

Twice in the first letter of John we read that God is love. We know that God is the personification of all Goodness, and that this love must reflect that Goodness and be something which draws us to him. But the question is, 'How does God show us what love means?'

Consider how God first showed his love to man. When most people think of what God communicated to man, about how to live, they think of the ten commandments, given to Moses on mount Sinai. We view these as encapsulating the core of the will of God. But what do they say about love? How do they show us what love is like? In Deut. 4.6-22, which records the ten commandments, the word 'love' is not mentioned but two times, in verse 10 where he shows the reciprocal relationship between Him and His people as it should be. But we do not see the word love defined in any real sense. How did God expect us to know what love was?

Of course, it wasn't as if we had no conception of what it meant at all. People loved each other back then as they do now, but in a way that only scratches the surface of the meaning of love. How then did God show us the magnitude of love? Deut 6:4 is a start, where God describes himself as the God who had delivered them, who had brought them to freedom.

Moses reminds the people of Israel in Deut 8-10 of all the wonderful things that God has done for them. This ought to bring a response of love from them, but we know that it does not last long. God reminds them again and again through his word of his love for them, but they do not really get the point. In Deuteronomy 6:4-5 we read, 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.' We see that Israel was commanded to love with every fiber of their being, but except for the examples of what God has done for them, there is no definition of that love. There is much more to love than to obey, serve, and fear.

If we look in a concordance at the instances of the word love in the teachings of Jesus, we see that apart from this instance in the sermon on the mount, the next discussion of love is found during the passion week, at the end of the earthly ministry of Christ. We will look to see where in a moment. But let us think first about what has gone on. Still in the teachings of Christ I feel this idea of Him trying to show the people that they had missed the point. This was what infuriated the Pharisees so much, even to the extent that they wanted to kill him. We can imagine that the pressure had mounted within those who were following Christ to find out just what the point was that they were supposed to get! I think that this is why the question is asked in Matthew 22.36, 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?' Now we know that this was asked by his enemies to test or trap him, but I think that it represents the need to get to the heart of the matter, to have Christ define it for everybody. We read what Christ has to say in vss 37-40...

We see that it is love that is the most important thing to God; love for God and man intertwined together. This he says in verse 40 is the foundation upon which all of the law rests. The proper understanding and implementation of love is the greatest thing in the world.

The next question that might come, then, is: Just how do we know what this love is? If you want more than what we know, then show us what you mean! Let us look at this occasion as it is recorded in the book of Luke, chapter 10.25-37. I am not going to read it all, but if you look at it you will see that after the great commandment someone does ask how this is all done in a practical sense. In other words, he wants to be shown how this kind of godly love operates. And Jesus answers him with the story of the Good Samaritan.

This story is really love in action! Here Christ shows in a very dramatic way what love means. Here is a man who is hated by the Jews, thought of as filth and refuse, but he has what God is after: compassion! Even after the so-called 'men of God' have passed him by, those who should not have missed God's point, this foreigner stopped and gave of himself to help. It was so obvious which person proved to be the kind of person that God wanted that the man who had put Jesus to the test had to answer that the man who fulfilled the greatest commandments was the one who had shown mercy. The word Samaritan could not even be said by him. But Jesus wants us all to act this way.

Let us now look at the first letter of John. In chapters 4 and 5 we see again that we are commanded to love God and our fellow man. Also we see that the proof of our love is our obedience, an echo of sorts of the passages that we read in the gospel of John. But the real heart of the matter is found in chapter 4, vss 7-11... In the first part we are again exhorted to

love, because God is love, but we need to know more about what love is. We are told in vss 9 and 10. Verse 9: In this was the love of God shown to us: that God sent his Son to die for us. Verse 10: here is the contrast between your love and our love: Christ gave up everything so that we would have a chance to live. And in response to this love, we ought to also love one another.

This is where I see God showing us what love really is. The KJV says: 'Herein is love'; God wanting us to understand what 'agape' love, love of the unlovely, is really like. We talked earlier about loving our enemies and how that related to God's kind of love. We read in Romans 5.6-10... We see the magnitude of this love for us. I don't think that we appreciate what Christ did for us. It is crucial to our understanding of what love is to see the magnitude of His gift.

Let's now read Philippians 2.5-8... It is difficult for us to conceive what Christ gave up to come to earth. Here we read that he was in a sense of equality with God, in tremendous glory in heaven, yet he loved us enough that he was willing to let go of it so that we might live. He gave up power, glory, and mobility to be confined in the body of man. He entered a world which in contrast to heaven must have seemed the refuse pit of the universe. But he did it for us, and this is what God wants to show as the proof of His kind of love.

The point that I really want to make is that there are many books in the religious literature of the world that say that we should love each other. Reason even dictates that we do this. But nowhere but in the Bible is there the proper example of how to do it. Christ gives us an extremely personal example; showing us absolutely what love means. Herein is love: Christ died so that we might live. This is real love. And this is the point that God has been trying to make to man. Man had to have this kind of example because he could not just be told about love. He had to be shown. Now that we have this great example, we have no excuse for not knowing what love is, and how to please God with it.