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Love of the Brethren

The philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote an essay entitled, "Why I Am Not a Christian." In it he presented what he believed were irrefutable arguments for rejecting Christianity. His primary focus was the lives of Christians he had known or heard of who conducted themselves deplorably. Ironically, though Russell taught critical thinking, nevertheless almost the entirety of his treatment is an *Ad Hominem* argument. Just because ten medical doctors are wicked men doesn't mean that traditional medicine is false.

That having been said, insofar as Russell attacked NOT the system of Christianity, BUT the churches whose members professed to be followers of Christ, he most certainly would have been going in the right direction. Christ Himself warned us about this:

John 13:35, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Wait a minute! You mean to say that one of the most fundamental apologetics for the authenticity of our profession of faith as a church is NOT

- Our doctrinal statements.
- Our worship services.
- Our outreach programs.
- BUT love

That is exactly what Christ says here! It truly is the final apologetic!

In light of that, we need to ask the question of Bethel: Is there enough love in the relationships in this church to convict you and me of being a Christian?

In many places and churches, sadly the answer would be a loud, "No!" And that is NOT because the church is filled with unbelievers (although that could be the case), BUT primarily because of all things, expressing and living in the love of Christ is most difficult.

Many of us have heard the poem (I've recited it throughout the years), "To dwell above with saints we love, ah Lord, that will be glory! But to dwell below with saints I know, now that's a different story!" Truly, the worst pain I have ever felt as a Christian has been on account of professing believers in the body of Christ. And I dare say that such would be the testimony of many of you (cf. Psalms 55:12-14)! It has been said that the church is the only army that shoots its wounded.

Christian, how do we rise above this all-too common tendency and genuinely participate in a fellowship characterized by love? That is the question Peter answers in the text before us. Peter, having exhorted his persecuted brethren to make holiness a primary objective in their walks, Peter then turned to his first exhortation toward holiness with the call of love!

The Command to Love of the Brethren

1 Peter 1:22c, "Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart."

That is the command. It is comprised of three words which in themselves speak of heightened commitment, but, placed together, they speak of an intensity of love and commitment rarely

seen today in the body life of the church. Let's look at them.

The word, fervently: ἐκτενῶς (*ektenōs*); this is a physiological term meaning "to stretch to the furthest limit of a muscle's capacity." Metaphorically, the word means to go all out, to reach the furthest extent of something.¹ God wants believers' love to stretch way beyond what would be considered as extreme by human standards. Our love must endure NOT just the foibles of those in the body of Christ, BUT their most egregious sin. As Peter will later teach:

1 Peter 4:8, "Above all, keep fervent [keep stretching] in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins."

Did you get that? The nature of love in the body life of the church is to stretch — to stretch in your love so far it covers a multitude of sins (cf. Proverbs 10:12b)! In this regard we conclude that if in your relationships with the body of Christ your love is NOT being stretched, EITHER your relationships are shallow OR your love is faulty. So, the command here begins with a call to endure the painful exercise of stretching in your love for one another! Yet what is the love referenced here?

The second term is *love*: ἀγαπάω (*agapaō*); this references a strong, non-sexual affection/love for a person and their good. In this context, it translates to a life characterized by a willing forfeiture of one's rights or privileges in behalf of another (it is this we are called to "stretch" when it comes to one another in Christ). In fact, there is a contrast here that serves to heighten the exhortation. Peter begins by talking about being saved unto "a sincere love of the brethren." The word he utilized for "love" is the compound, φιλαδελφία (*philadelphia*). This is where he begins which is what we would expect. We have been saved unto a brotherly love for the body of Christ. Most if not all of us would agree with this.

But then Peter ups the ante. I am going to paraphrase it, "...we have been saved unto a sincere brotherly love; yet our love must go beyond that. Our love must stretch beyond human love to encompass the same love with which we have been loved by God!"

In this regard, understand the essence of Biblical love. It is housed in the will rather than emotion. It is NOT determined by the beauty or desirability of the object, BUT by the intention of the one who loves. In this regard you must see that

1. There is NO condition to the love we are called to have for each other,
2. NOR is there a limit.

Accordingly realize, unlike anything on this earth which if stretched too far will snap, biblical love has NO breaking point.

Matthew 18:21-22, "Then Peter came and said to Him, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?' [Peter no doubt thought that he was being generous since Rabbinical teaching said that love was limited to three transgressions. But then our Lord responded...] Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times,

but up to seventy times seven.”

Christ took a very generous standard (seven times) and then He multiplied it by seventy! The result is a number that is beyond our natural ability. The idea behind Christ’s response is that there is no limit to the love we are to extend to a brother or sister (regardless of what they have done to us). In fact, it is the other John 3:16 which sets the standard for us in Christ:

1 John 3:16, “We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”

How far are we to “stretch” when it comes to our love for one another? Until it cost us our lives! Yet there is more. The third word/phrase used to modify the love Peter is exhorting here is “from [a pure] heart”: ἐκ [καθαρᾶς]² καρδίας (*ek katharas kardias*); as we’ll see in a bit, it is the “pure heart” — the washed heart — that serves as the basis for any biblical ethic, not just love. That having been said, Peter is talking about loving people NOT simply as an intellectual exercise, BUT from one’s heart — which involves volition and is determined by what we value.

Don’t forget, the essence of biblical Love is that it “does not take into account a wrong suffered” (1 Corinthians 13:5). This is an accounting term which essentially says that Love keeps no books. It does NOT keep before one’s eyes the sinful deeds of a brother or sister. Recall Paul’s exhortation to Euodia and Syntyche. In his treatment on their dispute, Paul exhorted them with these words:

Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brethren, whatever is true [in the other individual], whatever is honorable [in the other individual], whatever is right [in the other individual], whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.”

Loving from the heart involves a commitment to think only the best about your brother and sister. You do this, and love of the brethren will NOT be a massive leap as a believer.

And so, with an unreserved passion and with a heart cleansed by the grace of God, our love is to stretch well beyond the foibles and sins of one another to envelope the whole man. This will come NOT as we feel warm fuzzies toward each other, BUT as we make the decision to exercise the fruit of the Spirit and so love the unlovely. That is the biblical standard given to us in Scripture for the body life of this church. Sound impossible? With man, it most certainly will be. But with God?

This brings us to the ground or the foundation for the command and so an explanation of how we are able to walk in this love.

1 Peter 1:22, “Since you have in obedience to the truth // purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart.”

What is meant by this opening? It makes it sound as though biblical love flows from something that we do. Is that correct?³ There is an element in which we can say that as we labor to grow in our walks, biblical love will follow. But that is NOT the focus here. Let's walk our way through the verse.

The first phrase is this: "since you have in obedience to the truth": ἐν τῇ ὑπακοῇ τῆς ἀληθείας (*en ta hupakoē tas alētheias*); the language here is NOT talking about sanctification, BUT a genuine response to "the truth" of gospel. See, it is one thing to hear the truth of God's word proclaimed, BUT to obey it? To respond to what you hear? This is nothing short of genuine saving faith — which is how this expression is used in the Bible. On the last day, Christ will:

2 Thessalonians 1:8, "Deal... out retribution to those who do not know God [that is] to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus."

The focus here is NOT on our living, BUT on whether the person responded in faith to the gospel. In other words, IOW, were they saved? From this I want you to see that "obedience to the truth" reflects a positive response to the gospel which only comes when God regenerates the individual. Speaking of his unbelieving countrymen, Paul wrote this:

Romans 10:16, "However, they did not all heed [the word used here is our word, ὑπακοή (*hupakoē*), and so 'obey'] the glad tidings; for Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our report?'"

Notice that "obeying" the gospel is one and the same as "believing" it! From all of this⁴ we conclude that Peter essentially is saying here, "Since you now are saved... fervently love one another." Biblical love flows from salvation! Now if there was any question, notice the next phrase "since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls." The imagery here comes from the Old Testament and the many washings associated with temple worship. In the New Testament this language is used in reference to salvation. After detailing a list of the horrible lives which formally characterized those in the church at Corinth, Paul wrote this:

1 Corinthians 6:11, "And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God."

The Hebrew writer exhorts us this way:

Hebrews 10:22, "Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled *clean* from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."

So, the language here speaks of the cleansing of sin. Yet you say, "Why then does the translation read, 'Since you have... purified YOUR Souls'? This makes it sound like it is an activity that we do." The word for "purified" is a perfect tense which speaks of something that began

in the past with continuing impact unto the present. As such there are a variety of ways, we could translate this verse accurately, BUT NONE imply that the “purification” is something we do, BUT what has been done to us in the past with continuing impact on the present.

From all of this I hope you see that Peter roots and grounds his ethical call to “fervently love one another from the heart” to our salvation!

Do you understand what that means?

Peter is NOT rooting the calling here to the FACT of our salvation. RATHER, Peter is rooting the calling here to the PURPOSE of our salvation — which is nothing less than a love relationship with God! We were saved to enjoy God! Accordingly, the more we understand, appreciate, and enjoy the salvation granted us in Christ, the more we will become the people God has called us to be — which according to our passage involves an “ever-stretching love” for each other!

Before us each day is this choice:

- You can live on this earth sowing to your fleshly desire to hold a brother or sister’s sin against them, BUT that will cost you intimacy in your walk with Christ. Or...
- You can live on this earth growing in your understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment of Christ on account of His salvation. Practically speaking, this will result in a growth in your Christlikeness and so your love for one another.

We see this same teaching throughout God’s word! The basis of any and all “one-anothering” in Scripture is love for God!

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

Christian, this passage does much more than simply state a theological fact. It details the Ground of any and all love in the life of a child of God. We can and will only express love in our lives as we behold, understand, and enjoy the love of God! In this regard, consider (maybe you are like me), For much of my Christian life I have studied and come to understand and appreciate that God is holy, just, completely sovereign, in charge of all things, and upholds all things by the word of His power. In fact, recently I have been overwhelmed by how big God is. Yet throughout most of my Christian life I have been taught that divine love is NOT a feeling, BUT an action. It is a determined act of the will which always results in determined acts of self-giving. As that is the case, I have understood that while God’s love is an attribute, it nevertheless is an attribute of action. It describes something God does if it pleases Him.

But herein is the struggle... what if I do something that does NOT please God? Will God still be loving toward me?

Because God at times disciplines the sinner — yea, His children — with their sin (Proverbs 5:22),

we have beheld what appears to us as some pretty “unloving” acts on the part of God which have resulted in the loss of:

- A job.
- A loved one.
- A possession.
- That which is most precious in our eyes.
- An opportunity.

Now if I do what is natural as a sinner — interpret who God is by what happens to me- I conclude in view of these dark times God is NOT happy with me, BUT in fact is disappointed with me which is why He has deigned NOT to be loving toward me at the moment. The net result in my walk is that I have become alienated from God, feel unloved by God, and this only plunges me into further rebellion both toward God and man.

Yet all of this is muted when I understand that love is NOT an attribute of action on the part of God, BUT WHAT HE IS! God not only is holy, just, completely sovereign, in charge of all things, and upholds all things by the word of His power, BUT He also is good, gracious, kind, and loving! These attributes are NOT simply what God does (when He feels like it), BUT what God is at all times! That means, if God set His love upon you to save you, then, as an unchangeable Being, He will always love you no matter what you do! That is Paul’s point in Romans 5:8-10!

This frees us to enjoy God’s love without fear (cf. 1 John 4:18). And as we do this, do you know what will happen? We, just like our Lord, will love! In fact, anything less than love for the brethren will seem disjointed, disproportionate to the Love with which we have been loved by God! We see it in what Christ told His Pharisee host:

Luke 7:47b, “...he who is forgiven little, loves little.”

The Christian who lives in ignorance as to

- The greatness of their sin.
- The holiness of God.
- The cost God paid in order grant you salvation- the death of His Son.
- The Love of God who suffered such a loss that we might enjoy a love-relationship with Him.

That Christian will find it very difficult to love others. In fact, they will drift in one of either two directions: arrogance (where they push themselves up) or judgmentalism (where they push others down). But when we fellowship with Christ and there enjoy His unconditional love for us, we will grow in love for those whom He loves! Christ said this:

John 14:15, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.”

What happens when duty, a sense of obligation is replaced with loving God? You and I will “keep God’s commandments” the sum of which is love for the brethren!

Hebrews 12:28, 13:1, “Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service... [and what is that service?]... Let love of the brethren continue.”

When we considered the previous section in 1 Peter we saw this:

1 Peter 1:15, “But like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all *your* behavior.”

How is this holiness achieved? As we saw, it comes as we, “...fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:13b)!

We could go on and on. Yet from what we have just seen, we conclude that the ground of any and every act of love toward one another is a fuller understanding of, appreciation for, and enjoyment of the love of God, His grace, and so the salvation that God has given us in Christ!

If you show me a gathering of Christians who make it their objective in life to enjoy God, to love God, and so to fellowship with God I’ll show you a gathering where love of the brethren keeps going and going (cf. Hebrews 13:1)!

It is interesting to note how the moralism as taught by the Judaizer’s of Paul’s day translate to the daily lives of those who held it. Galatians is a book written to a group of churches who began trusting Christ alone for their salvation. Yet very soon after Paul left them, Judaizer’s came to the churches and began teaching that if the Gentile believers there did NOT receive circumcision, they could not be saved! Accordingly, Paul penned the book of Galatians in part to address this problem.

Galatians 5:2-3, “Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law.”

What practical implication did this moralism have upon the congregation? Notice Paul’s exhortation/warning:

Galatians 5:15, “But if you bite and devour one another, take care lest you be consumed by one another.”

Insofar as the child of God does NOT sit at the feet of Christ BUT relates to the world based on their own effort/righteousness, relationally they will bite, devour, and consume their fellow believers. Yet as they live in light of their freedom (Galatians 5:1), they and their relationships

will be characterized by “love, joy, peace, patience, etc....” (Galatians 5:22-23)!

End Note(s)

¹ cf. Luke 22:44; Acts 12:5; cf. Acts 26:7.

² “Pure” is found in some of the earliest manuscripts and so is a valid translation.

³ This actually is the teaching of Wayne Grudem in the Tyndale New Testament Bible Commentary (cf. *1 Peter*, p. 92). However, he is in the minority as every commentary I consulted on this verse states what I argue in this sermon.

⁴ cf. also John 3:36; Galatians 5:7)