dwell in (our) hearts through faith; that (we) being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height (of ever-expanding divine love) - to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge that (we) may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:17-19).

2. **UNFORGIVENESS** A second hindrance to Christ's love flowing through us is unforgiveness. We are always to remember the inestimable love of God in His forgiveness of our past sins through Christ Jesus. For many Christians this mercy is the greatest motive for loving Jesus. The Lord said, "Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little" (Luke 7:47). Which of us has

not been forgiven much - for our sins are many? If we deceive ourselves that we do not have our old sin nature in us, we are self-righteous (see 1John 1:8).

Extending full forgiveness to others who may have wronged us is a key to keeping our hearts open to allow the love of Christ to flow through them. Paul said we must be committed to "forgiving one another. If anyone has a complaint against another, even AS CHRIST FORGAVE YOU, SO YOU ALSO MUST DO" (Col 3:13, emphasis added). Of ourselves, we are unable to forgive others as He forgave us - fully and forever. But Christ's divine love through us for others includes His forgiveness of them. Many of us have sought to love our neighbors as ourselves. But a hidden truth is revealed when we follow the order the Lord has given to us in His Word. We find that if we pursue the Lord with our whole heart. Love for others becomes a blessed actuality. Jesus declared this fact when He said, "If anyone loves me, he WILL keep My Word (summed up in His new commandment to love one another as He does)" (John 14:23, emphasis added; see also 13:34).

3. DIVIDED HEART The Bible tells us that another major impediment to our loving Jesus as His Father does is a divided heart. In order for divine love to be effective, one's heart needs to be fully available for Christ to dwell there. We are to be strengthened with power through Jesus' Spirit in our inner person " so that Christ may finally settle down and feel completely at home in (our) hearts" (Eph 3:17, Wuest). But what if part of our hearts loves the things of this world? The Scriptures ask us: "Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4). God the Father cannot be satisfied with a heart that is only partially available to love His Son.

The apostle John warns us: "Do not love the world or the things in the world. IF ANYONE LOVES THE WORLD, THE LOVE OF THE FATHER IS NOT IN HIM" (1John 2:15, emphasis added). The "world" here is not the physical earth but a Biblical term for Satan's kingdom - his gaudy facade - on this planet. He rules over a pseudo-culture where human beings are exalted above God. The warning continues, "For all that is in the world - the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life - is not of the Father but is of the world" (v. 16). The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life are trinkets, hollow rewards dangled before us like jewels by Satan to entice us to turn our eyes and our hearts from Jesus. But if we refuse to be tricked or distracted by "the world", the Holy Spirit can begin a work in our hearts. When we are born again, we receive a new heart: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you (Ezek. 36:26.). But our bodily desires and unregenerated mind, will, and emotions (together

known as "the flesh") can back up into this pristine heart, clogging it. Therefore the Holy Spirit daily prepares for each disciple his "cross" - opportunities whereby he may choose God over his flesh (see Matt 16:24). Each time we choose the Lord over gratification of our fallen nature, a chamber is cleansed within the heart. Into each cleansed chamber rushes the living God (see John 14:23). Love like a torrent, like a swift cataract speeds to occupy every cleansed room. Love begets love until we can be satisfied with nothing but complete union with Christ. Only complete oneness satisfies our Father (see John 17:21-23). Therefore only complete oneness will satisfy His children. When we seek the Lord for His sake alone, longing to know Him as He knows us, we receive some surprising benefits. Without straining or crying, we find Him loving others through us. We begin seeing them as the Lord sees them: either helplessly lost without Christ or in various stages of growing up into Christ.

Another benefit is that we - in a sense - wake up. The world loses its allure. Nothing it has to offer - fame, fortune, power, position -- can motivate or control us. Why would we want any of these? We are in love with and loved by the most renowned, wealthy, powerful, and loving person in existence. No mere human can be all that Jesus is. No mere human can do all that He does. No mere human can love as He loves. There is a legend among the First Nations peoples about a beautiful Indian maiden who rejected every suitor. Her mother feared that she might ultimately overlook every eligible brave. But one day a handsome, shining admirer from a distant land visited her. He asked for her hand in marriage. She quickly accepted and left her home to live in that far-off country with him. We are like that maiden. Our hearts hunger for one who is not like everyone else, who is more than merely human. No one can fill the longing we feel for love Himself. Like the maiden, we don't want to settle for less than the best. We don't want a passionless existence -- we simply want to channel all our passion toward the right One. We were created to experience the best!

Mankind has searched this planet and beyond. We have followed every false god and every form of distraction and thrill. But there is only one who is eternal and who is a perpetual, ever-new delight: He is Jesus! Therefore set yourself to know Him - really know Him -- and learn to love Him above all else! Do not let the enemy deceive you by telling you that there are equally glorious pursuits, equally great attainments. There are not. HE IS THE PRIZE - and when you pursue Him, all things, all things, all things are added unto you (see Matt 6:33; Rom. 8:32, 1 Cor 3:21-23; Col. 2:10).