

The Kingdom Turn Part 8

KINGDOM PRACTICE



A ReVision Resource

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The Fellowship of Ailbe

Kingdom Practice: The Kingdom Turn Part 8
A *ReVision* Resource of The Fellowship of Ailbe
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Welcome to *ViewPoint*

Welcome to *Kingdom Practice*, a brief study on the Biblical virtue of love – the greatest of all virtues. *Kingdom Practice* is part 8 in our series, *The Kingdom Turn*, and is one of our *ViewPoint* series of studies in Biblical worldview.

These studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or a group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

Take one lesson at a time, reading the Scriptures and narrative aloud, and pausing to reflect on and discuss the questions provided. Don't be in a hurry. Be willing to take more than one session on a lesson if it will allow you to delve more deeply into the subject matter.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. Take turns leading your group. Let every member share in the privilege and responsibility of facilitating discussions. Group leaders should not feel like they have to "have all the answers." Their task is simply to lead the group through the readings and questions, and to help everyone participate.

These studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We are happy to receive your suggestions for future topics and studies. Contact us at our webpage. And if you're not receiving *ViewPoint* first thing every day, then be sure to register on the website, www.ailbe.org.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Where is Your Treasure?

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Matthew 6.21

We are what we love

In a very real sense, we are what we love. This is as true of those who have made the Kingdom turn as it is of everybody else. What we treasure in our heart will be what we seek in life and what we become in fact.

Love is that affection which, more than any other, gathers together our most powerful feelings and focuses them on a single object. It doesn't matter what that object is. It could be something as mundane as material wealth, fame or esteem, or even the possession of power over others. Whatever we love the most will be that which our affections point to, strain toward, and eagerly desire to possess. What we love is what we will treasure, and what we treasure will determine who we are.

This “treasure” will fill our minds day by day with visions, dreams, and carefully-laid plans for how we may acquire that for which we long. Love can obviously make us crazy – it can lead us to do strange and unpredictable things as we press, push, and lunge in the direction of what we love the most.

What we most love, therefore, tells us something about the condition of our hearts. If the best part of our spiritual and physical energies are invested in making a good living – if being materially well-off is the treasure we seek – then this will be evidence of a heart which believes it can only be satisfied by the enjoyment of things and the realization of every whim. Can such a heart practice meaningful love to another person?

Even more important, can such a heart really love God?

Where your treasure is, your heart will be. What you love, you will long for, strive after, and pursue until you have as much of it as will bring contentment to your soul.

But that's just the problem with things, isn't it? They never really satisfy because they never pan out quite the way we'd hoped; and we seem never to be able to have enough of the thing we desire most. Think: Imelda Marcos and shoes, Wilt Chamberlain and women, or Bernie Madoff and other people's money.

What kind of love?

Love can drive people crazy. But it can also make us sane – not only sane, but filled with joy, nestled in peace, brimming with hope, and given to caring selflessly for others. What kind of love, we might ask, can do so much for our yearning hearts?

The love God commands of us when He instructs us to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. Of the three great theological virtues – faith, hope, and love – love is certainly the greatest. Love gives rise to faith and hope. It nurtures and sustains them, causing them to grow stronger so that they feed the cardinal virtues – courage, wisdom, temperance, and justice – and bring them to ever-higher states of maturity.

Grow in love and you will grow in faith and hope; grow in these, and all the virtues will come to fruition as they should.

When our greatest passion is not the fleeting fame or fortune of this fickle world, but the unchanging and unfading glory of the living God, then our hearts will be tuned and strengthened as God intends, so that we might truly live in love. Know God, and love Him – this is where practicing the Kingdom begins. Loving God we will surely love our neighbors as well. Loving God follows from desiring Him and leads to all other

Kingdom virtues and practices. If we can discipline our hearts to love God purely, supremely, and consistently, all the other aspects of our lives will come together as they should.

Loving God

In Scripture the command to love God supremely takes a variety of forms: “Know the Lord.” “Seek the Lord.” “Seek His Kingdom.” “Follow Me.” These are just a few of the various ways that Scripture defines our quest for this most desirable treasure.

Love is the greatest of the virtues. When we are loving God and loving our neighbor, we are living the virtuous life and practicing the Kingdom turn. And when love is our treasure – the true and selfless love which God commands – all the affections of our hearts will be lined up precisely as the Lord intends.

For reflection or discussion

1. Why do you suppose Paul says that, of the three theological virtues – faith, hope, and love – love is the greatest?
2. Why is it true that “you are what you love”? How should this caution or encourage us?
3. Explain the relationship between love and all the other Christian virtues:
4. What are some of the obstacles we must continually contend with in order to grow in love?
5. What are your goals for this study? How do you hope to see love grow in your life?

Next steps: What does it mean to love God? To love our neighbors as ourselves? Ask a few friends to explain these and to give examples of how they try to fulfill them. What about you? Is love the treasure you seek above all else?

For prayer:

2 The Great Commandments

Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” Matthew 22:37-40

To understand the Bible

If you want to understand the Bible, you have to make love the aim of your quest. This is the argument Augustine put forth in the opening book of his great treatise on understanding Scripture, *On Christian Doctrine*. Scripture is about God, God is love, therefore, if you want to learn the Scriptures, look to learn love. If your passion is to know the Lord, your goal must be to love.

Jesus put it as plainly as possible: The Old Testament Law and the Prophets – whether Old or New – depend for their being understood on our having love as the treasure we’re trying to increase. If you only read the Scriptures in order to gain information or perspective, or to increase your understanding of doctrine, then you’re not reading them according to the purpose for which they were given. God gave the Scriptures to equip us for good works, works motivated by and expressive of love (2 Tim. 3:15-17).

And everything about the Scriptures – every book, section, story, doctrine, or theme – is intended by God to promote the practice of love.

God is love

But what is love? We’ve said it is the great treasure in which our hearts and lives are to be invested, and that the whole of Scripture is given to encourage us in lives of love. Love is the defining practice of all who have made the Kingdom turn. The Apostle John said that God is love (1 Jn. 4:8). We may turn that around and say that love is God.

To love, in other words, is to relate to other beings as God does. We know from our Lord Jesus that, in the divine Godhead, the Father, Son, and Spirit relate to one another in love, in such a way as that they share in glory together (Jn. 17:20-24). The Father loves the Son and so gives Him the world and a people for His own possession, whom He loves, saves, sanctifies, and brings into His glory with the Father. The Son loves the Father and so set aside, for a season, certain of His divine prerogatives in order to do the Father’s bidding in destroying death and Satan and saving from the destructive power of sin a people for God’s own possession. The Spirit loves the Father and the Son by being the motive power of the Kingdom for making God’s plan and the Son’s work come to fruition. And the Father and Son love the Spirit by giving Him such a central role in accomplishing the New Covenant.

But most of all the three Persons of the Godhead love one another and take pleasure in one another by their continuous, open, free, and full communion with one another, in love.

If only we could learn to love like that!

The Apostle Paul captured the essence of God’s love when he wrote, “Love suffers long *and* is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.” (1 Cor. 13:4-8). This love is what God is like. To treasure love is to treasure God. Make knowing God your supreme passion, seek Him, know Him, follow Him, and serve Him, and you will live in love.

God's love and God's Word

God is love. It stands to reason, therefore, that His Word – the Bible – would be all about love, teaching those who read it how they may enter into the life of love with God and for His glory.

As we read and study the Scriptures, therefore, we must let love be our aim, as Augustine insisted. The Bible is able to instruct and fit us for every work of love, toward God and toward our neighbors. But learning such love must be the thing we treasure most, what we think about and yearn for as we come before the Lord in His Word and prayer.

Make love your treasure as that treasure is embodied in God Himself. Then mine the many and varied spiritual veins of Scripture for the gold, silver, and precious gems of divine truth and love which they yield. As you read and study, make it your aim to improve love for God and for the people around you. If you do, you will find that the meaning of Scripture comes clear, your heart rises to the challenge, your mind opens to the prospects, your conscience resonates positively with the conviction of love's value – and you will begin to be a more loving person in all your ways.

For reflection or discussion

1. Why is it important that we read the Bible in order to learn how to love? What are some other ways we might read the Bible? How can these be bent toward God's purposes in giving us the Bible?
2. How do the members of the Godhead love one another? Why is it important for us to know this?
3. Choose a story in the Bible that epitomizes for you the idea of love. Be prepared to explain why.
4. What does it mean to seek God? How is this related to growing in love?
5. What might you do to begin reading the Scriptures more consistently in order to learn to love?

Next steps: What are some ways you would like to grow in loving God and the people around you? What are your greatest needs in this area? Talk with some Christian friends about these questions. Agree to pray together for a period of time that you may all increase in love for God and your neighbor. Meet together from time to time to share your progress.

For prayer:

3 How to Know When You Love God

So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" John 21.15

How do we know?

Peter was clearly unnerved by Jesus' question. He was still living in the *shame* of having denied the Lord and the *mystery* of having seen Him alive from the dead. Now Jesus pressed the point, focusing Peter on the question of where his true treasure lay.

"Do you love Me?" He asked the fisherman, three times.

What if God were to ask you that question? And what if, when you answered like Peter, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you", suppose God were to respond, "Well, *how* do I know?" How *do* we know when we are loving God? What does that look like? How should we prepare for it? How can we keep from missing opportunities to love God, so that both He and we know that our love is genuine and true?

If we don't know what loving God involves, or how we should do it, how will this ever become the true treasure of our hearts and the consistent practice of our lives in the Kingdom of God?

Indicators of love for God

Here I want to suggest eight indicators that will say to us and God that we truly love Him. By growing, enjoying, and serving the Lord in each of these ways, we may reach increasing assurance that our love for God is genuine. I will simply mention these in fairly rapid succession.

First, we know that we love God when we *love His presence*. The psalmist tells us that in the presence of God we may know fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore (Ps. 16.11). The Apostle Paul urges us to seek the presence and glory of God, for here is where we will most surely be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3.12-18). We love God when we love His presence and resort there often.

We also love God when we *love His Word* – reading, meditating, studying in the Word, hiding it in our hearts and sharing it eagerly with others (Col. 3.16), saying with Jeremiah that His Word is the joy of our hearts (Jer. 15.16).

We love God when we *love His salvation*, and when we work hard to lay hold on and unpack that glorious gift to increasing fullness in our everyday lives (Phil. 2.12; Ps. 116.13).

When we *love God's creation*, which He loves (Jn. 3.16), we are also loving the Lord. By giving ourselves to the study and enjoyment of creation, and to cultivating and conserving it so as to bring out the glory of God to others, we are demonstrating true love for our Father, Who owns it all (Ps. 111.2; Ps. 115.16; Ps. 8.6; Deut. 22.6, 7; Hab. 2.14; Ps. 24.1).

We may also be seen to love God when we *love His works* – creation, providence, and redemption – and when we talk about these eagerly and often, boasting of the greatness of our God and of His love, and when we eagerly take up the work He has appointed for us within His Kingdom.

We love God as we *look forward to His appearing* in the last days to take us home to Himself in glory. All who love the Lord Jesus pray, "Maranatha!" – "Come, Lord," and bring us to Your eternal glory.

Further, we love God when we *love bringing His praises to others*, and to the generations that will succeed us (Ps. 45:17). As evidence of our love for God, we delight in raising our children unto the Lord, leading others to the Lord, doing the work of making disciples, and contributing to the building-up of the Body of Christ.

Finally, we love the Lord when, at the same time we love Him, *we fear Him* as we should. As we've seen, the fear of God and love of God are two sides of the same coin, the locus of our greatest pleasure as those who have made the Kingdom turn.

Grow in love

There is always room for us to grow in love for God. Our goal is to love Him with *all* our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and we will prove that our greatest passion is for God when we work to practice love for Him in the ways I have outlined above.

Work hard to grow in love for God in all these ways. Find your greatest pleasure in life in increasing love for God. And when you see these eight indicators at work in your life, and growing, you can have confidence that you are loving God as the highest expression of your citizenship in His Kingdom.

For reflection

1. Why is it important that we *know* that we love God, and not just that we *feel* or *hope* we do?
2. Which of the eight indicators of love for God most describes you?
3. Which of the eight indicators of love for God least describes you? Why?
4. Using a 1 to 10 scale, where 10 is the highest rating, assess the state of your love for God according to the eight indicators mentioned in this article.
5. Suggest some things you might begin to do in order to grow in a fuller and more balanced way in loving God:

Next steps: Share the results of your self-evaluation with some Christian friends. Ask for their prayers to help you grow in love for God.

For prayer:

4 How to Know When You Love Others

“By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13.35

Neighbor love

Love is the greatest of all the virtues, the defining practice of all who have made the Kingdom turn. God commands us to love Him and our neighbors, and we have seen that loving God takes some fairly specific forms. We can be sure that we’re increasing in love for God when the various indicators of that love begin to be more in evidence in our lives.

But what about loving our neighbors? What does love “look like” as we extend it to the people around us – in our homes, neighborhoods, workplaces, communities, churches, and so forth?

Just as there are indicators which can guide us into greater love for God, so there are indicators which will help us to know when we’re loving our neighbors as we should, and that can guide us to grow in this Kingdom practice. Let me mention five. In each of these areas we may consider whether we really love our neighbors as we love ourselves, or whether we need help growing in some aspect of that “greatest of these” virtues.

Indicators of neighbor love

First, we love our neighbors when, like Jesus, we *seek them out to love them* (cf. Lk. 19.1-10).

Jesus did not wait for lost or hurting people to find their way to Him. He went looking for them. He learned the names of many of them, and used their names freely. He took the initiative in making certain contacts, some of which He repeated many times during His earthly sojourn. Jesus started conversations with people and was doubtless a good listener. And He prayed often for others, seeking their wellbeing before the Father.

We can know that we love our neighbors when, like Jesus, we go seeking them, in order to touch them with His love.

We also love our neighbors as ourselves when we make ourselves available to *serve them in various ways* (Jn. 13.1-15).

Here we must learn to be alert to the needs of others, to be ready with an appropriate word or helpful deed, as the situation may require. And if we lack skills to serve others, we will become equipped and will persevere in reaching out to others every way we can, especially by bringing them the Good News of the Kingdom or urging them on in their life in the Lord. Above all we will point them to Jesus by our lives and words, in the hope that they might find in Him all the precious and very great promises of God (2 Cor. 1.20).

Third, the various “one another” passages in the New Testament suggest that one expression of neighbor love involves our *“shepherding” others in their walk with the Lord*. By building strong relationships, living and sharing from our own walk with the Lord, giving up some of our time and interests to care for others, defending them against false teaching and temptations, and helping them to grow in the Lord’s salvation we fulfill the shepherding role that Jesus, our Good Shepherd, declared He had come to perform (cf. Jn. 10). We can’t shepherd everyone it’s true, and appropriate channels for shepherding are outlined in the New Testament. Nevertheless, we must all work to improve our “one-another” skills as members together in the Body of Christ.

Fourth, we love our neighbors when we *encourage and instruct them in the Word of God*. After all, here is where they, too, can learn to love with the love of God. We want our neighbors to hear the Gospel, to become

immersed in the study of Scripture, to be able to drink from the living waters of the well of God's Word so that they are daily refreshed and renewed in Him.

Finally, we love others when we are being a *good steward of our time, treasure, talents, and attention* in helping them to know the love of Christ. By praying for people, planning the time we will have with them, staying alert to others while we're with them, seeking the Kingdom of God no matter the context, and maintaining an active watch over our own souls, we may hope to increase in love for our neighbors and, thus, to enrich the treasury of our souls with the love of God.

Grow in love

Just as we can grow in love for the Lord, so we must also strive to grow in love for our neighbors. Love is not merely a sentiment or feeling; it is an active virtue. As Jesus came amongst us to seek and love us, so we must go among the people around us, determined to help them know the love of God which surpasses knowledge.

For reflection

1. Which of the five indicators of neighbor love most describes you? Why?
2. Which of the five indicators of neighbor love describes you least? Why?
3. Evaluate yourself, 1 to 10, on each of the indicators of neighbor love. Where do you need the most growth?
4. How can Christians encourage one another in neighbor love (Heb. 10.24)?
5. What do you think the relationship might be between loving God and loving our neighbors?

Next steps: Share with your Christian friends and ask them to join you in praying that you might increase in love for your neighbors.

For prayer:

5 Word and Deed

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting consolation and good hope by grace, comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work. 2 Thess. 2.16, 17

More than a feeling

By now it should be clear that “love” is not just something we *feel*. We don’t love God or our neighbors just because we *feel* love for them, or *sincerely believe* that we love them. It’s easy enough to *talk* about loving God and our neighbors, even if we’re talking only with ourselves. But the Apostle Paul, echoing all the other apostles and the Lord Jesus, explains that real love is grounded in God’s grace and comes to expression in our lives in meaningful, loving words and deeds.

Love, we might say, walks the talk. Love fulfills the commandments of God toward Him and toward our neighbors (1 Jn. 5.1-3).

If we need a general guideline for the shape our expressions of love should take, we can do no better than that which Jesus declared in the Golden Rule: Do unto others whatever you would have them do unto you (Matt. 7.12). Now precisely because this Rule is so familiar, we need to take a bit of a more careful look at its teaching.

The emphasis on doing

First, note that the emphasis is on *doing*. Love is something we *do* by words and deeds. Love involves actions requiring power, Kingdom power.

Doing involves us in bodily activities, whether of speech or deed, in the direction of or on behalf of others. This “doing” does not require heroic deeds on our parts. Jesus did good to people in the everyday context of His life, taking whatever needs He happened to encounter along the way as situations to be addressed with the love of God.

By cultivating kindness, thoughtfulness, attentiveness, and a willing spirit, we will always be in a posture of being ready to *do* whatever is needed to show the love of God to our neighbors.

Notice, in the second place, that the grounding of the Golden Rule is in our own souls. We should do to *others* what we would like *them* to do to *us*.

My father-in-law, the late Dr. Lane Adams, used to have the practice, from time to time – especially when he was a little down or feeling sorry for himself – of making a list of the five things he would most like people to do for him. Then he would get busy and start doing those things for others.

This is good advice. As you are with the Lord in prayer at the beginning of the day, ask yourself, “What would I like someone to do for me today?” Whatever things the Lord puts on your heart, make a point of doing them for others, as often as the Lord gives you opportunity.

What the Golden Rule does not teach

Finally, let’s be careful to observe what the Golden Rule does *not* teach. The Rule does not say, do unto others *as* they do unto you, but *as you would have them* do unto you.

It’s easy to become upset with people who are inconsiderate, unfriendly, or downright mean toward us. Something in our old sinful nature says, Well, if that’s the way you want to be, two can play at this game. We must resist such mean-spirited responses whenever we feel ourselves falling into them. Jesus loved His

enemies even to the point of dying on the cross for their – *our* – sins. If God did to us what we do to God, none of us would have any hope. So let us resist our sinful inclinations and follow instead the example of Him Who gave us this simple standard for our everyday practice of loving others.

By the way, the Golden Rule works as well in showing love for the Lord, albeit with something of a twist. The more attentive we are to the ways God actually loves us each day – and they are more than we can count – the more we will be inclined to reciprocate that love in worship, praise, obedience, and witness. We do unto the Lord *as* He does unto us, or, as the Apostle John put it, we love because He first loved us (1 Jn. 4.7-19).

Love is an active virtue, practiced in words and deeds of truth, whether these be directed toward God or toward our neighbor. May the Lord help us to grow in this greatest of all Kingdom practices.

For reflection

1. Love is more than a feeling. But does it include feeling? Why or why not?
2. Why does John say that love is the fulfilling of the commandments (1 Jn. 5.1-3)? Can we love well if we are ignorant of the Law of God? Explain:
3. What kinds of things keep us from practicing the Golden Rule consistently?
4. How does the Golden Rule come into play in our relationship with God?
5. How can Christians help one another to remember and practice the Golden Rule?

Next steps: Try for a few days making a list of what you would like others to do for you, and then do those things for others. Do you find your love for others growing as you do this?

For prayer:

6 Growing in Love

...but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen.
2 Peter 3.18

Growing in Christ

Love is the greatest of all Christian virtues, the overarching and overriding Kingdom practice. Love focuses faith and fuels hope, giving rise to lives of courage, wisdom, temperance, and justice. Those who are able to increase in love for God and neighbor express the life of Christian virtue as the natural outworking of God's Spirit and Christ's righteousness in their souls.

But we do not come to the life of faith full grown in the virtue of love. Instead, like all the virtues, we must grow in love. Growing in love is related to growing in the Lord Jesus Christ, for He is God, and God is love. The more we grow in Him, the more His love will come to expression through us. We cannot love others as we would have them love us simply because we want to or know we should. We need the Kingdom power of the indwelling Christ to make us willing and able to love others according to the pleasure and purposes of God (Phil. 2.12, 13).

A twofold proposition

Growing in Christian love is a twofold proposition. On the one hand, we must concentrate on growing *from within*. We must train our *minds* to love, nurture love in our *hearts*, and settle our *consciences* on love being the guiding practice by which we must live. This discipline is accomplished in the Word of God and prayer, where we yield to Him and embrace His will for us from within.

As we are thus being transformed on the *inside*, the *outside* of our lives will increasingly reflect that inward reality, and love will be more consistently the standard that guides our conduct in life.

But we can only effect real and lasting change on the *inside* of our lives by making some important changes in our *outer* lives at the same time.

Inner change comes only by the work of God's Spirit, as we resort to the Lord in prayer and the reading and study of Scripture. But such disciplines take time, and it may be that the time of our lives is already spoken for by a variety of activities. But if the discipline that changes us *within* is as important as we suspect, we will need to recover some of the time of our lives in order to devote more of it to the disciplines of prayer, reading, meditation, and study of God's Word. We will have to change some *outward aspect* of our lives, setting aside some activities – such as sleeping, watching television, surfing the Internet, or whatever – in order to put the time those activities require to better use in nurturing love within our souls.

Similarly, as we are learning to bring our minds, hearts, and consciences into agreement about the real nature of love, we may discover some not-so-loving practices in our outward lives that will need to change.

For example, I may learn (hopefully) that heartfelt, attentive, participative worship is a most important way of showing God that I love Him. At the same time, I may come to realize that my own worship is self-interested, uninformed, uninspired, and not very participative. I may need to change my practice of worship by, let's say, learning to sing the hymns more sincerely, paying more attention during the preaching, entering with more focus into the prayers, or making sure that I understand the Lord's Supper and how I should practice it. As I make these *outward* changes in my worship, I will discover that they reinforce what I'm learning in my soul, which, in turn, will make my worship of God a more loving and meaningful experience.

Similarly, as I increase in love for Christ, I may begin to discover areas where my own practice of neighbor

love is not what it should be. Then I can wait on the Lord and search the Scriptures to guide me better and more consistently in the way of love.

Looking to the Word of God

We grow in love by looking to the Word of God and waiting on Him in prayer to teach us what love requires – how we ought to think; what affections are appropriate, and toward which objects; what our values and priorities should be; and how we may practice love in every situation. Then, as we bring our words and deeds into conformity with the new furnishings of our souls, we will find that love becomes more consistently present in all our dealings with God and our neighbor.

But we need to make sure our love is patterned and practiced according to the only standard that pleases God. And that means looking to Jesus to guide and empower us in the everyday practice of this greatest of Kingdom virtues.

For reflection

1. How would you counsel a new Christian to keep growing in Christ?
2. What do we mean by growing in love from the “inside-out”? What does this involve?
3. But how do we also grow in love from the outside-in?
4. How do the Scriptures and prayer feed into our need to grow in the Lord? Does your own practice reflect this?
5. What are the greatest obstacles standing in your way as you seek to grow in love? How do you work around these?

Next steps: How could you adjust your practice of spiritual disciplines to focus them more pointedly on growing in love? Make some plans, then share these with some Christian friends. Invite them to join you in this project of growing in love.

For prayer:

7 The Horizons of Love

“For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you...By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13.15, 35

The focal point of all virtues

All the virtues, every Kingdom practice, Christians hope to acquire come together in Jesus Christ. This is why the Gospel is so important for renewing virtue in our day. Only the Gospel has the power to extricate us from the snares of sin and self-interest and to deliver us into the Kingdom of God’s own dear Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus is all courage and wisdom; all self-control and all justice; Jesus is the very epitome of faith, hope, and love. The Spirit of God, working with the Word of God from within and without, intends to transform us increasingly into the very image of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3.12-18). If we hope to renew virtue in our lives, then we will have to look to Jesus, especially for help in learning to love.

The account of Jesus washing His disciples’ feet in the upper room provides the perfect setting for learning to love as Jesus loved. Here we find Jesus focused on two horizons and taking up actions in line with both those horizons. By staying focused Jesus was able to overcome any potential distractions and fulfill the requirements of love – both love according to the need of the moment and the people around Him, and love in line with the eternal purposes of God.

Let’s consider these two “horizons of love” and how focusing consistently on them can help us to love as Jesus loved, and to grow in this defining Kingdom practice.

The eternal horizon

The horizons against which love acts are two. The first is the *eternal* horizon, that toward which everything is tending – all of life and the entire cosmos, all of history, and every human being.

John tells us that Jesus had this horizon in mind as He entered that upper room with His disciples. He knew that He was about to return to His Father in heaven (vv. 1, 3), but that He would only do so by fulfilling His own painful and sacrificial calling (his “hour”, v. 1). The eternal horizon is the horizon of God’s redemptive plan – what God is doing to reconcile the world to Himself through Jesus Christ. It is the horizon which reflects, if only faintly, the glory and rejoicing of the holy City to Come. This horizon is fraught with hope and promises. Focusing on it encourages us to live in the present as citizens of that coming Kingdom. But the path to that City wends through self-denial, sacrifice, and suffering. If we would gain the eternal horizon, as Jesus did, we must be prepared to walk the path He has pioneered for us (1 Jn. 2.1-6). This eternal horizon demands that we set aside mere self-interest, concentrate on what pleases God, hope in His glory and strength, and proceed according to the love Jesus showed His disciples.

Here and now

The second horizon against which love acts is that of the here-and-now. His mind filled with the prospects of glory through suffering, Jesus looked around at His immediate context to consider what love required. He was attentive to the opportunity presented by the situation before Him – someone needed to wash the disciples’ feet.

This hardly seems like a grand work of redemption or theological significance. But it was the need of the moment, and no one was stepping up to take responsibility for it.

Jesus humbled Himself by removing His outer garment. Then He gathered the tools and resources needed for this act of love and, bending Himself before His disciples, He took the dirt of the streets in His hand, gently and thoroughly cleaning each man’s feet, to the undoubted astonishment of them all.

Finally, rising from this task, He gave a quiz: “Do you understand what I have done to you?” (v. 13) But He didn’t wait for them to answer: “If I then, *your* Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.” (vv. 14, 15).

Life in the Kingdom is a continual focusing on two horizons – that of God’s eternal will and plan, and that of the needs and opportunities before us each day. The practice of love – for God and neighbors – requires that we live daily toward both horizons.

By focusing continuously on the eternal horizon of God’s redemptive plan, and by keeping alert to whatever rises before us on the immediate horizon of our everyday experience, we can learn to love like Jesus. And, loving like Jesus, we may expect to see all the virtues of Christ being renewed within us day by day.

For reflection or discussion

1. What does it mean for you to focus on the eternal horizon in learning to love?
2. Meditate on Ephesians 5.15-17. Suggest some ways a Christian can become more alert to what’s happening around him or her:
3. What risks do we take in reaching out to love others? How should we prepare for this?
4. What is the most important lesson you’ve learned from this series?
5. How do you plan to put that learning into practice in your life?

Next steps: Think about the day ahead. What will please God in this day? What might you do that will be in line with His eternal redemptive purposes for the world? What will that require of you? And, given the people and situations you are likely to engage, how will you prepare yourself now for loving as Jesus loved? Share your plans with a Christian friend, and ask for prayer.

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.