

STUDY
GUIDE
INCLUDED

Life without lack

LIVING IN THE FULLNESS
OF PSALM 23

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remember that the call to us is not to *do* as much as it is to *receive*. We love him *because he first loved us*. This is why the preaching of the gospel is essential, and why there is nothing more important on the face of the earth than ministers and teachers of the gospel teaching plainly—*plainly!*—the love of God toward every person. That is why John 3:16 is so vital: “For God so *loved* the world . . .”

He First Loved Us

I love old hymns. They have a beautiful way of expressing truth, and the lyrics are often taken directly from the Scripture. These two stanzas from an eighteenth-century German hymn based on Luke 15:2 plainly illustrate the wide embrace of God’s great love:

Christ receiveth sinful men,
spread this word of grace to all
who the heavenly pathway leave,
all who linger, all who fall.
Sing it o’er and o’er again;
Christ receiveth sinful men.
Make the message clear and plain:
Christ receiveth sinful men.²

One of the accusations the Pharisees made against Jesus was that he received sinners. This is very important for us to know. Jesus is the expression of the love of God for us, and in him we see the many ways God deals with people in mercy and grace. Jesus delighted in every individual; so, too, with us. He focused on what was of value in them; so, too, with us. He related to them, he associated with them, he got right down where they were and served them. So, too, with us; he meets us where we are, wherever we are. The darkest valley doesn’t frighten him away. In the gospel of Mark we find a beautiful description of his affection for his disciples:

And He went up on the mountain and called to Him those He Himself wanted. And they came to Him. Then He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach, and to have power to heal sicknesses and to cast out demons. (Mark 3:13–15)

Notice the love of God in action: Jesus called “those *He Himself wanted*.” He wanted them. Why? First and foremost, so “that they might be with him.” Yes, he had a mission for them, and that mission was to carry the love of God out into the world. But first he wanted them to be with him. He delighted in them.

The relational nature of Christ reflects the love of God, showing us what it is like and that it is *for us*. As we read in Romans 5:8, “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Do not miss that phrase, “*while we were still sinners*.” That is what God is like: “He is kind to the unthankful and evil” (Luke 6:35). That is the gift we are seeking from the God who is love.

Acting in Love, or Just Acting?

Most people know that love is not just about the things we do. Love is an attitude of the heart. We know we can *act* in a loving way without really loving. (Obligation, obedience, reputation, or personal benefit may be our motive.) We sense and appreciate when things are done for us because someone truly loves us.

When pastors and therapists are helping someone, they often have to overcome the individual’s attitude that says, “Well, you’re just acting in a loving way toward me because it’s your job.” Attempts to assure them that they are truly cared for are necessary, but it usually takes time for them to believe that. And during that time, the counselors naturally tend to care more and more for those they are helping.

Service to others is one of the easiest ways to begin loving someone. Helping people is something we all can do, and it allows us to grow in our ability to relate to others. There are many levels in relating to people, including choosing to be with them, being present and engaged with them, and experiencing the *gift* of love as we move into delighting in them. But there is also a way of *not* being with people when we are with them. You have probably had the experience of someone being both present and absent at the same time.

It is not easy to consistently love our families and friends at the heart level, much less our enemies. We may be able to focus on what is good and valuable in them, but delighting in them as God delights in us is a more difficult matter. Delight in those who have just cursed us or who have hurt us, who have taken something we value and scorned us and looked down upon us? It is hard to do—very hard. This is where we often give up on love.

Paul knew that when we think like this we are working at the wrong level. We should not try to love that person; we should train to become the kind of person who would love them. Only then can the ideal of love pass into a real possibility and practice. Our aim under love is not to be loving to this or that person, or in this or that kind of situation, but to be a person possessed by love as an overall character of life. Our responses to the specific occasions when we are to act flow out of our overall character. I do not come to my enemies and then try to love them; I come to them as a loving person. The good tree bearing good fruit.

What Is Love?

As you can imagine, there have been many attempts to gain a clear and precise understanding of the “many splendored thing” we call love. The primary word for love found in the New Testament is *agape*. One of the better efforts at describing *agape* love is that of Thomas Oord in his book, *The Science of Love*. Oord precisely defines love as

“acting intentionally, in sympathetic response to others (including God), to promote overall well-being.”³ Importantly, this definition distinguishes love from desire and locates it in the will, leaving room for desire and feeling to play an appropriate role in love without making them the heart of the matter.⁴

In our cultural context, it is necessary to emphasize that love and emotion are not identical. We can act in loving ways even when we do not “feel loving.” It cannot be said too often that agape love is not the same as desire or delight, although these might accompany agape love. Desire and feelings generally have a different nature than love. To be confused about this is to remain helpless to enter into love and to receive it into ourselves.

Desire and feelings are more matters of impulse than of considering and choosing the best alternative. They are concerned with their own satisfaction, not with what is better and possibly best. If a choice is made with a vision broad enough and clarified by love, it will find what is good and right. If choice is surrendered to God, united with his will, it will be able to do what is best.

Nonetheless, I believe that Oord’s definition fails to capture central features of love, especially those presented by Jesus and Paul. For them, love is something that has three essential characteristics:

1. Love arises in people whose lives are already marked by certain qualities of the whole self, chief of which are faith in our all-sufficient God and joyful embracing of death to self.
2. Love involves an orientation of the whole self toward what is good and right.
3. Love has amazing, supernatural power for good as it indwells the individual.

These are essential characteristics of agape love as Paul and the New Testament present it. Notice here that *love is not action*; it is a

source of action. Love is a condition out of which actions of a certain type emerge. It is a condition that explains how the three marks of love could be true and must be true.

Love is not an abstract ideal impossible to realize in our day-to-day lives. It is an overall condition of real people, living in the real world, who are poised to promote the well-being of those within their range of influence. Such people are ready to act in ways that bring about good. But again, love is not an action or a feeling or an emotion or an intention, even though it gives rise to intentions and to actions and is associated with some “feelings” and resistant to others. Only such an understanding of agape love as an overall disposition does justice to the New Testament teachings about love and gives us a coherent idea of love that can be aimed at in practice and implemented. After all, love is meant to be lived.

Such love is holistic, not something one turns on or off for this or that person or thing. Its orientation is toward life as a whole. It dwells on good wherever it may be found and supports it in action. Love is nourished by the good and the right and the beautiful. That is why Paul wrote to his Philippian friends:

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.” (Phil. 4:8)

Remember, deeper than the fact that God loves us is this: he *is* love. He wills nothing but what is good. That is his identity, and it explains why he loves individuals even when he is not pleased with them or loved by them in return. When Paul directed us to “be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us,” this is what he was talking about

(Eph. 5:1-2 NRSV). We are called and enabled to love as God loves by becoming like God as loving persons.

An Anatomy of Love

When we understand that love is an overall disposition to bring about good, we can better understand some of Paul's statements such as, "Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith" (1 Tim. 1:5). Notice that the aim of Christian instruction (that is, what "commandment" refers to) is love. This love arises "*from* a pure heart"—one that is not wallowing in fantasies of sensual gratification or malice—and "*from* a good conscience"—one unburdened with guilt from the failure to do the good and the right—and "*from* sincere faith"—genuine confidence in God's goodness and care for us, a love from which nothing can separate us.* We do not achieve the disposition of agape love *by direct effort*, but by training: attending to and putting into place the conditions out of which it arises. This is where the regular practice of the spiritual disciplines comes strongly into play.⁵ Once again, the goal is not to be people who do loving things but to become the kind of people who naturally, joyfully, and easily love.

The law is not the source of righteousness, but it is always the way of the righteous. It guides people into actions that conform to what is good and right. Love seeks the same result but from the innermost place from which our actions come (John 7:38; Luke 6:45). This is in keeping with Jeremiah's vision of the time when God will write his law on the hearts of his people (Jer. 31:33). If we take care of the source of our action—the heart—action will take care of itself.** Then we won't be constantly hindered or defeated by

* Romans 8:37-39.

** This was certainly Jesus' understanding of the nature of acts such as murder and adultery. See Matt. 5:21-30.

our conflicted self, which winds up doing what it “intends” not to do or not doing what it “intends” to do.*

When we read 1 Corinthians 13, it is important to understand that Paul is not issuing commands; he is not saying that *we* ought to be patient, kind, humble, and so forth. He is describing love itself as having these characteristics. That, after all, is what the passage actually says. So we “pursue love” by advancing our faith and dying to self through appropriate training and practice, and the love we receive from God takes care of the rest. These virtues arise from the overall disposition of love, because love, by its very nature, seeks what is good and right before God.

Love enables a person to not only refrain from hating his enemies but to instead seek what is good for them along with all others involved. This does not mean always giving in to what the enemies (or friends) want or letting them have their way. That might be the worst thing you could do to them and, therefore, cannot be the loving thing.

Love, then, is a condition of the will, embodied in the fundamental dimensions of the human personality, guiding them for the purpose of serving the good. In the deepest sense, love is not something you choose to *do*; it is what you become—a loving person. Your will is your capacity to bring things and events and processes into existence. It is the control center of the self: the “heart” or the human spirit. It is meant to direct all aspects of the self. When love pervades your will, all these other dimensions—your mind (with its thoughts, images and feelings, desires and emotions), your body, your social relationships, indeed your whole soul**—work in

* As examples of a conflicted self, see Peter’s three denials of Christ (Matt. 26:34, 69–75) or Paul’s experience described in Romans 7:14–24.

** “Soul” is here defined as the hidden or “spiritual” side of the person. It includes an individual’s thoughts and feelings, along with heart or will, with its intents and choices. It also includes an individual’s bodily life and social relations, which, in their inner meaning and nature, are just as “hidden” as the thoughts and feelings.

harmony with and in service to the kingdom of God, and your life becomes a testimony to the God who meets your every need.⁶

The Heart of a Servant

One of the hallmarks of those who live a life without lack is the freedom to serve others. From Jesus' perspective, there is no greater calling than to be a servant.* And whatever our place in life, as love fills and flows through us we will be engaged in caring for the welfare of others. The Shepherd Psalm portrays this as it poetically describes the abundance of God's provision in the language of a feast at which the psalmist is an honored guest.

Speaking to God, he says, "You prepare a table before me" (v. 5). On this table is a full banquet, including a cup that is overflowing. But that's not all. Surprise guests are in the room—the psalmist's enemies! The Lord has prepared this meal "in the presence of my enemies" (v. 5). We do not know if they are sitting at the table with him, but they are in his presence. I imagine that David, lacking nothing, and realizing that he certainly does not deserve this kind of divine accommodation, stops and serves his enemies, offering them food and drink and inviting them into the fellowship of the Shepherd's sufficiency. Having *been* served, he is free *to* serve.

Jesus, of course, is our master and model in this regard. Next to the passion events that led up to and included his crucifixion, there may be no clearer and more powerful expression of Jesus' servant heart than what took place at another feast, in an Upper Room hours before his passion began.

The scene is described in the thirteenth chapter of the gospel of John, which begins with these words: "Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own

* Matthew 23:11: "The greatest among you will be your servant."

who were in the world, He loved them to the end” (v. 1). Clearly, John is preparing his readers for a lesson in how Jesus “loved them to the end.”

For Jesus, this meal was the beginning of that end. He recognized that the hour had come in which he was going to be killed. He knew that in just a few hours he would be taken by the Roman soldiers and the priests who were guiding them, and he would lay down his life. A normal person would be preoccupied with this knowledge. But when Jesus came to this moment he was thinking, *What would be the most important lesson for me to leave my friends?* John’s narrative continues:

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. (John 13:3–5)

This is faith. Everything was in his hands. Everything! Yet he was free to give it up, for he was secure in his knowledge that “he had come from God and was going to God.” It was in that confidence that he was prepared to do what he did—in the Upper Room with his disciples, then later in the garden, in Pilate’s hall, and on the cross.

As he was washing the disciples’ feet he came to Peter who, obviously troubled by what Jesus was doing, exclaimed, “Master, you shouldn’t be washing our feet like this.” Jesus was not surprised at this response. He had observed the dynamics of this little group and had chosen to answer the question on everyone’s mind: “Who is going to wash our feet?” Their unspoken answer had unanimously been, “Not me! I’m not going to wash any feet.” We can be sure this question had been on their minds because at this particular meal

there was no host. The host normally would arrange for the foot washing.

All having answered the question by their silence; they were ready for an essential lesson about love. So Jesus engaged in serving them by meeting their needs. First, the need for clean feet. In those days feet really needed to be washed. It should have been done before the meal, because in that time they ate lying down, so noses and feet were not all that far apart. It would have been nice if the feet had been washed and anointed before the meal. But the disciples were unwilling to stoop (literally) to do that, which proved they had a far deeper need than dirty feet; they needed to learn about the servant heart of love. Apparently even after Jesus showed them, they still did not understand. So he made sure they got the point:

So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. (vv. 12-17)

One way we have responded to this story is to have foot-washing ceremonies, often on Maundy Thursday of Holy Week.* While these services can be meaningful, often the main benefit is bestowed upon the person who is doing the washing, rather than on the one receiving it. This is because there is no unmet need being addressed;

* *Maundy* is derived from the Latin *mandatum* for "mandate," because Jesus gives us a mandate, a new commandment, to love one another as he has loved us.

the recipient's feet are not in need of cleaning. Foot washing is symbolic of a duty to be humble, which, while certainly a praiseworthy virtue, is not the only point Jesus was making. He was actually helping people, delighting in them, relating to them in meaningful ways to meet a need and promote their well-being. In this sense we should hear him say, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

The Brand-New Old Commandment

What was "new" about this commandment? Certainly it was not new in the sense that it had never been heard before. John used similar language in his first epistle when he wrote, "An old commandment I give to you," and then he said, "No, it's a new commandment" (1 John 2:7-8 PAR). So which is it, old or new? Jesus was essentially saying, "Listen, you have heard about love ever since Moses told you to love your neighbor as yourself. I am showing you what that really means. You are to love one another with the same concern with which I have loved you. Do that and it will be obvious that you are my disciples." The newness of the commandment lies in the kind of love Jesus was demonstrating, a love flowing freely and easily from his God-rooted resources. When we love like this it is not the result of human effort, but of the radical with-God-ness we have in him. It is a gift of God.

If you look at Mohammed, or Buddha, or Confucius, or any other leaders, you will never find anyone who loved his disciples the way Jesus did. Not one of them. Some people, in an attempt to prove the superiority of Christ, focus on the fact that only he rose from the dead. That is true. But deeper still, the very character of Jesus stands out in how he related to his followers. None of these other leaders were willing to die for their disciples. And when you read

their teachings, you can clearly see that Jesus was the only one living in the realm of agape love.

Within the academic world there are those, like the late John Hick, who seek to grade world religions by comparing their power to transform and fulfill human personality.⁷ On this basis, every religion in the world flunks except Christianity. Only Jesus passes that test. Only Jesus enables his followers to live a life of selfless, joyful, anxiety-free, loving service on behalf of others. Having said that, the sad truth is that our churches today do not preach this as *the* message of the gospel. They have not offered this matchless life to people. They have not asked, "Would you actually like to live like this? Would you like to be possessed by this kind of love?"

You can be. God will give it to you, and when he does, these things that Jesus and Paul say about love will be realized in your life, not because you did it, but because you welcomed love in and let it take possession of you. You will be able to say with the old hymn, "I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore . . ." but "Love lifted me."⁸

While it is good to remember that love saves us, it is equally true that love is meant to enter our lives, our bodies, and our hearts. We are to be temples of the Holy Spirit, sacred spaces in which God dwells. He is the Spirit of Love who desires to reside within us and empower us to love as he loves. When the gospel of Jesus Christ is fully proclaimed, it includes offering this kind of life to people. The opportunity to be able to love people—*all people*—like Jesus does must be clearly presented, and then we must decide if that is something we want. If we truly want love like that, God will give it to us. But if we do not choose to become as loving as Jesus, we will never know a life without lack. For such a life is realized through love filling our lives. Faith is only completed in love, because our faith is in a God of love—no other. The more this faith grows in us, the more we will experience the carefree joy of Christ's love.