

Free To Love



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Free To Love

(How Free Are You?)

Bill Loveless

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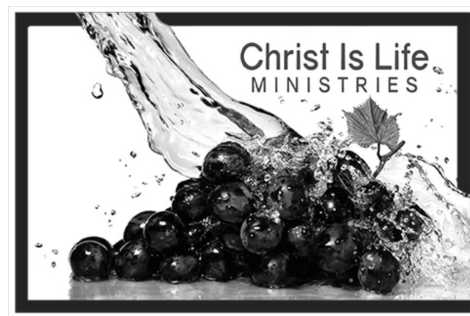
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Introduction

What non-believers truly want to see in Christians is not how much better our lives are than theirs. No, what they're looking for is one thing: love. They want ... ordinary, broken people who love each other. For the people of the world are ordinary and broken themselves and in need of love—the love that cancels mistakes, values what is lowly, mends broken hearts.¹

I must admit I have written and taught about God's love and loving others for several years. However, it wasn't until about a year ago that God began to open my eyes to the fact I wasn't connecting freedom in Christ to loving others. Because of what God is teaching me now, I can relate with Job when he said in Job 42:5, 6:

*"My ears have heard you but **now my eyes see you.**"*

I can identify with Job because, until recently, my understanding of loving others had been more about "hearing" than "seeing." [**Note:** I define spiritual sight as spiritual understanding and experience.] Concerning my new understanding of freedom and loving others, I am beginning to "see," understand and experience what love truly is and how it applies to loving others. My prayer for you, as you move through this book, is you, too, will have new "eyes" to see and experience a deeper love for others as you walk in greater freedom in Christ.

¹ Mason, Mike. "Living Life to the Full: The Ordinary Way (Part 6)," *Mike Mason Books*, 3 January 2019, www.mikemasonbooks.com/living-life-to-the-full-the-ordinary-way-part-6.

Chapter One

What Is Our Greatest Calling?

I want to start by answering the question: What is our greatest calling as Christians?

Before we start, I would like you to do me a favor. You may know some or all of the verses in this book. Nonetheless, I would encourage you to read them as if for the first time. As you read each verse, ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you what it means for you personally; then ask Him to deepen your belief of all that revealed in the verse because God's personal revelation to you is the key to your personal transformation.

What Is Our Greatest Calling?

I now believe our greatest calling as Christians is to be "lovers." God affirms this through such verses as Matthew 22:36-40:

*"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus said to him, "**Love the Lord your God** with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment.*

*The second is like it: '**Love your neighbor as yourself**. All the law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.'" Matthew 22:36-40*

Jesus goes on to affirm this in the following verses:

*"A new commandment I give to you, that **you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.**" John 13:34*

*"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, **if you love one another.**" John 13:35*

*"This is My commandment, that **you love one another, just as I have loved you.**" John 15:12*

I read these passages for years but missed their personal significance. Up until a year ago, I thought my greatest calling was to be a "messenger" of the Christ-life truths not a lover. I believed my primary mission was to share with Christians that a life of performance, trying to keep God's rules and commands and working for God will **not** lead to any spiritual transformation. Rather, living from Christ as our Source will radically transform how we think, feel, choose, believe, and behave.

For me, it was all about getting the liberating message of Christ as our life out to other Christians who were striving in their own strength to try to live the Christian life. As important as this message has been, was it God's highest calling for me? God is persuading me it was not.

In retrospect, I can see that for several years God was trying to get my attention when, prior to each speaking engagement, He would speak these words through my wife, “Remember, Bill, when love is felt, the message is heard.” I would always say, “Thank you,” but I missed the significance of what she was saying because my focus was on the message itself not loving those I was giving the message to.

But now, the Lord is opening my eyes to His truth that my highest priority is loving others so that His message will flow through His love. I first realized this when I was asked to come and share my testimony at a men’s prayer breakfast. I had a long-term relationship with the pastor and had taught and preached at his church a number of times.

As I was driving over to the church, the Spirit inserted these thoughts into my mind, “Bill, I want you to first and foremost focus on loving these men and not on giving your testimony.” So, when I started speaking, I silently prayed this prayer during the whole time I was speaking,

“Lord, love these men through me.”

When I finished, my pastor friend came over to me and said, “I have heard your testimony many times before but never more powerfully than today.” For the first time, I experienced the words of the Lord through my wife, “When love is felt the message is heard.”

As a result, I no longer see myself as just a messenger. Rather, I am seeking to become a “lover” who is delivering a message through the filter of His love. Isn’t this an affirmation of what Paul says in Ephesians 4:15?

*“... speaking the truth in **LOVE**....”*

This calling to be lovers of others isn’t just limited to ministry, but it applies to every area of our lives. When people experience God’s love through us, it sets the stage for them to respond to that love.

As Christians, God has gifted each of us in different ways for diverse roles, e.g., as messengers, encouragers, evangelists, caretakers, etc. But, is focusing on our gifting or roles our greatest calling?

***I believe our greatest calling is to be LOVERS,
i.e., lovers of GOD, OTHERS and SELF.***

If your highest calling is to be a lover of others, in what ways might that change the focus of your personal spiritual journey and your relationships with others?

How Do We Know Our Calling Is to Be Lovers?

I would like to look at a few more scriptures that further affirm our highest calling is to be “lovers.”

1. Look At The VALUE God Puts On Love

We see the high value God puts on love in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3:

*“If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but **do not have LOVE**, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, **but do not have LOVE, I am nothing**. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, **but do not have LOVE, I gain nothing.**” [emphasis added]*

Paul is telling you in this verse that if you do not have love, your gifting, your knowledge, your faith, and even your acts of service have no real value. Even though this verse may appear somewhat negative, God is trying to show you the tremendous value He puts on love.

2. God’s PRIORITY On Love

Let’s examine a few verses that reveal how great a priority God puts on our expressing His love.

“So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.

Beyond all these things put on LOVE....”

Colossians 3:12-14a

These verses contain only a partial list of Christ-like characteristics Paul instructs us to “put on.” However, the one characteristic that supersedes all the rest is love.

God gives love an even higher priority in 1 Corinthians 13:13:

*“Love never fails.... And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But **the greatest of these is LOVE.**”*

Paul concludes verse 13, above, by declaring love is a higher priority than even faith and hope.

When it comes to the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22, 23, which fruit is listed first?

*“But the fruit of the Spirit is **LOVE**, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control....”*

When I look at 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, below, I am becoming persuaded that all the other fruits of the Spirit flow from love. Look at the description of love below:

“LOVE is patient, LOVE is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

Paul is saying out of love flows patience and kindness which are two of the fruits listed in the previous Galatians passage. Thus, I believe all the fruits of the Spirit flows from love. From these scriptures we can see the value and priority God places on love. With that in mind, let's look at the answer to the following question:

What QUALIFIES Us to Be Lovers?

The truth is nothing in and of ourselves qualifies us to be lovers. A better question might be:

“What did God DO in us to QUALIFY us to become lovers?”

1. Christ put His life in you to be your SOURCE to love others.

“God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has THE LIFE....”
1 John 5:12a

The moment we were saved, Christ put His life in us. As a result, Christ became our Source for loving others. We see this in 1 Corinthians 1:30 and 1 John 4:19:

“He is the SOURCE of your life in Christ Jesus, ...”
1 Corinthians 1:30 (RSV)

“We love, because He first loved us.”
1 John 4:19

The good news about Christ's love is that God is not asking you to be the source to produce Christ's love for others because you can't be the source. Only Christ can provide and produce His love through you for others.

2. You Are a CONTAINER of All of Christ's Love

“For in Christ all the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form and you have been given fullness in Christ....” Colossians 2:9, 10a

As a result of Christ's living in you, according to Colossians 2:9, 10, you have the “fullness” of Christ in you. Practically speaking, you are a “container” of all of Christ's peace, joy, rest, forgiveness, etc. For the purpose of our study, it means you have the fullness of all of Christ's love in you. Why is this important?

As a container you POSSESS all of Christ's love and are POSSESSED by His love.

Since you contain the fullness of Christ' love, you are able to draw on His love to love others through you.

3. You Are A PARTAKER of God's Love

Not only are you a container of God's love, you are a partaker of His love. Look at 2 Peter 1:4:

"For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become PARTAKERS of the divine nature."

The word "partaker" in the original Greek means "to share with." We know a major part of God's divine nature is that He is love. (1 John 4:8). Because God is in us as our Source and He is love, He shares His love with us and through us to others.

4. We Love Because That Is Our TRUE IDENTITY in Christ.

Just as love is God's identity, it is our identity as well. How so? First of all, we know from 2 Corinthians 5:17 that we have a new identity:

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation [new identity]; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come."

As part of our true identity, we are unconditional lovers. We see this in 1 John 4:7:

"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God."

We love because when God gave us a new identity, He hard-wired us to be lovers.

***Therefore, loving others is not only what you DO,
it is who you ARE.***

[**Note:** If you don't know the truths of what it means that you have a new identity, I recommend you go through my curriculum, *Do You Know Your True Identity?* located on our website: www.christislifeministries.com.]

5. You Are A DISPENSER of God's Love

God not only wants us to be containers and partakers of His love, His ultimate goal is for us to be "dispensers" of His love. Look at Romans 5:5:

*"Now hope does not disappoint, because **the love of God has been POURED OUT within our hearts** through the Holy Spirit who was given to us."*

As our Source, the Lord does not pour His love into us only for us to then bottle it up. We are to be vessels of love poured out for others. We see this in 1 Thessalonians 3:12:

*"May the Lord make your love increase and **OVERFLOW for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.**"*

What kind of dispensers is God calling us to be? I don't believe He is looking for "eye dropper" dispensers that gives love one drop at a time. Instead, God is looking for "loving" fire hydrants. Can you imagine standing in front of an open fire hydrant and being washed off the sidewalk? I believe this is the kind of lovers God is looking for: available and willing to be generous dispensers of His great love to others.

Summary

Christ's love in us is the only thing that qualifies us to be "divine lovers." Since this is true, do we have any excuse for not loving others? Because we are His divine lovers, Paul exhorts us at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 14:1:

"Purse love...."

I would like to end this chapter by quoting Dallas Willard, a noted author, from his paper, "Getting Love Right":

"Our aim under love is not to be loving to this or that person, but to be a person possessed by love as an overall character of life. Love is not what you choose to do. It is what you choose to be.

"It is not about coming to the unlovable and trying to love them. Rather, come to them as a loving person. Even God doesn't just love, He is love. It is His identity."²

² Dallas Willard, *Getting Love Right*, A paper presented by Dallas Willard at the American Association of Christian Counselors conference in Nashville, TN on September 15, 2007 (Amazon, Kindle edition).

Discussion Questions:

1. What key truth(s) impacted you the most in this chapter? Why?

2. Why is Christ, not us, the Source for loving others?

2. In what ways does knowing you are a container, partaker and dispenser of God's love change the way you look at loving others?

3. In what ways does it change how you see yourself loving others to know that love is not only something you do, it is who you are in your true identity?

4. How is what you learned in this chapter going to change the way you love others?

Chapter Two

Two Types of Love For Others

What Kind of Love Are We Talking About?

There are many different forms of love but for purposes of this study, I want to focus on two types of love: human and agape love.

1. Human Love

I simply define human love as any and all forms of love produced by individuals. The problem with every form of human love is this:

***HUMAN love is SUBJECTIVE, CONDITIONAL,
and ME-centered.***

Let me explain.

Human love is subjective because it is based on and/or influenced by our beliefs, personal tastes, opinions and fluctuating moods, attitudes, and feelings.

Human love is conditional because we put certain terms or requirements on people that they must meet in order for us to love them. Another way of saying this is when it comes to human love, we put people under the law. I will explain this further in the next chapter.

Human love is “me-centered” because I determine who will be loved, how they will be loved, and whether they even deserve my love.

Let’s look at some biblical forms of human love. There are several forms of human “love” defined in the Bible. Let’s look at two of them.

- a) **AHAB** - is a Hebrew word that means love of family.
- b) **PHILIA** - is a Greek word for the most general type of love in Scripture, encompassing the human love one has for fellow humans, and the care, respect, and compassion for people in need.

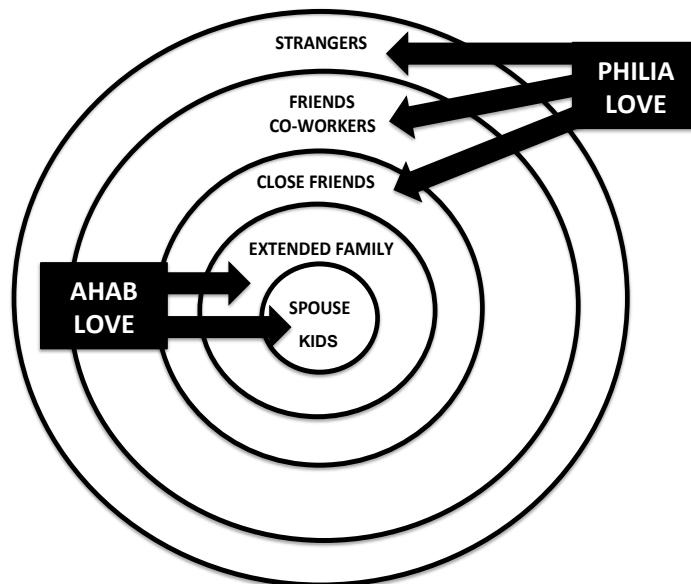
To better understand “philia” love, look at Matthew 10:37:

***“He who [philia] loves father or mother more than
Me is not worthy of Me; and he who [philia] loves
son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.”***

Let’s apply these two different types of human love to our relationships. As we know, we all have different levels of relationships. See the diagram on the following page that

illustrates this. In the inner circle, if you are married, your most personal relationship is your spouse. As you move out from that inner circle, you see relationships become less personal.

The diagram illustrates these two forms of love. “Ahab” love is love for your spouse and family. “Philia” love is the human love we have for every other relationship.



As you look at this diagram, think about your relationships in terms of human love. What conditions and/or expectations might you be putting on your relationships with others when it comes to loving them?

The only type of love unbelievers are able to love with is human love. In contrast, as Christians, we are equipped to love others with another form of love: *agape* love.

2. Agape Love (the “No Excuse” Love)

“And a second is like it: You shall [agape] love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” Matthew 22:39-40

When it comes to the second commandment, the “love” Matthew is talking about is *agape* love. Let me define *agape* love:

AGAPE love is Christ’s immeasurable, incomparable love for humankind. It is the divine love that ONLY comes from Christ.

Agape love is PERFECT, UNCONDITIONAL, SACRIFICIAL and SELFLESS.

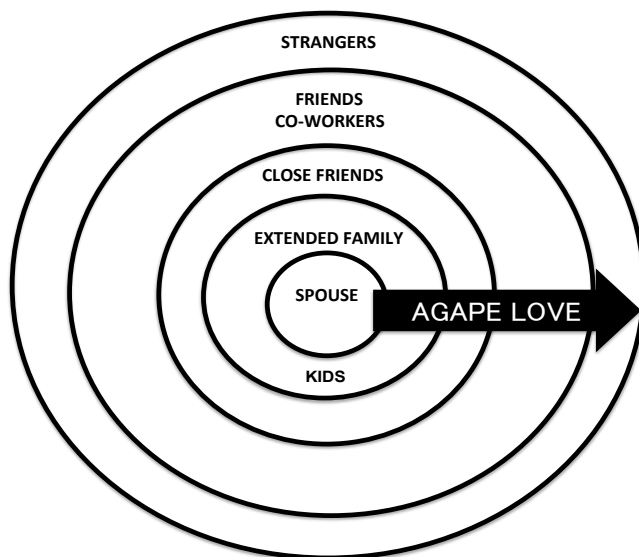
The kind of love we contain, partake of and dispense in Christ is *agape love*. Think about it for a moment. The *agape* love in Christ, who is in you, is perfect, unconditional, sacrificial and selfless.

When we are loving others with our own natural human love, we cannot help but love conditionally. However, with *agape* love there are no conditions and no expectations.

In addition, there is one more key truth you need to understand when you are loving others with *agape* love.

Since as a Christian, you contain all of Christ's *agape* love, you have NO excuse for not loving everyone EQUALLY.

This is why I call *agape* love the “no excuse” love. We have no excuse not to love everyone equally because we contain all of the love of Jesus. This is illustrated on the following page.



Think about it. When it came His *agape* love, did Jesus love the disciples and the little children more than he did the self-righteous Pharisees? The answer is “no” because *agape* love is perfect, unconditional, and does not play favorites. Because he loved with *agape* love, Jesus loved the Pharisees, the little children, and His disciples equally. (Even though He displayed it differently.)

So, let me end this chapter with this statement:

***When you are loving others with AGAPE love,
you are loving them with the HEART of Jesus.***

Discussion Questions:

1. What key truth(s) impacted you the most in this chapter? Why?

2. What are some of your excuses for not loving others?

3. What are some of the consequences of loving others with a subjective, conditional, and me-centered human love?

4. In what ways would it change your marriage, your parenting, and/or your other relationships if you were loving them with *agape* love?

5. Since you contain all of God's *agape* love, do you have any excuse for not loving everyone perfectly, unconditionally, sacrificially, and selflessly?

Chapter Three

Key Truths About Agape Love

In this chapter, I would like to share some key truths about *agape* love. Whenever I use the word “love” in this chapter, I will be referring to *agape* love.

Law and Love Don’t Mix

*“For the whole **Law is fulfilled in one word**, in the statement, ‘You shall **love your neighbor as yourself.**’” Galatians 5:14*

I said in the previous chapter that, by putting conditions on loving someone, we are placing them under the law. Another way we put people under the law is by placing expectations on our love for them. When our conditions and expectations are not met, then we feel justified in exercising our fleshly rights. Let me give you examples of each of these.

Conditions

Human love is conditional when we put certain terms or requirements on people that they must meet in order for us to love them. Here are some examples of conditions to love:

- I will love him/her when_____.
- I will love him/her if_____.
- I can’t love him/her because_____.
- If he/she_____ then I will love them.
- He/she is not worthy of my love **because** _____

Exercise: Think about a person you struggle loving and fill in the blanks above.

Expectations

Just to be clear on how I am using the word “expectations,” here is my definition:

<i>A BELIEF something WILL happen or will LIKELY happen.</i>

Here are some examples of expectations we tend to put on loving others.

- I expect to be loved unconditionally.
- I expect to be loved sacrificially.
- I expect to be loved selflessly.
- I expect to be loved in the following ways_____.

Many people tell me they don't really have expectations like the ones I have listed but their actions betray them when their expectations aren't met. I don't consciously expect people to love me unconditionally but when I am not, then I can become offended. These types of expectations can become hidden agendas—their existence only being revealed when those expectations are thwarted.

When I got married, I had all the expectations I listed above about my wife loving me. They were not conscious expectations but they were very real. She did really well in meeting all those expectations until the third day of the honeymoon when I got frustrated with her and she said something unloving. It was a wake-up call for sure.

Exercise: Please write down the ways in which you want to be loved. [**Note:** This might be a good place to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal where you might be harboring unconscious expectations about how others should be loving you.]

Fleshly Rights

The real problem comes when your conditions and expectations for others' loving you are not being met. The tendency in your flesh is to justify your conditions and expectations and then exercise your fleshly rights. Let me share what I mean by fleshly rights.

Fleshly "rights" are SELF-CENTERED, sinful DEMANDS towards others that are produced by your FLESH.

Here are some examples of fleshly rights when it comes to unmet conditions and/or expectations about being loved by others.

I expect you to love me in the following ways_____. Since I am not being loved the way I want, I have the following fleshly rights:

- To not love you.
- To be critical of you.
- To reject you.
- To get you out of my life.
- To find someone who will love me the way I want to be loved.

When you look at your relationships do any of the fleshly rights, listed above, apply? Are there other fleshly rights you are experiencing that are not listed?

Take a moment and ask the Holy Spirit to expose any relationships where you might be putting others under the law with conditions, expectations and fleshly rights.

The truth is you CAN'T both agape love and also put your relationships under the law because love and law are mutually EXCLUSIVE.

It is either love or law when it comes to relationships. In fact, Paul says the law is fulfilled by loving others. Look at Galatians 5:14 again:

“For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

As a result, if the law is fulfilled by agape loving others, then we have no right to put anyone under the law with the conditions and expectations associated with our human love.

Love Loves (Regardless)

I know “love loves” seems simple but the Lord brought this thought to my mind one day while I was talking to a friend. As I have thought more on these two words, it has become increasingly clear to me all agape love can do is love. Why?

Because agape love loves has:

- No conditions
- No expectations
- No fleshly rights
- No limitations
- No selfish motives

How would it change your relationships if none of the above were attached to them?

In addition, agape love doesn't:

- Judge
- Criticize
- Compare
- Take offense
- Hold grudges
- Hold onto the right not to forgive

I could make the list longer but I think you get the point. When we allow the Spirit to take away these things, then I believe we can agree that:

Love simply LOVES.

I would encourage you to re-read and think about this section, then ask the Lord to show you those relationships where you have imposed conditions, expectations, limitations, etc. on others or where you are judging, criticizing, comparing, etc. others.

Love Has No Excuses

Some time ago, I was talking with a man about his relationship with his siblings. He kept repeating that he couldn't truly love them or reconcile with them until they repented of all their wrongdoings towards him. This was the beginning of a number of excuses he was making to justify not loving them. As he was talking, the Spirit brought these three words to my mind: "Love trumps repentance."

I didn't share this with him but later, as I thought more about this idea, I began making a list of additional things love trumps even when our flesh is trying to make excuses to justify not loving someone.

Here are some examples of excuses we are tempted to use when it comes to the following:

- **Unforgiveness** – They must ask for my forgiveness before I can love them.
- **Unmet expectations** – I don't have to love them because they didn't meet my expectations of how I wanted them to love me.
- **Unmet needs** – They didn't meet my needs for love, acceptance, worth, etc., so I don't have to love them.
- **Woundedness** – I won't love them because of how badly they wounded me.

Are you using any of these excuses to not love others? This is why I call *agape* love the "no excuse" love because no matter the excuses we come up with, they don't hold up when it comes to loving others with Christ's love.

Write down any excuses you have for not loving others?

Love = Power

*"... for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of **power**
and love and self-control." 2 Timothy 1:7*

I didn't really understand this truth until I went to another city to minister to a number of all black churches. This was a city that had some pretty high racial tensions. Even though those who invited me knew I was a white guy, I was a little concerned about how some of those who didn't know I was white would feel about my coming and teaching at their churches.

Little did I know what the Lord had in store for me. All He told me was to go and let Him love them through me. So, the first night I spoke, that was my prayer. "Love these saints through me." What happened that night and the next three days that I was ministering to them was the most powerful display of God's love I have ever witnessed. As much love as I gave, the love I received in return was a hundred-fold greater. It was so strong that by the time I left, I felt like God had given me a new family.

This time with these wonderful believers was not only very powerful, but I learned a potent new truth: love is color blind. Love breaks down the walls we tend to build around racial and cultural differences. The key truth the Lord taught me while I was there was this:

Through you, the POWER of God's love can MOVE others to love you.

Here are some other examples of the power of God's love flowing through you:

- It can disarm others and make them open and transparent.
- It can bring a person to brokenness.
- It can draw an unbeliever to salvation.

In addition, God's love through you can:

- **Penetrate** someone's heart.
- **Soften** someone's heart.
- **Heal** someone's heart.
- **Transform** someone's heart.

When you let the Spirit speak His words of love through you to another, God will release His power to accomplish His purposes in that person's life (and in yours). We see this in Isaiah 55:11:

*"So, will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; **It will not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.**" Isaiah 55:11*

Have you every thought about how God's love and power are bound together? How might it change your willingness to love if you believed God's immense power to accomplish what He desires is behind it?

Write down more examples of what God's love through you could accomplish in another person's life.

Love Is An Unstoppable Force

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 8:38, 39

Romans 8:38-39 promises nothing will separate you from God's love. In addition, Paul tells us nothing and no one is going to stop God from loving you. Similarly, no one can stop you from loving other people. Someone may resist your loving them but they cannot stop Christ's love from pouring through you to them, because His love is truly an unstoppable force.

When I think of this truth, it reminds me of one of my board members who calls me periodically and says, "I love you, Bill, and there is nothing you can do about it." [**Note:** this is the same thing God is constantly saying to you.] Isn't this a great example of the unstoppable love of God?

How would it change your willingness to love those who are difficult to love or who you fear will reject your love when you realize there is nothing they can do to stop Christ's love through you?

Love Sees People In 3D

When you think about the people you know—especially your friends, people you attend church with or co-workers—ask yourself, "How much do I really know about them?" Our tendency when it comes to looking at others (except for close family members) is to take people at face value. By this I mean we are seeing them in one dimension (and sometimes stereotyping them) versus looking at them in what I call "spiritual 3D?" This is what I mean by spiritual 3D:

<p><i>Understanding the BACKGROUND, HISTORY, MOTIVES, and/or STRUGGLES underlying what someone is thinking, feeling, believing how they are behaving.</i></p>
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Let me give you some examples to explain.

- **Family background** – What kind of family did they come from, e.g., loving, unloving, abusive, etc.?
- **Internal struggles** – What are their internal struggles, including their fears, anxieties, insecurities, etc.?
- **Relationship struggles** – What are the struggles in their marriage, with their kids, friends, or family?
- **Spiritual struggles** – What struggles are they having with their false beliefs, unbelief, or past woundedness?
- **Adverse circumstances** – Do they have a history of trauma such as abandonment as a child, premature death of a parent, their parents' divorce, or their own divorce as an adult?
- **Church affiliation or biblical background** – What kind of experiences and teachings have they had in their church, if any? This information can help you understand why they believe what they do about God or living the Christian life.

What are some of the possible negative results if we don't see people in 3D? Here are some examples of results, including thoughts (in italics) associated with those results:

- **Judging their motives and their actions or their beliefs.** *(They are unfit parents; He is such an idiot as a husband; Why can't she just trust God with her fears and stop being so fearful.)*
- **Being offended by things they say and do.** *(I am offended by what she said about my friend; I resent the fact they left the church over something so petty; I am shocked he/she would say such things.)*
- **Self-righteous comparisons.** *(They wouldn't be in this mess if they knew God's word, like I do; If they could only imitate my walk with the Lord, things would go easier for them; Thank God I am not as messed up as he/she is.)*
- **Condescending and/or critical.** *(Anybody with any sense wouldn't have done what they did; It was their own selfishness that caused their divorce.)*
- **Insensitive/lacking compassion** *(They dug their own graves; This is what they get for making that decision)*

Why is it so crucial for you to know others in 3D?

- It enables you to give grace instead of judging, taking offense, being self-righteous, or condescending/critical.
- It gives you a deeper understanding of how you can encourage them, pray for them, or speak God's truth to them.

- It gives you insight into when to be sensitive and compassionate in areas where they struggle.
- It helps you discern (not judge) why they say what they say and do what they do.
- It allows you to love them with the unconditional love of Jesus in spite of their beliefs, their struggles, their past, or their behavior.

When you think of your relationships, in what ways might you be judging, taking offense, being self-righteous, etc.? (I hate these questions as much as you do but, be assured, the Holy Spirit has also asked them of me.)

[**Note:** I am not suggesting you pry into someone else's personal life uninvited. I realize initially you may not be able to get some people to open up; but, as we talked about earlier, God's love and power may eventually penetrate the hearts of even the most closed down or defensive people. This may, in turn, result in their opening up to you. As you get to know others and build their trust, let the Spirit give you discernment on when and how to ask about the areas of their life we just listed.]

My encouragement to you is to never stop learning about someone because learning will eventually lead you to loving them more deeply. This is a truth I am continuing to practice and experience in my own relationships.

Love Sees The SPIRITUAL POTENTIAL In Other People

Before I share with you a personal example, let me give you my definition of spiritual potential.

***How God can TRANSFORM a person where they are NOW spiritually.
(This includes Christians and non-Christians)***

This means that part of loving people is not focusing on where they are now but seeing their spiritual potential. Think about you at the darkest time in your life. You only saw darkness (i.e. hopelessness, despair, wanting to give up, etc.) However, what did God see? He saw spiritual potential. He saw what you would become by living in a dependent relationship on Him. Since we have Christ in us, do we not have the same eyes of Christ available to us to see past the externals of a person and see spiritual potential.

Try this out on the next street person you see. He or she may be panhandling at a street corner or may be under a bridge. Look past their externals and see the same potential in them that God saw in you and sees in them. Let me share a personal story to show you how someone saw spiritual potential in me.

In my 20's and 30's and most of my 40's, I was not a very lovable person because of my woundedness and the toxicity of my flesh (i.e., angry, controlling, demanding, and

manipulating). I had some very serious soulical plaque. I will never forget the first man God used in my redemption who loved me warts and all. He was a much older Christ-centered man who became a spiritual mentor.

Through him, I felt the love of God for the first time. I couldn't believe that as toxic as I was, he still loved me. One of the main reasons he could was God enabled him to see beyond my fleshly behaviors and realize my spiritual potential.

As a result, my mentor started teaching and encouraging me in my walk with the Lord. Through the love of Christ through him, I was drawn to Jesus and able to begin experiencing His unconditional love from Him. My wife's statement to me was so true with this man: "The love was felt with the result that the message was heard." Little did I know that my mentor's agape love for me when I was at my worst became a vital part of my spiritual transformation and freedom in later years.

Do you SEE people where they are NOW or where they COULD BE if they knew Christ for salvation OR they started living from Christ as their SOURCE?

Aren't you glad God looked past your sins, your flesh, etc. and saw your spiritual potential? In like manner, ask the Spirit to give you eyes to see the spiritual potential in others and be willing to be used of the Lord through loving and encouraging them to make their spiritual potential a reality.

In what ways might it change how you see/love people if you could see past their externals and see their spiritual potential?

Love Makes You "Safe"

First, let me tell you what I mean by "safe":

***By safe, I mean others will TRUST you enough
to share DEEP things from their hearts they
would likely not otherwise share.***

I have found this to be especially true in my ministry with pastors. In general, pastors can be pretty closed up when it comes to sharing their personal struggles. My desire is for them to feel safe enough with me to confide their struggles. As I intentionally build our relationships through my loving them, my goal is they will reach a place where they feel safe enough to say, "I want share something with you I have never shared with anyone else."

Here are some characteristics of a “safe” person:

- Good listener.
- Trustworthy.
- Not critical/judgmental.
- Caring/Compassionate.
- Others feel secure with you.
- Others are experiencing Christ’s love flowing through you.

Becoming a safe person is primarily a process, but by your increasingly loving others with Christ’s love, you will eventually create an atmosphere of safety that allows others to trust you.

Do you desire to become a “safe” person? How might becoming “safer” change your relationships?

Love Is the Key to Unlocking a Person’s Heart

*“...and hope does not disappoint, because **the love of God has been poured out within our hearts** through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.” Romans 5:5*

This principle goes along with the truth that love equals power. I know because I have witnessed the love of God unlock many people’s hearts, including mine. Let me share a personal story to make this point.

Because of my anger, bitterness, unforgiveness, and woundedness towards my dad, I had a padlock on the door of my hardened heart. This went on for 46 years until God brought a man into my life in 1996 named David Love (only God could bring a Love to a Loveless).

This was the darkest time in my life. The wheels were falling off and I was spiraling down into depression and despair. David and his wife Denise were missionaries to Colombia at the time. We met because, as head of the mission’s committee of my church, I was interviewing David to see if our church would support them financially. I went to pick him up for lunch at a restaurant and on the way there he said very few words. Little did I know what was about to happen.

I started the interview with a question but he didn't give me a response. I thought that was strange but I was soon to realize we weren't there for me to interview him. Rather, we were there for me to experience the love and power of Jesus through him. When David finally opened his mouth, he didn't answer my questions. Rather, he started probing me about my life. Before I knew it, I spent the next 3 hours pouring out 46 years of my pent-up pain and heartache. Christ’s love through him was so powerful I couldn't stop weeping in the middle of the restaurant.

I didn't realize at the time that it was not only the love of Christ being poured through him, but also the power that love had to be able to pierce the thick walls of self-protection surrounding my heart.

I ended up inviting David to stay with us that weekend and for the next 48 hours God continued to pour His love through David. Christ's love was like a surgical scalpel digging deeper and deeper and cutting away the hardness of my heart.

Looking back, I recognize it was God's power flowing through His love in David that was beginning to set me free. All I knew at the time was I was being loved by Jesus through David. His love was unconditional and irresistible. (Since then, David and I have become very close friends.) When I look back on that event, I recognize that what I saw and experienced was the irresistibility of agape love that unlocked my heart. This was the beginning of my new journey to live in Christ and from His love.

Conclusion

There are many more things that I could say to describe agape love. However, I think you will better understand why the Lord wanted me to share these specific descriptions as you read through the next few chapters.

Discussion Questions

1. Share some of the conditions, expectations, or fleshly rights you wrote down in the previous exercises.

2. Share some of the excuses you wrote down for not loving others.

3. How might it change your willingness to love if you truly believed the power behind God's love could heal and transform another person's heart through you?

4. When you look at your relationships, in what ways do you think you need to see them in 3D?

5. What might be some spiritual reasons God wants you to become a "safe" Christian?

Chapter Four

Love Versus Liking, Trusting, Approval and Boundaries

Loving Versus LIKING

When I teach on the topic of loving others with the love of Christ, I hear this question most often: “Does loving someone with *agape* love mean I have to “like” them? The answer is, not necessarily. According to scripture, we are to *agape* love people like Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, but we don't have to like his sinful, fleshly attitudes and behavior.

Think for a moment how this applies in your relationship with God. God will never like your fleshly, sinful behavior but that will never stop Him from loving you. Why? Because His essence is love. (1 John 4:8) He cannot help but love you. Nonetheless, He can, simultaneously, dislike your sinful behavior.

The good news is that God is capable of transforming us to not only love others but to like them as well. This happened with a guy I know who was pretty rough around the edges. He was fairly boastful and full of himself. He was not very likeable.

However, as I continued to love him with the love of Christ, he began telling me more of his personal story about how he was raised by an unloving and abusive father. I realized that all of his unlikable traits resulted from his woundedness. As I began to see him more with the eyes of Christ and look past his exterior, I began to really like this guy. And now he and I have become very good friends.

The key thing to remember then is that people in our lives we don't like today, we may end up liking because of a change in their hearts or our hearts towards them.

Loving Versus TRUSTING

When it comes to human love and trust, I believe they go hand in hand. You can't have one without the other. However, when it comes to *agape* love, you must have one even if you don't have the other. What do I mean by this?

There are many LEGITIMATE excuses not to trust someone but there is NO excuse for not LOVING them with the love of Christ.

The perfect example was what Jesus said in John 2:24-25:

“But Jesus didn't trust them, because he knew all about people. No one needed to tell him about human nature, for he knew what was in each person's heart.”

We know Jesus loved everyone because that is His nature. However, He did not entrust Himself to people because he knew what was in their hearts.

I have heard many times from married couples that they can't trust their spouses because of affairs or the way they mismanaged their finances. These are legitimate reasons for not trusting one's spouse but is it an excuse not to agape love him/her? I worked with a couple recently where the wife says, "I can't love Him because I can't trust him." With human love this is true but with agape love there are no excuses.

However, there is a silver lining to the cloud of distrust. What I tell people in marital or other relationships is that when trust is compromised it can be rebuilt. It may take time and, in some cases, it may take a long time. It also involves both parties' commitment to rebuild that trust.

In every case of broken trust, the beginning of the rebuilding process begins with the offended party *agape* loving the offending spouse and visa versa. I know this is true experientially because I have witnessed the Holy Spirit's supernaturally rebuilding trust in many couples who started out intensely distrusting one another. But in every instance, the foundation for that rebuilding was the love of Jesus. Let me end this section with this comment:

***We must love EVERYONE with agape love, but
TRUST will have to EARNED and/or REBUILT.***

I hope this section has helped you in two ways. One is not feeling guilty for loving someone but not trusting them. Two, it is possible to rebuild trust if both parties are willing to do so. God does the healing work in both hearts but only if each party is willing to let Him and also give Him enough time to finish His supernatural work.

Love Versus Approval

Similar to loving and not necessarily liking someone, we are to love everyone even though we may not approve of their behavior. I think a good example of this is the LGBTQ movement. We are to love all those who call themselves lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer even though we, as Christians, don't approve of their behavior because it is contrary to what God's truth says about it. However, disapproval does not let us off the hook from loving others.

Let me share with you a powerful story about a homosexual and a Christian couple. The homosexual was very steeped into his lifestyle and was very anti-Christian. He went to gay parades and would see the Christians standing there with signs that read "Turn or Burn." As a result, he was deeply angry and offended because of their unloving attitudes. He got sick with a long-term illness that kept him bedridden for the most part.

There was a Christian couple in his apartment complex who found out about his condition and started bringing him meals, running his errands, etc. They did not tell him they were Christians. They just kept performed these loving acts until one day he couldn't help but ask, "Why are you so kind and loving?" They told him it was because of the love of Christ that compelled them to do it. He knew that because of their beliefs that they did not approve of

his behavior but were loving him anyway. The good news to this story is that he trusted Christ as a result of their unconditional love towards him.

***We may NOT approve of someone's BEHAVIOR
but that is NO excuse for not loving them.***

Love Versus BOUNDARIES

I won't go into any depth about this issue but, suffice it to say, there are certain abusive and toxic people that you need to draw boundaries with to protect yourself against them, especially those who have physically harmed you or have threatened to do so. While you can learn to love them with agape love, you must separate from them physically because of their potential to physically hurt you.

With other toxic people, such as those who constantly ridicule, demean, or criticize you, you also need to set up boundaries with them to protect yourself from verbal abuse. For them, it may take physical separation or it may mean being honest with them and telling them they must stop the offensive behavior if they want to continue having a relationship with you.

Another category of people that you may need to set boundaries with are what I call "life suckers." Have you ever been around someone who is so needy that they seem to suck the very life out of you. They are like suction cups that latch on to you and hang on for dear life. If you are not strong enough spiritually to deal with them, you might need to build some boundaries to protect yourself from them.

However, just like with love versus liking and trusting versus approving, your setting up healthy boundaries is not an excuse for not loving those unhealthy and toxic people. Having shared this I want to end this chapter by saying that God can grow us up spiritually where, in some cases, we no longer need boundaries. He can also change, through His agape love through you, the person you had set up boundaries against to the point that you can safely remove those boundaries.

How Growing Up In Christ Can Sometimes Remove Boundaries

When I teach about spiritual growth with those who are at the beginning of their spiritual journeys, the analogy I often use is that Christ is our spiritual armor. I explain that experientially, early on, our armor is the thickness of cellophane. As a result, the darts of rejection, abusive behavior by others, etc. can easily penetrate the cellophane. However, as we grow in Christ, our experiential armor grows thick enough to repel these sinful and fleshly darts coming at us from others. How does this apply to people we have built boundaries with? Let me give you a personal example.

There was a "friend" of mine who early on in my spiritual journey unknowingly offended and belittled me. These were painful darts that easily penetrated my "cellophane" armor. I would feel very hurt with the result that I built boundaries by periodically separating myself from him.

However, as my spiritual armor thickened, I found myself not taking ownership of his painful darts. This was because the Lord was transforming me to believe that I was totally accepted in Christ and, therefore, unrejectable. As a result, I no longer had to have any more boundaries because he could no longer penetrate my spiritual armor. This freed me up to love him unconditionally.

My point being that your setting up boundaries may not be forever. As you grow spiritually, and your spiritual armor thickens and your confidence in Christ increases, you will find yourself needing fewer and fewer boundaries.

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways has this chapter been helpful to you when it comes to loving versus liking?

2. How has this chapter been helpful to you when it comes to loving versus trusting?

3. How has this chapter been helpful to you when it comes to loving versus approval?

4. In what ways has this chapter been helpful to you when it comes to loving versus boundaries?

Chapter Five

How Free Are You to Love?

I believe that freedom and loving others go hand in hand. So, in this chapter, I will take a closer look at the direct relationship between freedom and the ability to love.

How Free Are We In Christ?

*"It was for freedom that **Christ has set us free**; therefore, keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery." Galatians 5:1*

*"For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but **through love serve one another**." Galatians 5:13*

Since Christ is our freedom and we contain the fullness of Christ (Colossians 2:9, 10), we are totally free in Christ. Because this is true of us, freedom is not something we are working towards, it is something we are working from. This is good news isn't it? But the problem is that few of us feel like we are completely free. I believe this is true for three primary reasons:

1. We don't fully believe we are totally free.
2. We have not walked long enough in appropriating Christ's freedom to experience His freedom.
3. We choose not to walk in the freedom we believe we have in Christ.

Freedom and Love

These three reasons not only negatively impact our experiential freedom in general, but, more importantly, they impede our willingness and ability to love.

As I have looked over both my life and the lives of those I minister to, I initially failed to see how closely freedom and love were connected. But now God is persuading me of the following truth:

Your willingness and ability to love are DIRECTLY proportional to your EXPERIENTIAL freedom in Christ.

It stands to reason, doesn't it, that the greater the freedom you are experiencing, the greater is your capacity to love.

You Have to Be Free FROM in Order to Be Free TO

I would like to add the following corollary to our connection between freedom and love.

You have to be free FROM whatever is blocking your ability to love in order to be free TO love God, others, and self.

Let me use the following illustration of a “spiritual artery” to illustrate this principle.

Your Spiritual Artery

As you know, a physical artery contains all the blood you need to sustain life. However, we also know that plaque can build up in an artery and prevent blood from fully flowing. If that plaque is not dealt with, over time it could kill us by a stroke or heart attack.

What if we applied this analogy to a spiritual artery? In your spiritual artery, you contain all the Life of Christ i.e., His peace, rest, forgiveness, etc. For the sake of this illustration, let’s focus on the love of Christ.

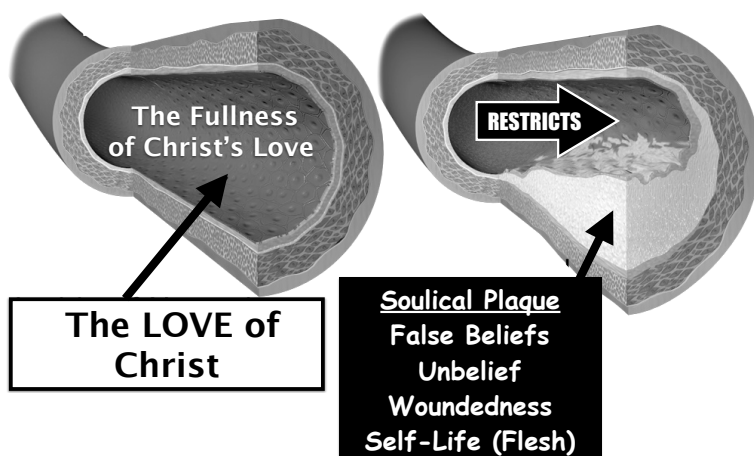
We learned earlier that since we have all the fullness of Christ in us (Colossians 2:9, 10), we contain all of the love of Christ. However, similar to a physical artery, we can have plaque on our spiritual artery, as well. I call this “soulical” plaque.

Here are four key things that make up our “soulical” plaque:

- **False beliefs**
- **Unbelief**
- **Past woundedness**
- **Self-life (Flesh)**

Take a look at the illustration on the following page:

YOUR SPIRITUAL ARTERY



Before I expand on these four causes of soulical plaque, I want share a key truth concerning the blockage in a spiritual artery caused by soulical plaque.

Our soulical plaque not only BLOCKS us from LOVING OTHERS, it also prevents us from RECEIVING God's love.

I hope this truth makes sense because blockage works to restrict both giving love to others and receiving love from God and others.

How do these four areas of blockage restrict the flow of Christ's love in us and through us?

1. False Beliefs

False beliefs about spiritual truths, such as God's character, our identity, and living the Christian life, severely restrict the flow of Christ's love in us.

Let me give you a personal example. I was raised with unloving parents. I did everything I could to earn their love but to no avail. When I became a Christian, I projected my earthly parents' faces onto the face of God causing me to believe I had to work to earn God's love. I didn't learn until 30 years later that I was already a container of God's love and an unconditional lover in my new identity in Christ. All that time striving to earn the love of God—that I already had—and feeling rejection, failure, anger and despair, prevented me from loving others and receiving God's love.

Here is another example. I ministered to a lady who, because she was sexually molested as a child, felt so rejected, unworthy, guilty and "dirty" that she believed God couldn't possibly love her. As a result, she couldn't receive God's love or give His love to others.

Here are some other examples of false beliefs that Christians can have concerning God's love:

- God loves me but His love is conditional.
- My sin outweighs God's love for me.
- If I would only do more for God, then He would love me.
- I will never be good enough for God to love me.

Is it possible that you have false beliefs about God's being love and His love for you and others? If so, write down some of your false beliefs.

2. Unbelief

Unbelief is another problem that restricts our being able to accept God's love. Let me first differentiate between "knowing" God's truth versus "believing it." We can give mental assent to God's truth by reading or hearing it. So, can a non-Christian. We can only believe God's truth by engaging the Holy Spirit to supernaturally take us from unbelief to belief.

We all grapple to some degree with believing God's truth. As a result, on some level, we are all "unbelieving" believers. This results in our unbelief creating a roadblock to our willingness to give and receive love.

For example, the Bible states that God loves us unconditionally. However, among the Christians I have ministered to, there are many who don't believe God loves them because of their past sins. If they believe the lie that their past sins outweigh God's love, they will be unwilling to receive Christ's love, and, consequently, will have no agape love to give to others.

Here are some other examples of unbelief:

I don't believe God loves me:

- Because I don't feel His love.
- Because He let my loved one die.
- Because He isn't meeting my expectations.
- Because I feel unworthy to receive His love.

Do you struggle with unbelief concerning God's love? If so, please list any additional things you might not believe about God's being love and His love for you and others.

3. Woundedness

Woundedness comes in many forms: abuse, trauma, divorce, etc. It can create deep scars in your soul that keep you focused on yourself and thus prevent you from receiving and expressing the love of Christ.

I ministered to a man whose fiancée was killed by a drunk driver the night before their wedding. When he came to see me fifteen years later, he was still very wounded. He was still so angry at God that he was incapable of receiving or giving love. It wasn't until the Lord healed his wounded heart that he was able to receive His love. (It was one of the most amazing examples of the Spirit's healing power I have ever witnessed because of the intensity of his hatred for God.)

Here are some other examples:

- If God loves me, why did allow me to be abused?
- If God loves me, why doesn't He stop the pain?
- I feel so dirty and worthless from being molested that God couldn't possibly love me.
- If my parents didn't love me, how could God love me?

How were you wounded in the past? List any additional struggles, other than those listed above, that prevent you from accepting God's love because of your woundedness.

4. The Flesh (our self-life)

We, acting in our flesh, cannot love unconditionally because our flesh is always self-absorbed, self-focused and self-serving. All our attempts to love others from our flesh is contaminated by our expectations, conditions, unforgiveness, self-protection and fleshly rights.

In what ways is your flesh impeding your ability to freely receive and then give Christ's love?

Discussion Questions

1. What truths most impacted you in this chapter?

2. Share some of the responses you wrote down concerning your false beliefs, unbelief, woundedness and your flesh concerning God's love.

3. Share what you think may happen if you fail to allow the Holy Spirit to remove your soulical plaque?

4. Conversely, how do you think your life will change if you allow the Holy Spirit to remove your soulical plaque?

Chapter Six

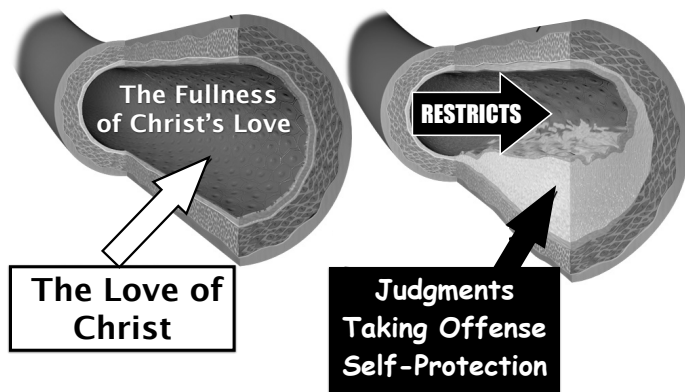
Three Other Areas Of Soulical Plaque

In addition to false beliefs, unbelief, woundedness and our self-life (flesh) there are at least three other areas of soulical plaque that can create severe blockage to our loving others. They are:

- **Judgments** we make about others
- **Taking offense** (being offended)
- **Self-protection**

Here is the illustration of the spiritual artery showing judgments, taking offense and self-protection as part of our soulical plaque.

Additional Soulical Plaque



Let's take a closer look at the three areas.

1. Judgments

The word "judge" has two meanings in the Bible. One means "to choose." We see this meaning used in Luke 7:43 when Jesus and Simon Peter are talking:

*"Simon answered, 'The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.' And he said to him, 'You have **judged [chosen]** rightly.'"*

The second meaning of judgment is "to pronounce an opinion concerning right and wrong" or "to pass judgment on the deeds and words of others." It is the second definition that I want to focus on. For purposes of this study, let me define judgment this way:

***Living out of your FLESH to pass judgment
on another person's thoughts, feelings,
beliefs and behavior.***

We see this form of judgment in the following verses:

*"You **judge** according to **the flesh**...." John 8:15*

*"Therefore, you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in **passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.**" Romans 2:1*

In our flesh we tend to make judgments about many things, such as, how someone looks, their race, sexual orientation, or behavior.

The problem with our trying to be the judge is that we really don't know our own hearts, not to mention the hearts of those we are judging. Can you see into others' hearts and know the true motivation for their behavior? Would you agree that the answer is "no?" Nonetheless, we habitually make judgments about everything and everyone. (And of course, we think our judgments are right. Right?)

Another reason we judge is because we don't know that person in 3D. (Remember our discussion from Chapter Three) If we knew more about a person's background, family, etc. we might not be so judgmental. Let me share a personal story to bear this out.

There was a lady I knew who was hard to be around because of her discomfort around men. As nice as I tried to be to her, she always seemed a bit cold. So, in my flesh I started judging her. Here were some of my thoughts: "What is her problem? I am being gracious and kind to her but she always seems to be stiff-arming me." This went on for some time until one day I found out more about her past.

Someone shared with me that she was molested by her father and several other men as a child. She was no doubt severely traumatized, as you can imagine. When I learned this background information, it became crystal clear why she was behaving the way she was around me. I went from being judgmental to feeling guilt and shame for my unfair judgments. The Spirit changed my heart and gave me a greater compassion for her and increased my capacity to love her. Isn't it interesting that knowing this one bit of history changed my attitude 180 degrees.

Judging others is such a big part of our fleshly DNA. It comes as easy as breathing. However, as our judgments of others multiply, so does the thickness of our soulical plaque. Your judgments will continue to crowd out your desire and ability to receive God's love and be a conduit of His love to others.

The real key question concerning judging others is this: "Do we have any excuse for judging anyone?" Read the following passage and wince,

“Therefore, you have no excuse, every one of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.” Romans 2:1

Ouch! Paul doesn’t mince words does he? Here is more from him if you are not yet convinced:

***“Who are you to judge the servant of another.”
Romans 14:4a***

The question is, “Who is calling you to judge and are you the one true judge?” James 4:12 gives us the answer:

“There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?”

“Therefore, do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until **the Lord** comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God.” 1 Corinthians 4:5

These two verses reveal the following truth:

God is the ONLY judge because He is the ONLY ONE who knows and can RIGHTEOUSLY judge the thoughts and intents of a person’s heart.

I don’t mean to beat you over the head with all these scriptures but apparently the Spirit wants me to reinforce His truth when it comes to judging others. Judging others is serious business in the eyes of God.

In addition to God’s being the one and only true judge, I have discovered you can’t both be loving someone and judging him/her at the same time. Can you?

What are some specific judgments you find yourself making about others?

Would you agree that your judgments prevent you from loving those you are judging?

Before I finish this section, let me add one more thought:

***In addition to your not judging others,
you don’t have to take OWNERSHIP of
another’s judgment of YOU.***

We see this in the following passage:

“Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day.” Colossians 2:16

Being free from judging others or taking ownership of someone else’s judgments of you will remove your soul’s plaque and free the love of Jesus to pour through you.

2. Taking Offense (Being Offended)

Webster’s dictionary defines the word “offended” as “anything or anyone who causes (a person or group) to feel hurt, angry, or upset by something said or done.” We live in a time where everyone seems to be offended by something or someone.

I have divided offenses into two categories. One I call “direct” offense where someone you know has rejected you, maligned you or judged you. The other I call “indirect” offense where you are offended at something or someone who is not in agreement with how you think, feel, or believe. Here are some examples of “indirect” offense.

We can be offended by politicians whose politics don’t line up with ours, or cultural norms and standards that contradict ours. We, as Christians, can be offended by other Christians whose biblical beliefs don’t line up with ours or even those whose style of worship music differs from ours.

Our lists of offenses can be long, but the basic problem with taking offense is that it is almost always accompanied by our frustration, anger, or resentment. Whether we recognize it or not, being offended results in great stress in our thought life and emotions.

Continuing to stay offended and taking ownership of someone else’s offenses towards you, directly or indirectly, is like a slow growing cancer of the soul. It moves from stage one to stage four over the years until it eventually consumes you.

I have been reading a book titled “Unoffendable” by Brant Hansen³ that I highly recommend. In it, he says we tend to thrive on being offended. In other words, because so many things and people around us are offensive, we think we have the right to be offended. It gives us a sense of self-righteousness to be offended by other people. This self-righteousness includes our playing the “victim” card which provides us with additional excuses to be offended.

As I began reading Hansen’s book, the Holy Spirit started exposing the many ways I took offense and stayed offended. The Spirit first exposed the offenses I was taking ownership of from my wife. That was not pretty! The Spirit went from my wife to exposing the many other offenses I was taking ownership of. (I would share with you my list but it would cover too many pages.)

Like judgments, my list of offenses was robbing me not only of loving those who offended me but was limiting my love for those who hadn’t offended me. (Which was fewer people

³ Brant Hansen, *Unoffendable: How Just One Change Can Make All of Life Better*, Thomas Nelson, 2015.

than I thought.) In my insecurity, I was even taking offense where no offense was ever intended.

What is the truth? Do you have the right to be offended about anything? Do you have to take ownership of someone else's offenses directly or indirectly aimed at you? The answer to both questions is "no" because as we have said before, there is no justification for any fleshly right. Jesus, while on earth, was never shocked by humans' sinful attitudes or behaviors. Why? Because He already knows the heart of every individual. We see this in the following verse:

*"But Jesus, on His part, **was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men.**"*
John 2:24

Can we not follow His lead and quit being shocked or offended by others' untrustworthiness, unependability, or sinful behavior? Wouldn't that reduce our "offended-ness" factor?

Part of our problem when it comes to being offended is our unrealistic expectations. We, on some level, take offense because we expect people to think, act, feel, and believe like we do. If we really understand the hearts of people, like Jesus does, perhaps we can lower our bar of expectations to the ground and start living more offended-free lives.

When hurting couples come to see me, each spouse is usually very offended by the other spouse's flesh. They just can't believe their spouse did what they did or said what they said. My typical response is, "What else would you expect their flesh to do?" Let's face it. The flesh is capable of doing everything from lying to murdering. It is unstable, it is unpredictable and, unfortunately, it is not going away. Therefore, let's quit being surprised or shocked by what someone else's flesh is capable of. (By the way, how offensive is your flesh to someone else? Sorry, I had to turn the tables for a moment.)

How did Jesus respond when he was rejected, abused, and eventually crucified? Did he take ownership of other's offenses towards Him or offend them back? We see the answer in 1 Peter 2:23:

*"... and **while being reviled, He [Jesus] did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.**"*
1 Peter 2:23

The word "revile" means to criticize in an abusive or angry manner. Jesus didn't react negatively to other people's offenses towards him. He kept giving those offenses over to the Father which freed Him up to be loving, caring, and compassionate.

Think about how freed up you would be if you weren't taking ownership of someone else's offenses. Can you be offended by someone (using Webster's definition) and still love them at the same time?

One thing I am discovering as the Lord is freeing me from taking offense: I have a greater capacity to love not only those I was being offended by, but, because my spiritual artery is clearing out, I can love others more deeply, as well.

How about you? What or who directly or indirectly offends you? You may resist wanting to write the answers but, trust me, it is important to do so as a first step to freedom. So, let me ask it again? In what ways are you offended by people, their beliefs, their actions, their sinful attitudes or behaviors? Please be specific.

Also, seek the Holy Spirit to expose who and what offends you that might not be that obvious to you.

The third part of our soulcal plaque I want to talk about is self-protection. Because of the length of what I want to share on this topic, I am dedicating the entire next chapter to it.

Discussion Questions

1. Share some ways you are judging people or are taking offense.

2. In what specific ways has the section on judgments helped you, exposed you, or encouraged you?

3. In what specific ways, has the section on judgments helped you, exposed you, or encouraged you?

4. What would you like God to change in you as a result of what the Holy Spirit revealed in this chapter?

Chapter Seven

Self-Protection As Part Of Our Spiritual Plaque

What Do I Mean By Self-Protection?

Let me begin by defining self-protection:

SELF-PROTECTION means constructing walls in the soul to try to PREVENT others from HURTING or REJECTING you (again).

Unfortunately, no one escapes being a “self-protector” because it is one of the results of the fall of Adam. Since we were all born in Adam, we were all born as self-protectors. It was part of Adam’s DNA that we inherited. Much like Adam and Eve put on fig leaves after the Fall to try to hide their shame, we build walls of self-protection to keep others (or sometimes God) from getting too close. Why do we protect ourselves?

What Is Behind Self-Protection?

I believe the key driver in self-protection is **fear**. Fear and self-protection are like two sides of the same coin. Let’s look at some examples of fear to better understand this.

- Fear of rejection
- Fear of being hurt (again)
- Fear of failure
- Fear of being exposed or found out
- Fear of losing control

When you look at this list, do any of these fears apply to you? What other fears would you add to this list?

If you have experienced any of these fears, would you agree that you tend to protect yourself so that you won’t be rejected, hurt, exposed (again), or lose control? As a strategy to avoid being hurt, we think we have to build walls of protection. Our fears are the bricks of the walls we are building. The very walls we think will protect us, in fact, imprison us.

These walls IMPRISON us because they not only hinder us from receiving God’s love, but they PREVENT us from loving others and being loved in return.

Let me illustrate this with a personal story. I remember when I was on a retreat with some pastors. I was sitting there one night listening to a lecture when this thought came to my mind, “What if they find out who I really am?” This thought was quickly followed by

a second thought, “I will be exposed.” The final thought was “If they find out who I really am, they will reject me.”

The fears of exposure and rejection rose up and rapidly consumed me. My walls of self-protection went up immediately and my plan was to do whatever it took the rest of the retreat not to be exposed. Do you think in the middle of my self-absorbed thoughts that I cared for anyone other than myself? I had no capability to love others because I was too busy figuring out how to protect myself.

Fear blocks responsiveness to others. David Benner, in his book, *Surrender to Love*, said it this way: “[F]ear interferes with the impulse to love. Energy invested in maintaining safety and comfort always depletes energy available for love of others.”⁴

Self-Protection Can Be Conscious or Unconscious.

For most of us, self-protection is so ingrained that we do it subconsciously. Much like breathing, we are not even consciously aware we are doing it. But, there is also a conscious self-protection where we are very aware of what we are doing to defend ourselves against people or circumstances.

Ways That We Self-Protect

1. Avoidance

We try to avoid people or circumstances that might penetrate our self-protecting walls. If we can’t avoid contact with some people, like our spouses or co-workers, we try to avoid conversations or situations with them where we might be hurt or exposed.

For example, I know about a married couple who avoided talking about their first baby that was lost at childbirth. Instead of dealing with the pain of the loss, it became the elephant in the room that was never dealt with and it eventually destroyed their marriage.

Do you tend to avoid being hurt, rejected, exposed, etc.? If so, in what ways do you try to self-protect?

2. Withdrawal

Following close on the heels of avoidance is withdrawal. We withdraw to ensure that no one can get close enough to hurt us. We can emotionally withdraw by shutting down so we won’t feel anything. This is like switching off a breaker in an electrical breaker box.

We can also physically withdraw. I met with a husband who told me that every time he perceived there was about to be an argument with his wife, he left the room to avoid being hurt and rejected.

⁴ David Benner, *Surrender to Love, Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality*, InterVarsity Press, 2003, p. 42.

Let me take you back to the retreat I talked about earlier. As these thoughts of exposure and rejection started coming, my next thought was, “I have to get out of here before they find out.” I thought my only option was to physically escape or withdraw from the situation in order to protect myself.

In what ways do you withdraw emotionally or physically in order to protect yourself?

3. Being critical and judgmental

You have heard the expression that the best defense is a good offense. One of my favorite offensive attitudes (and it was literally “offensive”) was to be critical and judgmental of others. I would find ways in my mind to be critical of others in order to build myself up or to assure myself that I was okay. If I could convince myself someone was “less than” I was, then I could deceive myself into believing that person was not a threat.

My being critical of others was also a way I used to drive that person away before they could hurt or reject me. It was a form of “doing it unto others before they could do it unto me.”

Do you tend to be critical or judgmental as a defense mechanism to protect yourself?

4. Manipulation

We are all are guilty of some type of manipulation. One of the reasons we manipulate is to ensure that no one gets close enough to wound or expose us. Manipulation can be like a chess game where we move the pieces (i.e., people) on the chessboard to specific places to avoid being exposed to harm. We can also manipulate others by silence, guilt, or flattery.

In what ways do you find yourself manipulating others to protect yourself?

5. Being in control

Another leftover from our Adamic DNA is our desire to be in control. Appealing to that desire to be in control was part of Satan’s ploy with Adam and Eve when he said that they could “be like God” (Genesis 3:4). Being in control and being like God go hand in hand because every time we desire to be in control, we are asking God to step aside so we can take over. When it comes to self-protection, we believe if we can control ourselves, others, and our circumstances, then we will avoid being hurt, rejected, etc.

Control falls into primarily three categories:

a. Controlling others.

We believe if we can control those around us, they will not be able to hurt, reject, or expose us. One of the ways we do this is by having “safe” conversations. Safe conversations often consist of small talk about the weather, sports, or hobbies that deflect those you are talking with from saying something personal that might hurt or expose you.

We also try to control others by keeping them at arm’s length. One of my favorite ways of doing this was by being a people-pleaser. If I could successfully please people, then they would be more likely to accept me and less likely to reject me.

In what ways do you try and control others?

b. Controlling our circumstances/situations.

One of the ways I tried to control my circumstances was to avoid small group Bible studies. Those could be very dangerous because I knew at some point I would be called upon to share how some Biblical truth or book I was reading applied to me. The same would apply to both men’s retreats or couples’ retreats. You couldn’t hide out at events like this for long because sooner or later you would be exposed.

In what ways do you try and control your negative circumstances or situations?

c. Self-control

We believe this method of controlling is the most effective because trying to control others and circumstances is much more difficult and unpredictable. To keep our thoughts, words, and emotions in check is crucial to staying in control and not letting anyone get near your heart.

I see two types of self-controllers: overt and covert.

Overt self-controllers are easy to spot. They really have their guards up and are carefully choosing their words to protect themselves. Perfectionists are an example of overt self-controllers because they will try to do everything right to avoid being rejected or seen as inadequate.

Covert self-controllers are harder to spot because so often they have mastered the art of self-control. They have developed their masks so convincingly that you believe the mask is who they really are.

In reality, though, they are using their masks to stay in control. I have seen covert self-controllers come across as sensitive and caring but it is all designed to deflect you away from seeing what is really going on in their heart.

In what ways do you try to control yourself?

[**Note:** You may be saying that self-control is a fruit of the Spirit according to Galatians 5:23. However, since self cannot be in control of self, I distinguish the two by calling the fruit in Galatians, "Christ-control."]

Why Self-Protection Is A Lie

Let's think back to the *True Identity* study and remember these two key truths that prove we no longer have to try to protect ourselves.

Truth #1 - The self you are protecting is DEAD.

The problem with self-protection is that it is a lie. Why?

The self (self-life) you are protecting was CRUCIFIED with Christ on the cross.

We see this in Romans 6:6:

*"... knowing this, **that our old self [self-life] was crucified with Him**, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin."*

We see this as well in Galatians 2:20 which says, "I [my self-life] have been crucified with Christ." This begs these two questions: (1) Why are we trying to protect something that is "dead?" and (2) Can a dead man have any fears or does a dead man need to protect himself?

Truth #2 - You have a NEW self

*"Therefore, if anyone is **in Christ, he is a new creation**. The old [self] has passed away; behold, the new [self] has come." 2 Corinthians 5:17*

The good news is that God didn't just crucify your old self. He gave you a new self [new identity] that does not need protecting. Why? Look at the following list of the characteristics of your true identity in Christ.

Unconditional love	Worthy	Humble	Righteous	Accepted
Patient	Forgiving	Christ-confident	Free	Secure
Discerning	Wise	Adequate	Thankful	Kind
Sacrificial	Compassionate	Selfless	Fearless	Victorious
Strong	Joyful	Peaceful	Good	

If you understood, believed, and walked in these characteristics, would you need to protect your new self?

See if you agree with the following statement:

Since your OLD self has been crucified and you now have a NEW IDENTITY [new self] you no longer have to PROTECT yourself.

This is why it is essential that you learn about and walk in your true identity.

Freedom FROM Self-Protection Results In Freedom TO Love

As you grow in your belief that you have a new identity, you will find yourself experiencing greater freedom to love yourself and others.

Think about it for a moment. Since you have a new self that doesn't need protecting, shouldn't that free you up to love others? The answer is a resounding "yes!" As the Holy Spirit removes that self-protective plaque out of your spiritual artery, the love of Christ will flow more freely.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of your fears when it comes to your self-protection?

2. Which of the ways we try to protect ourselves applies to you?

3. What is your self-protection producing in you?

4. How would knowing, believing, and walking in your true identity make a difference when it comes to your self-protection?

Chapter Eight

The Overflow of Your Soulical Plaque

The Source To Remove Your Soulical Plaque

What Is the Toxic Overflow of Our Soulical Plaque?

Unfortunately, the bad news doesn't just stop with the buildup of plaque on your soul. There is a toxic overflow which negatively impacts you and everyone around you.

Let me give you some examples of some fleshly behaviors as an overflow of our soulical plaque:

* **False beliefs** – A false belief that my sin is so great that God can't love me may leave me with fleshly feelings of frustration, self-condemnation or unworthiness.

* **Unbelief** – If I don't believe God really loves me then I might have fleshly feelings of rejection, depression, or fear.

* **Woundedness** – Out of my woundedness, I can justify fleshly behaviors of unforgiveness, anger, and self-protection against those who have hurt me.

* **Flesh (self-life)** – Loving out of the flesh can result in my unwillingness to forgive, repent, or die to my fleshly rights. Trying to love others out of my flesh may also result in my trying to manipulate and control others so they will love me the way I want and then justify rejecting them when they don't meet my expectations.

* **Judgments** – towards others can result in prideful arrogance that I am better than someone, a condescending attitude, or self-righteousness.

* **Taking offense** – results in frustration, anger, or resentment.

* **Self-Protection** – leads to avoidance, self-control, withdrawal, manipulation, being critical or judgmental.

What are the fleshly behaviors that are resulting from your false beliefs, unbelief, woundedness, flesh, judgments, taking offense, or self-protection?

Now that we have a better understanding of our soulical plaque and how it restricts the flow of Christ, let's turn the corner and answer the following questions.

- **Who is going to remove your soulical plaque?**
- **What is your part in the removal process?**

Who Is Going To Be The SOURCE To Remove Your Soulical Plaque?

In the medical field there are many drugs designed to remove the physical plaque on our arteries. The question is which drug will we use. When it comes to removing the plaque in our spiritual arteries there is only one option. The problem is that many Christians think there are two options. Let me explain.

1. Option #1 – Depend on YOURSELF with God's help.

When you think about what you do to get through everyday life, think about the fact that you had to learn how to do those things that you do. You would take that knowledge with your IQ and ability and get them done. The problem with too many Christians is that they believe that “learn and do” mentality applies to living the Christian life as well. They believe because they have been taught that living the Christian life is primarily up to them and their ability and to seek God's help when necessary.

In other words, you “learn” the word of God and using your willpower, self-discipline, IQ, ability, capabilities, strength, and/or determination (did I leave anything out?), you go out and “do” what the Bible says. In other words, it is up to you to do such things as:

- Keep God's rules and commands.
- Keep from sinning.
- Stop behaving badly.
- Produce God's promises of victory, freedom, transformation, etc.

Have you tried to do any of these things? What would you add to this list that you have tried to do? Concerning my list and yours, how well are you “doing?” How is what you are doing to live the Christian life working for you? You don't have to tell me the answer because I already know it. It is not working. Why am I so sure it's not working? To explain let me start with Jesus's words in last part of John 15:5.

*“.....Apart from Me you can do **nothing**.”*

The key question I want to ask you from this verse is what does “nothing” mean? I looked this word up in Strong's Concordance to find out it's meaning in Greek which is the original language. Guess what it means? “Nothing.” This doesn't seem very profound but it is the key to determining who is going to live the Christian life. Let's go back and examine your Christian life for a moment.

If you have tried any of the following, would you agree that:

- You can't set yourself free.
- You can't keep God's rules and commands.
- You can't stop sinning.
- You can't change your sinful behavior.
- You can't stop judging, taking offense, or self-protecting.

I could go on with this list but I think you get the point. When it comes to any real, supernatural change/transformation in your life you can't make that happen no matter how hard you try.

Look at the first three words in this verse again. "Apart from Me." What Jesus is saying that apart from or independent from Him you can't do what the Bible is calling you to do because He, not you, is the "source" to produce THE Christian life. Let me define what I mean by the word "source."

Source means the one who is going to TAKE all of God's word and MAKE it an EXPERIENTIAL reality in your life.

If you have been trying to do any of these things and know you are failing, you now know why. Because God never intended for you to live THE Christian life that only Christ can live. If you have been believing that it is up to you with God's help to live it, then what I am about to share with could radically change how you see your Christian walk.

2. Option #2 – Christ as your SOURCE to live THE Christian Life IN and THROUGH you.

How do we know that Jesus is to be the Source for living THE Christian life. To better understand this truth look at what Jesus says in the first part of John 14:6

*"I am **THE way, THE truth, and THE Life....**"*
John 14:6

Paul says this about Jesus being the Source.

"He (Jesus) is the SOURCE of your life in Christ Jesus...." 1 Corinthians 1:30 (RSV)

What are these verses telling us? First of all, that Jesus is THE Life. What this means is that THE Christian life is a Person. It is Christ Himself. In other words, THE Christian life is not about what we do for God. It is Christ Himself who is our Source to live it. As our source:

Jesus is the PROVIDER of what you need and He is the PRODUCER of what He promises.

Since only one Person has led a perfect Christian life, then we need to depend on Jesus, as our Source, to live THE Christian life in and through us. This is why Paul says in Galatians 2:20.

*"....I no longer live (I am not the source) but **Christ lives in me...**"* Galatians 2:20

(If this is a new concept for you, I would encourage you to go on to our website and go through the study called *Living Life From A New Source* to learn more about Christ being your Source. You can find it on the Discipleship page of our website: www.christislifeministries.com)

How does Christ being our Source apply to this study?

Christ will be the Source to FREE you FROM the bondage created by your soulical plaque and FREE you TO love others with His agape love.

What Is Your Part In Being Set Free?

Let me sum up the answer to this question this way.

Your part is to **DEPEND ON, RELY ON, and DRAW FROM** Christ as your Source, moment by moment in order to set you free.

This is accomplished in two ways. One is moment by moment abiding in Christ. The other is an intentional pursuit/engaging of God. Let me break these two ways down.

1. ABIDING In Christ

*"I am the vine, you are the branches; **he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.**" John 15:5*

In this verse, Jesus describes THE Christian life as one of "abiding" which means moment by moment dependence. What we know from a physical vine is that the life of the vine flows from the vine through the branch. The fruit is not produced by the branch. Rather, it is produced by the vine.

In the same way, we, as the spiritual branches, abide (depend on, rely on, participate with) Christ then He supplies His life in us and through us. Therefore, we do not produce the fruit of the Spirit. It is Christ flowing in us and through us Who produces the spiritual fruit.

Why is this important? First of all, many Christians like me have been falsely taught that it is up to them to produce the fruit of the Spirit. Therefore, it was up to me to produce the fruit of the Spirit of love. I only tried that for thirty years. I jokingly told people that me trying to produce spiritual love only made me more "loveless." However, when I learned and believed that Jesus is the supplier and producer of the spiritual fruit, then I started abiding and quit trying to produce the fruit. As a result of abiding relationship, Christ is producing the fruit through me.

How does this apply to our study? As you go through your day abiding in Christ, He, supernaturally is removing your soulical plaque by:

- Renewing your mind to His truth – Romans 12:2
- Moving you from unbelief to belief – Mark 9:24
- Healing your woundedness – Psalms 147:3
- Moving you away from living from your flesh – Galatians 5
- Removing your desire to judge, take offense, or live in self-protection. – Philippians 1:6

These things will occur as you simply abide in Christ. However, there is a second way that the Lord uses to set you free. I call it the intentional pursuit of God.

2. INTENTIONAL Pursuit Of God

I define “intentional pursuit” this way.

A WILLFUL DETERMINATION to CHOOSE to engage God to transform your life.

We see this willful determination in Paul when he says this in 1 Corinthians 2:2.

*“For I **determined** to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.”*

Along with Paul’s determination was an intentional pursuit of God to transform His life. When it comes to our plaque removal, the key part of our participation in God’s process is our willingness and determination for God to do the same thing in our lives.

Look at Matthew 7:7 to reinforce this thought.

*“**ASK** and it will be given to you; **SEEK** and you will find For everyone who **asks receives**; the one who **seeks finds**....”*

“Ask” and “seek” in this verse indicates an ongoing, intentional pursuit of God. Have you thought about the converse of this verse? If you don’t ask or seek, you won’t receive or find. As it pertains to this study, God wants us to intentionally pursue Him to set us free. Here is a key truth to remember.

Remember that even pursuing God is a RESPONSE to His producing in you the WILLINGNESS to pursue.

Since God is the supplier, the initiator and the cause and effect of our faith, we say “yes” to God because He has put that desire in our heart.

In light of these verses, stop and ask yourself this question. “How determined am I to seek God to remove my soulical plaque?” My hope is that your willingness and determination factor is high. Why? Because if it is not there will be at least three results:

- Your soulical plaque will continue to build.
- Your heart will become hardened towards God and towards others.
- You will never experience the freedom, victory, and transformation that God promises.

Therefore, what does intentional pursuit look like? That will be the focus of the next chapter.

Discussion Questions

1. Share some of your fleshly behaviors that come from your soulical plaque.

2. If you are hearing the truth for the first time that Christ, not you is the Source to live THE Christian life what are your thoughts on that?

3. Even though abiding in Christ may seem passive, why is it necessary in order to be transformed and set free from your soulical plaque?

4. Share your thoughts about what you understand from the intentional pursuit of God section of this chapter.

Chapter Nine

Practical Application To Intentionally Engage God To Set You Free

Now that we have a better understanding of God's part and our part in being set free, let's look at some practical application of what it looks like to intentionally engage God to be set free by removing your soulical plaque.

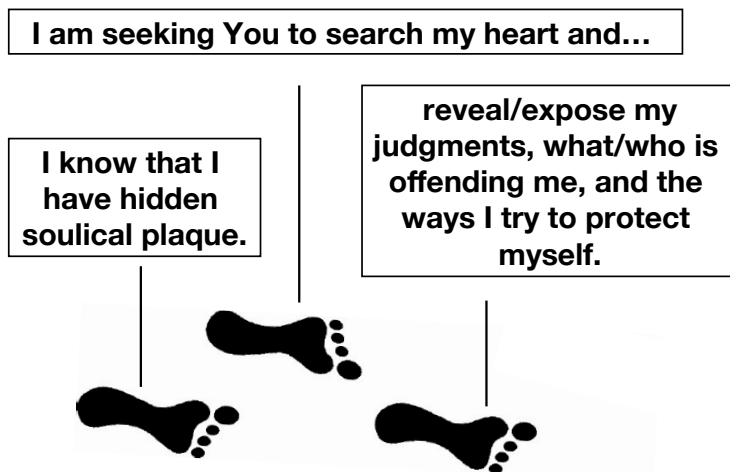
(Note: As you go through these applications, please do not look at them like legalistic steps that you must "do" to be set free. These are just examples of practical application designed to help you to engage God.)

1. Seek the Holy Spirit to EXPOSE your specific soulical blockage.

Remember that as you have gone through this study, I have asked you to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal or expose such things as your false beliefs, unbelief, past woundedness, judgments, or areas of your self-life(flesh). This is a crucial step to take (even though none of us wants to be exposed do we?) because we have things hidden in our hearts that can only be exposed by the Holy Spirit. This is why David prayed this prayer.

*Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And **see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.**"* Psalm 139:23,
24

David knew the eternal value of the Spirit searching and exposing the blockage in his heart. What does it look like to intentionally seek God to search your heart? Look at the diagram below.



The good news is that this will happen over time not all at once. Thank goodness! I don't know about you but I don't want the Spirit totally exposing these things all at once.

2. Once the Spirit exposes your blockage, WILLINGLY invite Him to do whatever is NECESSARY to set you FREE from it.

*“..you will know the truth and **the truth will set you free.**” John 8:32*

As the Spirit exposes your plaque, seek Him to do whatever is necessary to remove the blockage. The part that may trouble you about the last sentence is the part that says, “whatever is necessary.” Those words can conjure up feelings of fear or anxiety and might create questions like, “How much pain is going to be involved? or What am I going to have to give up?”

I understand that to invite God to do whatever is necessary is a tall order. However, I can tell you from my experience that as I have gone (and still going) through this process, God has been very good and gracious to me. The only pain comes when we willfully resist God’s work in our lives. The key thing to remember is that if you don’t invite Him into your heart to set you free, the result will be continued and reinforced bondage from your soulful plaque.

3. If you are UNWILLING to pursue God, ask Him to give you the WILLINGNESS.

*“...the spirit is willing, but **the flesh is weak.**”
Matthew 26:41b*

What this verse is telling us is that as we live dependent on Christ as our Source, we will always be willing to pursue God. However, as you know we all have within us what the Bible calls the “flesh” which is always weak and unwilling. We have already talked about fleshly behaviors but let’s take a look at the issue of our flesh overall. In light of this study, I define the “flesh” as:

<p><i>The PRIDEFUL RESISTANCE within us to engage God to be set free.</i></p>
--

Why does our flesh resist God’s work to remove the blockage:

- We feel justified (feel we have the right) to judge others and be offended.
- We don't want or feel like we need to be set free. (In other words, we want to hold on to our false beliefs, unbelief, judgments, etc.)
- We think we can set ourselves free independent of God.
- Our flesh has such a grip on us that we don't believe even God can set us free.

There is only one problem with these reasons and others like it and that is that living from the flesh only produces “death.” Look at Romans 8:6 to confirm this.

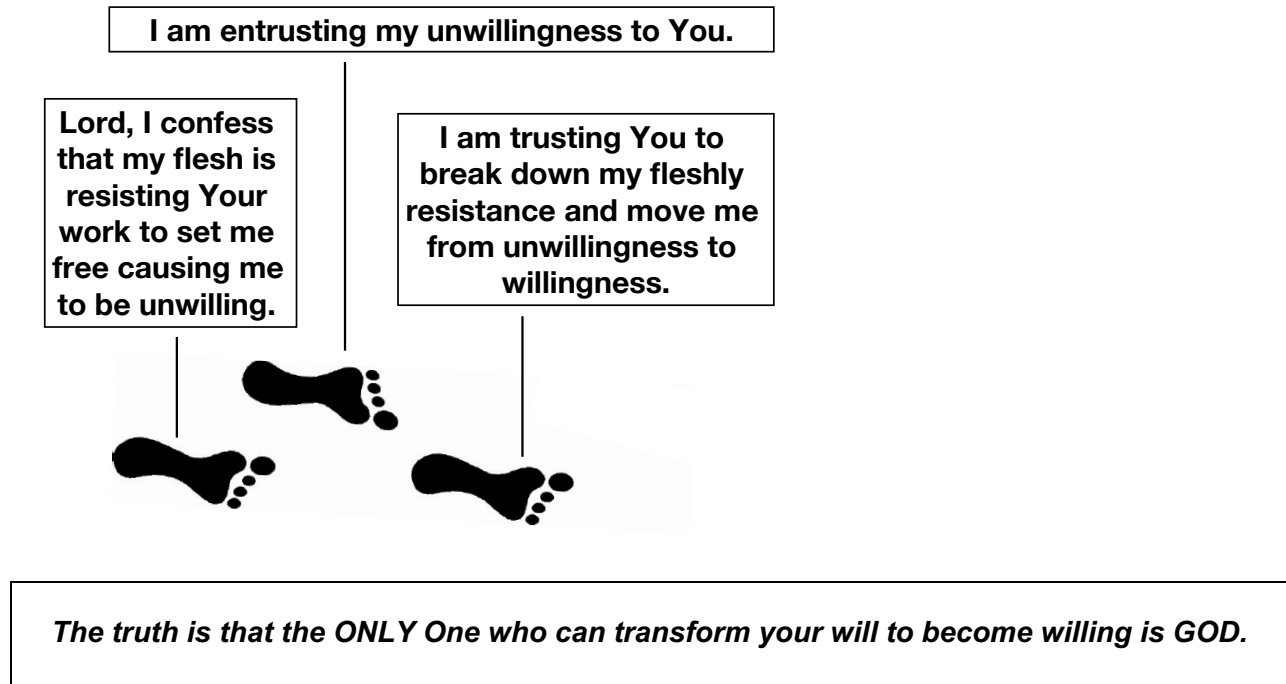
*“For the **mind set on the flesh is death**, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.”*

“Death’ in this verse means “the misery of the soul resulting from sin.” In other words, by holding on to your false beliefs, judgments, self-protection, etc. it will result in internal

“misery.” Misery being such things as self-righteousness, self-condemnation, stress, arrogance, rejection, frustration, anger, unforgiveness, or bitterness). This is why Paul says this in Galatians 5:13

*“For you were called to freedom, brethren; **only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh**, but through love serve one another.”*

Therefore, if your flesh is resisting God’s work in your life then seek the Holy Spirit to break down your fleshly resistance. The diagram on the following page will give you some practical steps.



It is important to understand that depending on God to break down the resistance of your flesh, may take several steps of faith because of the strength of your fleshly resistance. Therefore, as is says in Matthew 7:7, keep seeking and keep asking.

4. As the Holy Spirit reveals your plaque, seek him to RENEW your MIND to the TRUTH

*“And do not be conformed to this world, but **be transformed by the renewing of your mind**,” Romans 12:2a*

If the truth is going to set us free, then we must engage God to renew our minds to His truth to experience that freedom. Practically speaking we can do that in two ways.

- **Know** God’s truth.
- **Engage** God’s using His truth.

Let me share some practical steps of faith when it comes to the examples of soulical plaque we studied in Chapters Six through Seven.

a. FALSE BELIEFS

False Belief: I have to earn God's love.

What is the truth?

1. Christ is your source for love. ***"He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus..."*** 1 Corinthians 1:30

2. You contain all of Christ's love. ***"For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form."*** Colossians 2:9

3. Therefore, you don't have to earn what you already have. ***"and in Him you have been made complete..."*** Colossians 2:10a

Engaging God: "Lord, I have a false belief that I have to earn your love. I know that is not true according to 1 Corinthians 1:30 and Colossians 2:9, 10. I am asking you to renew my mind to the truth that I don't have to earn what I already have."

What is one false belief you have about God's love or loving others Write down a prayer to engage God to begin moving you from your false belief to God's truth.

b. UNBELIEF

Unbelief: You don't believe God loves you because of all the sins you have committed.

What is the truth?

1. You have been forgiven of all of your sins. ***"When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, **having forgiven us all our transgressions.**"*** Colossians 2:13

2. God has removed all of your sins. ***"He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west."*** Psalm 103:12

3. Since God's essence is love, all He can do is love you. ***"...for **God is love.**"*** 1 John 4:8

Engaging God: "Lord, renew my mind to the truth that you have forgiven all my sins and you are not holding my sins against me. Most importantly, renew my mind to the truth that you love me no matter what because Your essence is love."

What is one truth concerning God's love or loving others that you struggle with believing? Write down a prayer to engage God to begin moving you from unbelief to belief concerning that one truth.

c. WOUNDEDNESS

Woundedness – Because of my molestation I am dirty and ashamed and unworthy of God's love.

What is the truth?

1. What has happened to you will never change Gods' love for you. ***"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:37, 38***

2. There is no condemnation from God because you are in Christ. ***"Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."*** Romans 8:1

Engaging God: "Lord, persuade me that regardless of how I was wounded, it makes no difference in Your love for me. Renew my mind to the truth that now that I am in Christ there is no more shame or condemnation from you and I no longer have to condemn myself."

What are any negative feelings towards God and or others that have resulted from your woundedness and keeps you from loving Him or them. Write down a prayer to engage God to set you free from those negative feelings.

d. FLESH (SELF-LIFE)

Flesh – I have the right for people to love me that ways I want to be loved.

What is the truth?

1. You have no fleshly rights because they have been crucified. ***"Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."*** Galatians 5:24

2. God is constantly delivering you over to the death of your flesh so that you will die to your fleshly rights. ***"For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death (to our flesh) for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh."*** 2 Corinthians 4:1

Engaging God: "Lord, persuade me that I have no fleshly rights because those have been crucified. I am seeking You to deliver me over to the death of my flesh so I will no longer desire to have any fleshly rights."

What is one struggle you have in your flesh when it comes to loving others? Write down a prayer to engage God to begin setting you free.

e. JUDGMENTS

Judgement– People must be _____ to not see how
stupid _____ their _____ thinking _____ is _____ about _____
(Fill in the blank)

What is the truth?

1. You have no right to make judgments about another person. ***“Who are you to judge the servant of another.”***

Romans 14:4a

2. There is only one judge and it is not you. ***“There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?”*** James 4:12

Engaging God: “Lord, expose me at those times I am judging someone and renew my mind to the truth that I have no right to judge because You are the one true judge.”

What is one judgment you have towards others you really struggle with? Write down a prayer to engage God to begin setting you free of that judgment.

f. TAKING OFFENSE

Taking offense – I am offended by people who _____
_____. (Fill in the blank)

What is the truth?

1. You do not have to take ownership of anything or anyone that seems offensive to you or towards you. ***“and while being reviled, He (Jesus) did not revile in return; He uttered no threats...”*** 1 Peter 2:23a

2. Entrust everything and everyone who is offensive to you and towards you. ***“...but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.”*** 1 Peter 2:23b

Engaging God: “Lord, renew my mind to the truth that I don't have to take ownership of anything or anyone that I find offensive. Continue to remind me to entrust those things and people that offend me to You.”

What is one thing that consistently offends you? Write down a prayer to engage God to begin setting you free from taking ownership of that offense.

g. SELF-PROTECTION

Self-Protection – I must protect myself from anyone who wants to hurt me again.

What is the truth?

1. The self you are trying to protect was crucified on the cross with Jesus. “... *knowing this, that our old self [self-life] was crucified with Him [Jesus], in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin.*”

2. You have a new self that needs no protecting. “*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old [self] has passed away; behold, the new [self] has come.*” 2 Corinthians 5:17

Engaging God: “Lord, continue to remind me that I no longer have to protect myself because my old self is dead. Renew my mind that I have a new self that does not need protecting.”

What is one reason why you feel you need to protect yourself? Write down a prayer to engage God to begin setting you free from that reason.

I hope these examples have helped you better understand how to engage God to renew your mind to His truth because as you take these steps of faith He IS setting you free.

5. Engage God to TAKE CAPTIVE your sinful, fleshly thoughts that come into your mind that are ATTACHED to your plaque.

We all are bombarded with non-stop sinful, fleshly thoughts when it comes to our plaque. This is why it is so critical to engage the Holy Spirit to take those thoughts captive. Paul confirms this when he said:

*“We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking **every** thought captive to the obedience of Christ.” 2 Corinthians 10:5*

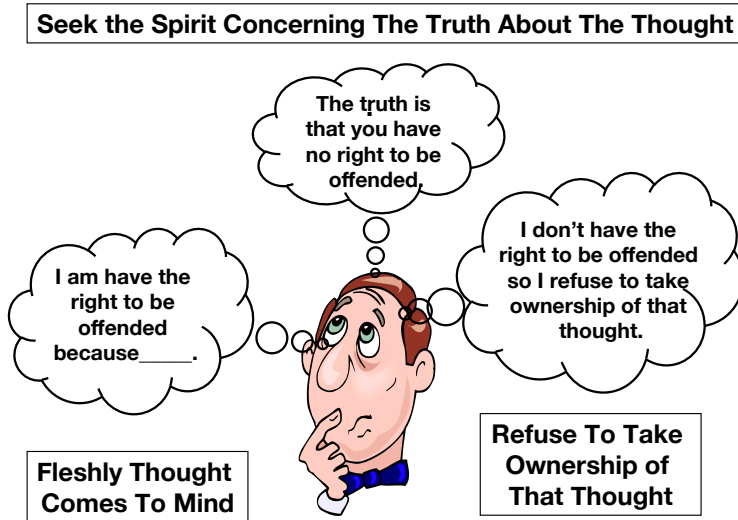
What I have discovered in me and everyone else I know is that our default is to take ownership of our sinful, fleshly thoughts. This is why I always ask people this question: “Do you think about what you think about?” I usually get the deer in the headlight look because most people don’t think about what they think about. However, if we don’t seek the Spirit to take those sinful, fleshly thoughts captive, then this will result in:

- Reinforcing our false belief, unbelief, judgments, etc.
- A growing resistance to desiring to take those thoughts captive.
- Keep us in perpetual bondage to our soulical plaque.
- Never experiencing the freedom to love.

How do we engage the Spirit to take every thought captive? Here are four key truths to help you.

- Measure every thought against God's word.
- Seek the Spirit to be your discernment concerning your thoughts.
- Speak truth into fleshly, sinful thoughts.
- Refuse to take ownership of those fleshly thoughts.

Here is an illustration to help.



Using the diagram above, write down a fleshly or sinful thought you have when it comes to loving others, judging others, or taking offense and then write down what God's word has to say about that fleshly thought.

I hope some of these practical applications have been helpful for you to begin your journey to freedom. I hope the Spirit is asking you this question: Will you take the first step? If He is, I trust you will.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the reasons we might not want the Holy Spirit to expose our soulical plaque?

2. What are some negative words, thoughts, or feelings that come to mind when I said that you need to invite God to do “whatever is necessary to set you free?”

3. Share what you wrote down to engage God in dealing with one of the following: false beliefs, unbelief, woundedness, your flesh, judgments, taking offense, or self-protection.

4. What is some recurring fleshly, sinful thought that comes to mind when it comes to your judgments, taking offense, or needing to protect yourself. Share what God’s truth has to say about that thought. If you don’t know the truth, ask the group to help you.

Chapter Ten

Key Truths To Remember As You Engage God To Set You Free

I would like to finish this topic by sharing with you some key truths to remember as you take these steps of faith.

1. It is a PROCESS.

As much as we would like to experience freedom overnight it is a process. We know the Lord could transform us but I believe He allows it to be a process is to learn how to continue depending on Him.

2. That is why you will have to "FAITH IT" before you "EXPERIENCE" the freedom.

The Bible doesn't say it is just one step of faith. Rather, it says it is a walk of faith.

*"for we **walk by faith, not by sight.**"*
2 Corinthians 5:7

Faith means trusting God that He is working when there is no physical evidence (i.e. a thought, feeling, or behavior) that He is working. However, I am convinced that if you continue taking steps of faith you will eventually experience your freedom to love others.

Here is a diagram to illustrate this point.



You start out your faith walk by engaging God to set your free. I call this phase in the process "faithing it." "Faithing it" means that even though you are not experiencing freedom you believe God is in the process of setting you free. The good news is that over time, you will experience freedom in some of the following ways:

- You will find yourself not making a judgment where you normally would.
- You will realize that you are not taking offense at someone who is offending you.
- You will experience a situation where you discover you are not choosing to protect yourself.
- You experience God's love growing and flowing through you in deeper ways.

The key is this:

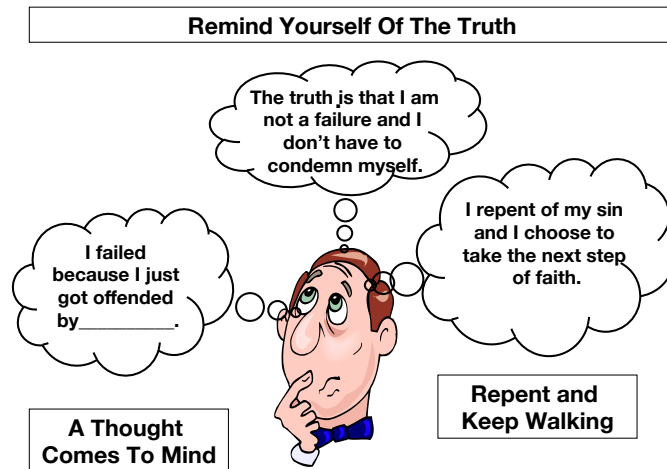
Keep FAITHING IT until you EXPERIENCE the freedom to love that God PROMISES.

3. You will FAIL many times in the process BUT....

You will fail (i.e. find yourself judging or taking offense) but this does not make you a failure because the Bible says this:

*"Yet in all these things **you are more than conquerors** through Him who loved us." Romans 8:7*

When you fail, repent of your sin, and take the next step of faith. You do not need to wallow in the prodigal pigpen of self-condemnation when you fail. Remember according to Romans 8:1, you are no longer condemned and you can longer have to condemn yourself when you fail. Just get up and keep walking.



4. You have an enemy, SATAN, whose objective is to STEAL, KILL and DESTROY your pathway to freedom.

Here are some ways that he tries to accomplish his objective.

- Inserting lying and sinful thoughts into your mind.
- Tempting you to judge, take offense, self-protect, etc.
- Inserting self-condemning thoughts when you judge, take offense, etc.
- Trying to persuade you that you will never be set free.

When Satan inserts thoughts into your mind, they are always in first person. The thought is not “You are a failure.” The thought is “I am a failure.” This is why, as we discussed in the last chapter, you have to seek the Holy Spirit to discern your thoughts, speak truth into them and refuse to take ownership of any lying thought.

The good news is that Satan was defeated at the cross and the power of Christ in you is infinitely greater than any power of Satan or his demons. We see this truth in 1 John 4:4

*“You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; **because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.**”*

5. Eternally more than you WANT to be set free, GOD WANTS to set you free.

Have you ever look at God as the “divine” cheerleader who is cheering you and encouraging you to take the next step of faith? In the same way you were encouraged by your parents to keep walking when you were learning to walk and fell down, so is your heavenly Father. He is saying, “I know you fell down(failed) but get back up and take another step.” In light of this truth meditate on the following verse:

*“.... **since God is for us, who can be against us.**”*
Romans 8:31

6. THANK God as you take these steps, knowing by FAITH that even though you are not experiencing freedom, you are being set free.

*“**in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.**” 1 Thessalonians 5:18*

In other words, in the “faithing it” phase of your journey to freedom continue to thank Him because you know by faith He is working even though there is no experiential evidence of it. Yet!

A Personal Example Of Seeking God To Set Me Free

I thought I would end this chapter with a personal story to experience freedom that includes many of the truths that we talked about.

One friend in particular hurt me pretty badly in the past and has not repented of what he did. For months, I would sit there and make such judgments as, “Doesn't he realize that he hurt me? Why can't he figure it out? What kind of Christian does he think he is? When is he going to repent?”

The problem with this line of thinking is that I became his judge, jury, and executioner. Initially, after he hurt me, I didn't want to be around him but he was my friend and I knew we would meet from time to time. When the Lord confronted me about my judgments that prevented me from loving my friend, my flesh was very resistant. Because after all, shouldn't he repent before I have to love him? However, the Lord eventually wore me down by His truth. The truth being that I don't have the right to judge. There is only One true judge and it isn't me. As a result, I made the choice to engage God to be set free of my judgments.

One thing the Lord did not do was to give me permission to bring up the past situation to my friend that caused the pain. What God wanted me to do was to look past my sinful judgments and love him unconditionally.

The process for me was this:

- God exposed my judgments and the death those judgments caused in my relationship with my friend.
- I began seeking the Holy Spirit to take every judging thought about him captive whenever they came to mind.
- When I wasn't with my friend, I asked the Lord to renew my mind and set me free of my judgments.
- Over time, as I sought God to love my friend through me, I began to look past my judgments and focus on forgiving and loving him.
- During this whole process, God continually reminded me that I was called to love not judge.

This whole process took several lunches. (That is when we usually would meet one another.) When I sat with my friend, I would engage God to take those painful, negative judging thoughts (and emotions) captive and to keep me focused on loving him. I compare this to the time Peter walked on water. How did Peter do it? The only way he could do it was keeping his eyes fixed on Jesus.

In like manner, I had to focus on loving my friend regardless of what judgmental thoughts came into my mind. Early on this was a very hard battle, but each time it became progressively easier to focus because the Lord was replacing my judgments with His love. Currently, I can sense my friend is responding to Christ's love through me. Even though this experience was hard for me early on, it was worth it because not only am I totally free to love him, but this freedom is helping me to love instead of judge in other relationships.

Think about your spouse, family, and friends. Ask the Spirit to bring to mind someone He wants you to start looking past your judgments towards them and start loving. Begin intentionally engaging God to replace those judgments with His love, remembering it will likely be a gradual process. However, you will discover that as you move through the process it will eventually give you a deeper love for that person.

Discussion Questions

1. Which of the six key truths to remember as you engage God to set you free most impacted you? Why?

2. Why do you think it might be hard to “faith it” long enough until you experience freedom to love others?

3. If you have been faithing it for awhile and not experiencing any real freedom, what discouraging thoughts might be coming into your mind?

4. What thoughts did you have when you read that you may fail many times during the process but that does not make you a failure?

Chapter Eleven

Seeking God To Love The Unlovable People In Your Life

Who Are the Unlovable People In Your Life?

If you have unlovable people in your life, your flesh is not going to like this chapter. I know this because of what happened with an unlovable person in my life. (To minimize the repetition, I am going to refer to unlovable people as **UP** for the rest of this chapter.)

See if any of the following people fit into your UP category:

- Those who have, in the past, wounded you or are engaged in wounding you now.
- Those who continue to reject or malign you.
- Those who have no interest whatsoever in your life, but who should have.
- An estranged family member.
- An ex-spouse.
- Those who are always needy and come to you repeatedly to meet those needs.

Who are the UP in your life? What happened to you that makes you see them as unlovable?

It Can Be A Labor TO Love The Unlovable

You have heard the expression “labor OF love.” When it comes to loving someone, especially the UP in your life, it is not only a labor of love, it is a labor **TO** love. Let me first define what I mean by “labor.”

Labor is the INTENTIONAL pursuit of, or the willingness to RESPOND to God’s INITIATING work in transforming our lives.

The word “labor” is used in Hebrews 4:11 where it says:

“Let us labor therefore to enter into that rest....”

The New Testament Greek word for “labor” means “diligence.” Diligence in the Greek means to make haste, to exert oneself, or to endeavor. These words imply an intentional pursuit of something. Since we are not initiators but responders to God’s work in our lives, our “labor” is an intentional pursuit of, or willingness to respond to, God’s initiation of whatever He is doing in our lives.

Actually, the truth is we can't even produce the willingness to respond. God must produce that as well. But, as we seek the Spirit to transform our wills (make us willing), we will respond with a greater willingness to pursue Him and His will, etc. Now let me define labor as it pertains to loving others.

***Labor TO love means the INTENTIONAL
pursuit of, or the WILLINGNESS to pursue
and depend on, God to transform you to LOVE
OTHERS and to become an agape LOVER.***

I have discovered that loving others is not passive. Especially when it comes to loving the unlovable people in our lives. It is a very active pursuit of God to transform my will to love others and to become an unconditional lover. This active pursuit (labor) is especially true when it comes to loving difficult people.

One of the key results of the labor is God's removing your soulical plaque resulting in a greater freedom to love. Before we go on, let me share with you my UP.

My UP

Jim (not his real name), was a very unlovable person in my life. Jim held on to every past sin I had ever committed against him. For a long time, I was able to ignore Jim until a turn of events came about that brought Jim back into my life. As a result I was the recipient of his many phone calls, texts and emails that were always intended to demean me and reject me.

I wanted to retaliate against him but I restrained myself. Nonetheless, I was very angry in my flesh. Before I go on, let me share with you what I did and what most of us tend to do with the UP in our lives.

We Tend to Compartmentalize UP

Imagine a prison cell or a room with a lock on the door. Our tendency with those UP in our lives is put them away in a prison cell or a locked room in our minds. I call this "compartmentalizing." We believe that if we can just not think about them, correspond with them or be around them, then we can go about living our lives without consequences. Out of sight, out of mind.

The problem with this "human" solution is that fleshly responses, such as anger, unforgiveness, and avoidance, towards UP not only restricts our desire and ability to love them, but those fleshly behaviors "leak" out into other relationships. The truth is this.

***It is impossible to COMPARTMENTALIZE
negative or toxic relationships. They will inevitably NEGATIVELY impact every other
relationship.***

I tried to compartmentalize Jim but it was a losing battle. His face would come to mind or he would call and my anger would rear its ugly head. I didn't realize until later that my angry and critical attitude towards him spilled over into some of my other relationships, as well. My fleshly attitudes towards Jim robbed me of loving him and prevented the flow of agape love towards others.

Think about a negative relationship that you have had or are currently experiencing. Have you tried to compartmentalize him/her in your mind? How effective do you think you have been?

I Wanted To Keep Protecting Myself From Jim, But....

I was living in self-protection with Jim. I didn't want to be around him, hear from him or even think about him. However, in the midst of my soulful agony towards him, the Lord came along one day and said, "What about Jim?" Ouch! I didn't want to even think about Jim so my sarcastic response to God was, "What about Jim?" The Lord said, "I can't let you continue not loving him. You write and teach about love but you are not applying that to Jim." This is the last thing I wanted to hear from God because I call this the "divine gotcha." You know what I mean don't you. There was no escape from God concerning loving Jim. (At times like these I realize why it is so much easier to teach the truth than to live it.)

My first response was a fleshly one because I wanted to keep on protecting myself from Jim rather than loving him. However, I knew in my spirit that the Lord was right and it was time to stop self-protecting and start loving. The problem was that I was not willing to love Jim.

[**Note:** I wanted you to know that I didn't hear an audible voice from God. These were thoughts He inserted into my mind.]

Write down what you think might be the results of holding on to your excuses/rights for not loving your UP?

Practical Application In Being Set Free To Love The UP In Your Life

I want to walk through some practical application of what it looks like to engage God to set you free the unlovable people in our life. I used every application I am about to share with you in order for God to set me free to eventually love Jim. So this is not just theology for me. These are real key things the revealed to me in being set free.

1. Engage God to love your UP THROUGH you.

I couldn't love Jim because of all the things he had said and done to me. God knew that I couldn't do it so this is the prayer He asked me to pray.

“Lord, You know I can’t love Jim because all he has done to me so I am asking You to love Jim through me.”

Think about what God was asking. He wasn't asking me to love Jim because He knew I couldn't. The step of faith was asking God to love Jim through me. Here is a key reason why God was asking me to pray this prayer.

God NEVER does a work THROUGH you that He doesn't do IN you.

What does this mean? It means that as I was praying that prayer, God was not only loving Jim through me but He was slowly, supernaturally, knocking down my fleshly resistance to loving Jim. I used the word supernatural because I wasn't feeling God breaking down the resistance. Before we go on, let me define supernatural when it comes to God working in our lives.

Supernatural is God's process of transforming our lives in which there is NO man-made explanation for and for which there is NO feeling or experience of that transformation early on.

This is a lot of words to say that we don't know how or what God is doing in us to transform us. In addition, early on in the process we won't experience God working.

If you can't love your UP, are you willing to prayer this prayer.

“Lord, You know I can’t love _____ because _____ so I am asking You to love _____ through me.”

2. If you are UNWILLING to let God love your UP through you, seek the Lord to move you from unwillingness to willingness.

The primary problem in loving others is our unwillingness to love them. As we said earlier, unwillingness is produced by our soulical plaque. It is easy to be willing to love those that are easy to love. However, when it comes to those who are more difficult, we become increasingly unwilling. We are unwilling because of the resistance of our flesh to love.

So, what do we do with our unwillingness to love? Remember what we talked about in Chapter Nine.

Your only option is to SEEK God to transform your heart to BECOME willing.

This is one of the key reasons I had to depend on God because I knew that I was not initially willing to seek God to even love Jim through me. How about you? Before I could ask God to love Jim through me, I had to engage Him to move me to a place of being willing. This is why I prayed the following prayer concerning Jim.

“Lord, give me the willingness to engage You to love Jim through me.”

Initially this was a very difficult prayer to pray but after I continually prayed it, over time the Holy Spirit changed my unwilling heart to one willing to engage God to love Jim through me.

Who is it you are unwilling to love? Are you willing to engage the Holy Spirit to transform you to become willing to engage God to love that person? What do you think might be the consequences if you remain unwilling?

3. Seek the Holy Spirit to EXPOSE any FLESHLY RIGHTS you have that you believe JUSTIFIES you not loving your UP.

In my flesh, I had built a case for not loving Jim. You see, our flesh is the best defense attorney we have because it builds and rebuilds the case over and over for not loving our UP. As a result, the Lord led me to pray David’s prayer in Psalm 139:23, 24

“Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.”

God exposed all my reasons, justifications and fleshly rights for not loving Jim. It was a very hard prayer to pray but it was necessary for God to expose my fleshly rights. Therefore, would you be willing to pray this prayer?

“Lord, when it comes to _____ (name of person) would you expose any and all of my reasons, justifications, and fleshly rights that I have in my heart that prevent me from loving him/her.”

What might be the consequences if you are not willing to pray this prayer?

4. Once the Spirit exposes your fleshly rights, ENGAGE Him to do whatever is NECESSARY to set you FREE from them.

*“It was for freedom that Christ set us free;
Therefore, keep standing firm and do not be
subject again to a yoke of slavery.” Galatians 5:1*

When it came to my reasons, justifications, and fleshly rights for not loving Jim, the list was long. So as I began going down the list, I would ask the Lord to speak truth into those fleshly rights. As He did, I began asking Him to set me free from them. This was one of the prayers I prayed.

“Lord, I feel in my flesh that I have the right not to love Jim because he criticizes me and rejects me constantly. However, Your word says that I don’t have to take ownership of his criticisms and rejection. Therefore, I am seeking you to renew my mind to the truth and transform me to a place where I no longer take ownership of his criticism/rejection.”

This truly was “labor” because my hardened heart felt so justified in holding on to my fleshly rights. However, this is what I eventually learned and experienced.

FREEDOM is the result of allowing God to REPLACE your fleshly rights with His TRUTH.

Would you be willing to pray a prayer similar to this?

“Lord, I feel in my flesh that I have the right not to love _____ because he/she _____. However, Your word says that I don’t have to take ownership of what his/her flesh has done (or is doing) to me. Therefore, I am seeking you to renew my mind and replace my fleshly right with Your truth.”

5. Seek the Holy Spirit to tear down your walls of SELF-PROTECTION that prevent you from loving your UP.

Have you ever thought about love being a wrecking ball? I see how love is like a wrecking ball because it can tear down our walls of self-protection resulting from our false beliefs, unbelief, woundedness or our flesh. Here is a key truth we need to understand about self-protection:

***We think these walls protect us from being HURT
again when in actuality they PREVENT Christ's
love and power from flowing in and through us.***

I believe the height and thickness of our self-protective walls are directly proportional to the amount of soulcal plaque we contain. As for me, my self-protective walls were very high and very deep when it came to Jim. I knew my only hope for being free to love him was for the Lord to break down my walls.

In addition to breaking down your personal walls of self-protection, God’s love through you has the power to break down others’ self-protective walls as well. In some relationships, it can happen fairly quickly. For others, it may take a long while. Here is a prayer I prayed:

“Lord, I am seeking you to tear down not only my walls of self-protection but also tear down Jim’s walls.”

As I look back on the six months I prayed this prayer, I now realize that God was tearing down the walls between us even though I couldn’t feel or experience it.

Are you unsure whether you even have walls of self-protection against others? I would encourage you first to ask the Lord to reveal whether you have them. For example, ask God

to show you if you feel defensive or self-protective around someone. If the Lord's answer is "yes," seek Him to tear down both your walls and theirs.

Are you willing to pray this prayer?

"Lord, I am seeking you to tear down not only my walls of self-protection but also tear down _____ walls as well."

What do you think might be the consequences if you don't allow the Holy Spirit to tear down your walls of self-protection?

6. When fleshly thoughts come into your mind about your unlovable person, ENGAGE the Holy Spirit to take those thoughts CAPTIVE.

"We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ." 2 Corinthians 10:5

As we discussed earlier, we tend to take ownership of the sinful, fleshly thoughts that come into our minds. This is especially true when it comes to our UP. That certainly was the case with Jim. What I didn't realize was:

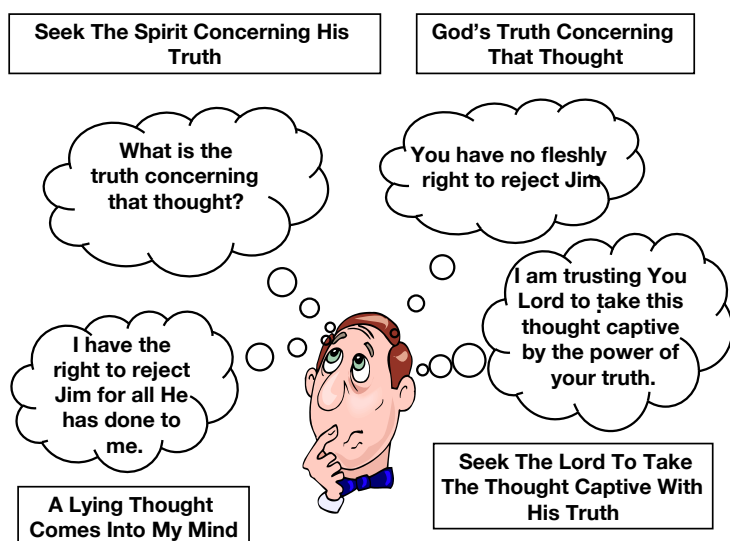
Every thought about Jim I took ownership of only REINFORCED my fleshly attitudes of anger and bitterness towards him.

Therefore, I began engaging God for Him to take those negative, angry, fleshly thoughts captive towards Jim. Let me show you what this looked like practically.

Early on, I was not taking any of my judgmental and condemning thoughts towards Jim captive. However, as I began seeking God to renew my mind to the truth, I started taking those thoughts captive by asking the Spirit to remind me of the truth associated with that sinful thought and then I would speak God's truth into them which allowed me to reject those thoughts.

For example, my fleshly thought was, "I have the right to reject Jim for all he has done to me." What is God's truth? I have no fleshly right to reject him. Therefore, I would take God's truth and speak this truth into that fleshly thoughts: "I have no right to reject Jim because I have no fleshly rights." Then I would add a simple prayer like this: "Lord, persuade me that Jim doesn't deserve my rejection. Rather, he needs to experience Your love through me."

Here is a diagram that illustrates this process.



Write down some recurring fleshly thoughts you have when you think of your UP.

Now write down God's truth associated with each of those fleshly thoughts.

Begin speaking His truth into those thoughts whenever they come to mind. You will find yourself at some point rejecting ownership of the thoughts which will result in God's renewing your mind to the truth and setting you free.

Are you willing to engage God with your fleshly thoughts towards your UP?

7. **FORGIVE your offender.**

*".... **forgiving each other**, whoever has a complaint against anyone; **just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.**" Colossians 3:13*

Forgiving the one who has wounded or rejected you is essential in your becoming free to love. This is true because:

***Unforgiveness CUTS OFF the flow of
Christ's love and forgiveness in you.***

In addition to restricting the flow of Christ's forgiveness, unforgiveness:

- Imprisons you.
- Hardens your heart towards that person.
- Builds up your soulical plaque.
- Will be toxic to those around you.

I know these things to be true experientially because of the unforgiveness I had towards my dad for 48 years. My unforgiveness was like a cancer in my soul. The cancer went from stage one to stage four over those years with the result that my heart grew harder, more resistant, and more bitter. In addition, it made me toxic to my wife and everyone else around me.

Many people are unwilling to forgive because of the amount of pain they have endured from someone. As hard as it may seem, our only option is to seek the Spirit to move us from unwillingness to willingness to allow God to both forgive and love that person through us.

I was so resistant to forgiving my dad that the Lord had to ask me if I would be willing to let Him forgive my dad through me. Here is an example of a prayer I prayed engaging the Spirit to move me to become willing to forgive my dad:

"Lord, you have exposed my unforgiveness towards my father. I am seeking you to renew my mind to the truth that I am a forgiving person in Christ and transform me to be willing to forgive him. Until then, I ask you to forgive my dad through me."

We really don't have any excuse not to forgive, do we? Why not? Because:

- Christ totally forgave us when we were unworthy of being forgiven. (Colossians 2:13)
- We have no fleshly rights not to forgive. (Galatians 5:24)
- We contain all of Christ's forgiveness. (Colossians 2:9, 10)
- We are forgiving people in our true identity. (Ephesians 4:32)

Remember this when it comes to forgiveness:

***It may take multiple ACTS of forgiveness for you to eventually experience an ATTITUDE
of forgiveness towards that person.***

Because of the many years of abuse, it took me numerous acts of forgiveness before the Lord produced an attitude of forgiveness in me towards my dad. I define an act of forgiveness as a point in time where some thought came to mind or the Spirit brought a thought to mind

concerning my past woundedness in order for me to forgive my dad in that moment. Here is an example:

“Lord, You brought to mind another wounding event that I need to forgive my dad for. Give me the willingness to forgive him.”

It took over two years of experiencing acts of forgiveness (i.e., intentionally praying for God to forgive my dad through me regardless of my feelings) for the Spirit to transform me into having an attitude of forgiveness. Once the Lord produced that attitude there was no need for any more acts of forgiveness.

In addition, just as the Lord was transforming me to forgive my dad, He was also setting me free to begin loving my dad. This freedom didn't apply to just my dad. It started freeing me to love others as well. I wish I could put into words what that freedom felt like. The closest I can come is that it felt like I was being let out of prison after living in solitary confinement for 48 years.

The same was true for me when it came to forgiving Jim. Because of Jim's rejection, I had to intentionally engage in multiple acts of forgiveness over that six months for God to eventually produce an attitude of forgiveness in me for him.

Who is the person who wounded you, rejected you, or offended you that you have not forgiven? Begin with acts of forgiveness, knowing that God will eventually produce an attitude of forgiveness towards that person. If you are unwilling to forgive, ask God to forgive that person through you. In the process, seek the Holy Spirit to transform your heart to make you willing.

8. Remember that if your UP is a Christian, they have a NEW IDENTITY in Christ just like you do.

*“Therefore, if any man **is in Christ he is a new creation**. The old things have passed away and new things have come.” 2 Corinthians 5:17*

*“For we are God's **masterpiece**...”
Ephesians 2:10*

Why is this truth so important? Imagine a black curtain for a moment. On this curtain are imprinted all the different ways you have been hurt or wounded by that person (i.e., rejection, abuse, divorce, etc.). If this person is a Christian, behind this curtain is their new identity. What are the results in your heart if you focus on the wrongs set out on the curtain and never open it?

Now let's imagine that this is your curtain on which all your sins, fleshly behaviors, resistance to God and His will, etc., are listed. What does God see? Does He focus on your curtain and reject you or does He pull the curtain back and focus on who you are in your true identity and love you? Since God pulls our curtain back in total forgiveness and love, do we have any excuse for not opening the curtain of the unlovable person and seeing them in their true identity in Christ?

You see, God does not like our fleshly behavior but that does not stop Him from loving us because of who we are in Christ. Likewise, since in our true identity we are unconditional lovers, we too must look beyond their curtains and love them in God's power as He loves them.

As hard as it was to look beyond Jim's curtain early on, over time God persuaded me to pull the curtain back and see that even though his behavior towards me was fleshly, he possesses the same identity in Christ as I do.

Have you ever thought about God's looking past all your sins and fleshly behaviors and still loving you because of your true identity in Christ? Wouldn't the same be true of those Christians who have hurt or wounded you?

List everything that is on the curtain of your UP.

Are you willing to pull the curtain back and see them as God sees them? If not, what are you left with?

10. THANK God for the UP in your life even though it may be through GRITTED teeth.

What is your response to this prayer: "Thank you, God, for this UP who has caused me great heartache and pain?" Can you do this or is your response, "You've got to be kidding me?" If it is the latter, I totally understand how you feel because that was my first response when God confronted me about my attitude towards Jim.

But that began to change when the Lord brought to my mind 1 Thessalonians 5:18:

*"... **in everything give thanks**; for this is
God's will for you in Christ Jesus."*

When I got to the word "everything," it started flashing like a neon light. Then, the Lord reminded me that "everything" included Jim. I believe there is a key reason for thanking God for those difficult people in our lives.

***God uses our thanksgiving for these difficult
people as part of His process of setting us FREE
(i.e. removing our soulical plaque) from our
fleshly attitudes towards them.***

How does God do that? He uses these difficult people in our lives as "divine" scalpels to expose such things as our self-protectionism, judgmental attitudes and fleshly rights. If we can't see the plaque, then we can't engage God to set us free from it.

As difficult as it may be, I would encourage you to spend time thanking God for the people that you struggle to love (even if, initially, it is done through gritted teeth).

Key Truths Concerning Loving Unlovable People

I hope these truths have been helpful in your journey to begin loving the UP in your life. Before I finish this chapter, I want to leave you with three final key truths.

1. Loving the unlovable will most likely be a JOURNEY rather than a SPRINT.

If you are like me, you want to experience transformation sooner than later. However, learning to love people we struggle with is more likely to be a journey rather than a sprint, especially if the following conditions apply:

- If you have struggled with them for a long time.
- If you have been hurt or wounded deeply.
- If your heart is really hard towards them.
- If you are unwilling to allow the Spirit to transform your heart.

Remember that even if it is a journey rather than a sprint, you will still find partial freedom along the way and total freedom at the end of your journey. Are you willing to take the first step?

2. You may have to take several steps of FAITH before you FEEL or EXPERIENCE love for that person.

As you seek to depend on the Lord to love through you, often, at least initially, you won't feel or experience love for that person. Remember what it says in 2 Corinthians 5:7

*"... for we walk by **faith** and **not by sight**."*

"Sight" in this verse means feelings or experience. Faith, as it applies to loving your unlovable person, means that you may have to walk for some time believing God is producing His love in you before you actually feel or experience His love for that person. But don't give up.

Over the six months that I was asking the Lord to love Jim through me, I was not feeling or experiencing any love for him. However, what do we know by faith? Every time I prayed that prayer, God was transforming my heart. How can we be certain of that when we are not feeling or experiencing any change? Look at Philippians 1:6:

*"For I am confident of this very thing, that **He who began a good work in you will perfect it [bring it to completion]** until the day of Christ Jesus."*

Whether you feel it or not, God is working non-stop to transform your heart to love the unlovable.

3. At some point along your journey you WILL EXPERIENCE God's love for your UP.

The good news is:

Even though you INITIALLY have to walk in and believe by faith that God is freeing you to love your UP, you will EVENTUALLY feel and experience Christ's love for that person.

After six months this became true for me towards Jim. Here is what happened.

The End of One Story and the Beginning of Another

To sum up what happened with Jim, for six months I continuously prayed the prayers I shared with you earlier. As I said previously, for six months I didn't feel or experience any love towards Jim. I was very intentional about that prayer whenever I called or emailed him. During that time, I also didn't sense any change in Jim's rejection, criticism or anger towards me.

Then one day, I got a call from him and he said these words which he had never spoken to me before. "Can you help me?" I knew the Lord had done a work in my heart because I didn't respond with a negative or sarcastic remark. Instead, I said, "How can I help you?" I realized in that moment that God had changed my heart to love Jim. When we finished the conversation, Jim uttered two other words I had never heard from him, "Thank you."

Let me give you an analogy of how I felt after that phone call. Think about Moses for a moment. He is standing at the Red Sea, believing God was going to open it. Even though he believed God would do it, can you imagine the expression on his face when those waters actually rolled back? Amazed! Astonished! Wow! My friends, this is exactly how I felt when I got off the phone that day with Jim.

Little did I know that this was the beginning of a new relationship with him because from that time until now our friendship is growing closer and closer. My love for him continues to grow.

Let me share with you what the Lord has persuaded me as a result of this process.

God's love CAN move you to LOVE the most UNLOVABLE people in your life.

As you read these words, you may be saying about your UP that it is impossible. I understand because I had those same thoughts. What God is asking you now is, "Are you willing to take the first step of faith and see what God can do?"

Some of you may be asking this question: "What if Jim never returned your love?" That is a question I asked myself over and over during the process.

The truth is you have no control over whether or not that person you are seeking to love will ever love you in return. If that never happened, the Lord brought this truth to mind.

You WILL BE set FREE to love that person UNCONDITIONALLY even if they never love you in return.

My friends, you will be set free regardless of whether or not they love you in return. This will free you up to love others because you were set free to love your UP. If you choose to walk this path towards freedom, remember that as long as you both are alive, there is always hope for your love towards them to be returned.

Discussion Questions

1. Share about your unlovable person.

2. Which of these applications are the hardest for you to apply? Why?

3. What will be some of the negative results in you and through you if you choose not to engage God to love your UP?

4. In what ways do you think being set free to love your UP, would impact your other relationships? With your spouse? Kids? Parents? Friends? Co-workers?

Chapter Twelve

What Does Freedom To Agape Love Look Like?

I want to end this book with some final thoughts of what we can expect as God sets us free to love.

1. You will experience a RENEWING of your mind to BELIEVE and WALK IN God's truth.

When it comes to your false beliefs about God's love towards you or through you to others, God will replace your false beliefs with His truth. It will radically change how you see and experience God's love for you and others.

As far as your unbelief is concerned about loving God, God loving you, or loving others, you will experience God's movement of you from unbelief to belief.

You will discover that the frustration, anger, unforgiveness, or bitterness that you have been experiencing towards the person(s) who has wounded you will be replaced by forgiveness and eventually unconditional love.

2. As you allow the Lord to transform your heart to become a lover, you will find yourself becoming OTHER'S focused.

For me, this was one of the greatest effects of being set free to love others. For so long I had been so self-absorbed that I had no capacity to love anyone else. However, as the Lord is removing my soulical plaque, He is persuading me of His love towards me and in me. As a result, I am finding it easier to love and I am more willing to love others.

3. You will love others WITHOUT any conditions or expectations.

As you are being transformed to become a lover like Jesus, you will find yourself loving more unconditionally and with fewer and fewer expectations.

4. You will LOSE your desire to judge others.

Freedom from judgments is freedom indeed. As you see people in 3D and realize they need your love rather than your judgments, you will find yourself loving more and judging less.

5. You will find yourself taking ownership of FEWER and FEWER offenses.

We talked earlier about your spiritual armor growing stronger the longer you walk in Christ. Imagine those offenses being darts that early on penetrate your armor but at some point in your spiritual journey they can't penetrate. Likewise, concerning your offenses, you will find yourself taking ownership of fewer and fewer offenses. Offense will be replaced by love.

6. Your walls of self-protection will COME DOWN.

As I experienced with Jim, God's love was the wrecking ball that has knocked down the walls of my self-protection. The good news is that God not only knocked down the walls of self-protection towards Jim, He is knocking down those walls with others as well.

7. Perfect love will REPLACE your fears with Christ's COURAGE

For some of you, loving someone who has hurt, wounded, or rejected you is a fearful thing. This is because loving someone like that makes you feel vulnerable to being hurt or wounded again. I understand because this is how I felt with Jim. Our human tendency when someone wounds us is to protect ourselves from being hurt again. However, in contrast to this human tendency, scripture tells us:

"... perfect love casts out all fear...."
1 John 4:19

In our human logic, we reject loving the one who wounds us because of fear we'll be hurt again. But God says the opposite is true in 1 John 4:19. As you are being set free to love, God will replace your fears with Christ's courage.

8. Not Only Will You Become More Of A Lover, You Will Become More LOVABLE

What made Jesus so attractive? Was it His command of the scriptures or His supernatural powers? I don't think so. I believe He was attractive because of the divine love radiating from His heart. Whether we know it consciously or not, we are drawn to Jesus because of the irresistibility of His love.

That being true, it follows that God is not only transforming us to become lovers, He is also renovating our souls to make us increasingly lovable. You can't have one without the other. I believe this is what Paul is trying to tell us in Ephesians 5:1-2:

*"Therefore, **be imitators of God**, as beloved children; and **walk in love**, just as Christ also loved you...."*

As imitators of God, we are to depend totally on Him to transform us to become more attractive (loveable) to others. Look at 2 Corinthians 2:14-15.

*"But thanks be to God, who ... **manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him** in every place. For **we are a fragrance of Christ** to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing."*

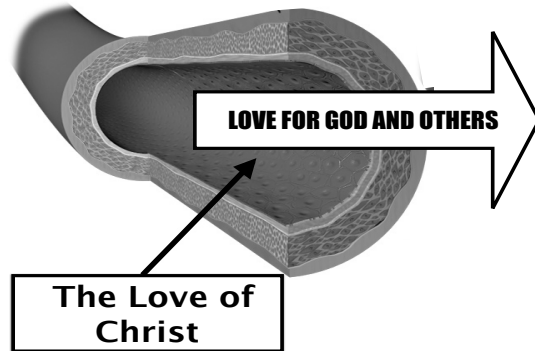
Paul tells us it is God who manifests the knowledge of Christ through us as a "sweet aroma" and then calls us the "fragrance of Christ" to everyone around us:

We know that in our own power we cannot make ourselves more loveable. However, as we walk in the Spirit and grow in Christ, His love in and through us will supernaturally make us more attractive to Christians and non-Christians alike.

What Does Your Spiritual Artery Look Like Now?

My prayer for you is that you are walking by faith and allowing the Holy Spirit to remove your plaque with the result that on some level it is freeing you up to love. If so, this is what your spiritual artery is looking like now.

**The LESS The Blockage The
GREATER The Freedom To Love**



Conclusion

"Loving is of the essence of being human, the connective tissue of life, the oxygen of life."
James H. Olthuis 2

Think about those words from James Olthius. They mean more to me than ever before because of what the Spirit is doing in clearing out the blockage in my heart. I have not arrived because am still undergoing God's transforming process of putting these truths into action in my life.

2 The Beautiful Risk: A New Psychology of Loving and Being Loved (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2001), p. 69

But, already I am experiencing a deeper love for those unlovable people in my life and for all of those I come in contact with.

My prayer for you is that you will begin taking steps to seek God to further renovate your heart, to love the unlovable and to go even deeper in your love for those you already love. May 1 Corinthians 16:14 become seared into all your soul:

*"Let all that you do be done in **LOVE**."*

In His love,

Bill Loveless

Where Do I Go From Here?

At our website listed below, we encourage you to check out our four-part discipleship series called ***Growing Up – Growing Out – Growing Deep*** designed to teach Christians how to fulfill their purpose and calling. The first book in the series is called ***Growing to Become Like Christ***.

Book One covers the following topics:



- What it means to grow up spiritually to become like Christ.
- The difference between living “A” Christian life versus living “THE” Christian life.
- What it looks like practically to grow to become like Christ.
- What are some of the hindrances to spiritual growth and how we overcome them.
- How becoming like Christ transforms every area of our lives.

CILM DISCIPLESHIP MATERIALS

CILM has this series and many other studies, booklets and videos at our website listed below. To purchase ready-to-use copies from **Amazon or download for free** and do your own printing, copying and binding, please go to the **Discipleship** tab of our website. We hope you will take advantage of these materials.

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