

# GETTING LOVE RIGHT

STRONG SOULS (4)



T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM  
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Getting Love Right  
Strong Souls (4)  
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*Getting Love Right*

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Welcome to *Getting Love Right*

These days the idea of love has become diminished. We “love” so many different things that it’s possible we don’t know what love really is.

Especially when self-love colors so much of what we do, it can be difficult to get love right. But whereas fear of God is the first affection to put in place for a strong soul, love is the greatest affection. A well-kept heart will be nurtured in love on the foundation of the fear of God.

But we need to recognize the counterfeits if we’re going to embrace and practice the real thing.

*ReVision* 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’re happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you’ll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore  
Principal

## 1 The Greatest of These

*Unite my heart to fear Your name.* Psalm 86.11

*“And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him...”* Deuteronomy 10.12

*And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.* 1 Corinthians 13.13

*From the first to the greatest*

A strong soul begins in a well-kept heart, where all the affections are united in the fear of God to move us to obedience and immerse us in the pleasure of the Lord. Obeying the Lord demonstrates and enhances our love for Him, as Moses indicated. And when we love God with all our heart and strength, then we will be rightly inclined and well-equipped to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22.34-40).

The first affection which we must diligently guard in our hearts is the fear of God, as we have seen. When we fear God as He commands, His salvation is near to us (Ps. 85.9), and we can bring all the other affections into proper focus and function for the strengthening of our soul.

The fear of God is the *first* of the affections; *love* – for God and neighbors – is the *greatest*. The fear of God leads to love for Him, and when we love God with all our soul and strength, we will love our neighbors as He does.

Love most mirrors the way God’s Presence comes to light in His creation, especially in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ. And love most fulfills the deep longing of every human being’s heart. Fearing God provides the solid foundation for loving Him and our neighbors.

*Love defined*

A good bit of confusion exists concerning the true nature of love. The influence of pop culture, the aspirations of politicians and social activists, the careless use of everyday language, and the pervasive presence of relativist thinking in every aspect of life have made of “love” a kind of catch-all for whatever anyone sincerely desires.

Love is what we make of it, as is obvious from how we profess to “love” this or that food, film star, article of fashion, story or joke, work or person, sports team or diversion. Lacking a clear understanding of love, and knowing implicitly – because we are made in the image of God – that love is the greatest of the affections, we squander the true meaning of love, cheapening it by substituting love for such lesser affects as enjoy or like, and using it to justify all manner of good – though perhaps at times misguided – intentions.

In the most general sense, love is that disposition of the heart which seeks the Presence of God for beauty, goodness, and truth. Rightly understood, love brings God’s perspective, Presence, and will to bear in time, seeking His glory and Presence in and for others, even, if necessary, at the cost of self-denial and suffering. It is by love that God’s Kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven. Such love must be learned *from* God, from being in His Presence and experiencing His love; and this makes it important that we *fear* God as we should, so that we may learn from this *first* of the affections how to get right the *greatest* of them.

*The greatness of love*

But why is love the *greatest* affection? A brief overview of its manifestations and ends should help us in answering this question.

## Getting Love Right

Consider first that love *creates channels of expression for all the best and noblest affections*. Through love, patience, kindness, contentedness, humility, courtesy, self-denial, compassion, and the desire to bless and edify others are funneled into our words and deeds (1 Cor. 13.4, 5), filling our world with Jesus (Eph. 4.8-10).

At the same time, love *suppresses those affections which deny or obstruct the manifestation of God's Presence*. Thus, love discourages covetousness, self-vaunting, rudeness, vengefulness, and gloating (1 Cor. 13.4-6).

Further, love is a *strong* affection. It is not given to whim or flights of fancy, and it is not easily discouraged from seeking its proper end. Love sees through a situation, no matter how demanding, to the goal of its manifestation, that is, the Presence of God and His glory for beauty, goodness, and truth; and love is willing to endure whatever a situation may require for achieving those ends (1 Cor. 13.7; cf. Heb. 12.1, 2).

Such love *covers a multitude of sins* (1 Pet. 4.8). Like the love God has for miserable sinners, the love we learn from Him empowers us to forgive when sinned against; put transgressions in the past; focus at all times on the hope of beauty, goodness, and truth; and undertake works of self-denial and sacrifice to lift others into a greater experience of the Presence of God. We love this way when we know God's love, so that His love loves through us to make known His greatness and glory (1 Jn. 4.7-11).

The apostle John reminds us that God *is* love (1 Jn. 4.8), and if we know God, if we possess the gift of eternal life through the love He has shown us in Jesus Christ (Jn. 17.3), then *achieving* love will be our highest priority in every situation.

Such love must be *learned*, and it can only be learned *from* God, *in the presence* of God, and *according to His Word*. If we fear God, we will walk in all His ways, following the counsel of *His* love in all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities. The more we *walk in love*, the more we will realize just how great this greatest affection is; and this, in turn, will lead us to *love God and serve Him with all our heart and soul* (Deut. 10.12, 13), and to delight in and keep His Word as the best and surest way of living in love as He intends.

In a fallen world, populated with sinful people like us, many traps and pitfalls exist which can cause us to misapply this greatest affection in ways that neither glorify God nor bring His Presence to others. The greatest danger of all is the powerful working of self-love, bursting its proper bounds and becoming the *whole* of love, whether as a way of life or the expression of a moment. Unless we understand how to love ourselves as God intends, so that we keep our hearts with all diligence for such love, we will pervert the true nature of love and make love a tool, not for the glory of God and blessing of others, but for satisfying whatever it is we may desire, no matter how banal or base.

We don't want to miss *true* love – either to know it or to show it. Thus we must commit ourselves to getting love right, for love is the greatest affection and God's greatest commandment.

### *For reflection*

1. Why does it make sense that learning to love must begin in fearing God?
2. How can thinking about love in terms of God's Presence keep us from using love for our own advantage?
3. In what ways do you experience the greatness of love from the people in your life?

*Next steps – Transformation: From what we've seen thus far, in what aspects of love do you most need to improve? Make note of these, and seek the Lord for help in showing more of His love, more consistently every day.*

## 2 Self-Love

*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

### *The foci of love*

We love as God intends when our desire is to know and enjoy His Presence for beauty, goodness, and truth.

God is beauty, and to love Him is to enter His beauty, for immeasurable delight, fullness of joy, and every holy pleasure (Ps. 27:4; Ps. 16:11).

God is good, and to love Him is to be immersed in His goodness, clothed in it, equipped with it, and made ready for every good work (Matt. 19:17; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; Tit. 2:11-14).

God is truth (Jn. 14:6), and truth sets us free from the fears, follies, and failures of sin (Jn. 8:32), so that we may walk in the light of truth as Jesus is true (1 Jn. 2:1-6).

To love our neighbors in this way is to bring the reality of the living God into their experience, whatever may be their situation, so that they confront a power not of this world, Who woos and beckons them to seek His Presence and know His love. When we love our neighbors with the love we learn in God's Presence, we want them to experience what *we* experience of God and His love. And loving them this way *confirms us* in the love of God, making us more ready and willing to love at the next opportunity.

God's love is what we want for our neighbors, because we realize the great value of that love for ourselves. Thus, we love ourselves when we love our neighbors with the love of God, for by loving thus we *grow in God's love*, and in all the blessing and bounty God in His grace can bring into and through our lives, even beyond anything we may ever previously have known (Eph. 3:20).

Love God with the love you learn in His Presence, then proffer that love to your neighbors, so that you may increase in it yourself. These are the proper foci of this greatest affection.

### *Love of self*

The danger, of course, is that love of self, while entirely proper when understood and pursued as I have outlined, can too easily assert itself as the *ultimate* and *defining* focus of love. We are called to love God first, with all our soul and strength, and next to love our neighbor. But we only truly love our neighbor when our desire is for our neighbor to know the beauty, goodness, and truth of God. We do *not* love our neighbor when we see him as a means for satisfying some personal longing, when, that is, we *use* our neighbor as a way of loving ourselves *first*, and God and our neighbor second, if at all.

It is not always easy to notice when self-love has burst its legitimate restraints and is beginning to trample or pervert all other affections in the name of mere self-interest. We must exercise continuous vigilance against this happening, or we will not get love right, even though we protest love for our God and our neighbors.

The tendency for loving self first is fueled by the law of sin, which is at work in everyone (Rom. 7:21-23), coaxed by spiritual powers of wickedness in high places (Matt. 4:1-11), and encouraged by the narcissistic and self-serving spirit of our times. We live in a day in which, as one writer put it, "narcissism is the new herpes. It's not like you got it on purpose, you were just in the wrong place at the wrong time, and now everyone's pointing fingers and trying to pretend they don't have it, too. Hence the blame game. You're so self-involved. Can you think of anything but your *self*? What's that horrible smell? It's *you*!" (Laura Kipnis, "Narcissism: A

Reflection,” *Spiked*, January, 2017). In such an environment, when it can seem that self-love – “looking out for number 1” as Robert Ringer put it some years back – is just the way things are, believers in Jesus can be turned from a right understanding and proper use of love to manifest a form of self-love gone awry that can deceive even them into thinking that all is well with their souls.

*Keeping self-love in check*

We need to be on guard against all manifestations of self-love that go beyond the proper bounds of such love as God has established them. We love ourselves as we should when we are seeking only to increase in love for God and our neighbors. All other love of self is mere narcissism. Worse, unbridled self-love is a form of idolatry, in that it seeks to gain for *self* the attention, admiration, adulation, and honor that are proper to *God alone*.

So how can we guard our hearts with all diligence against unbridled self-love? First, by immersing ourselves in the Word of God. All the Law and Prophets, and all the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament, teach us the proper manifestations of love, and guide us into the power of God for loving God, our neighbors, and ourselves. Reading, meditating in, and studying the Bible is the *sine qua non* for loving as God intends. If we will not give ourselves to this discipline, we will be vulnerable to the law of sin, the enemy of our soul, and the winds of wrong thinking; then unbridled self-love will rear its ugly head and take command of our heart, sapping our soul of proper spiritual strength.

But we also need to linger before the Lord in prayer, waiting on Him to search our hearts (Ps. 139.23, 24), settle His Word within our soul, and illuminate the path before us each day. In prayer we may increase in the experience of God’s love and prepare ourselves in advance for such opportunities of loving others as may present in the day ahead (cf. Ps. 90.12, 16, 17).

Finally, we must practice the Presence of God with us, by His Spirit, so that the words and deeds that come from us will express the love He has for us and those around us, and can keep self-love in its proper place and for its proper uses.

It will also help to have a soul-friend who loves you enough to caution or confront you as needed when self-love has begun to stray from its proper track (cf. Gal. 2).

Keeping our hearts diligently for love is thus a continuous challenge, and we must master those disciplines that will allow us to keep self-love in check, so that true love may flourish in us at all times.

*For reflection*

1. How do you experience each day the love God has for you? What difference does that make in how you regard others?
2. How can you keep more consistently in mind the ends of beauty, goodness, and truth when faced with opportunities to love others?
3. How would you describe the state of your disciplines in working to keep self-love in check?

*Next steps – Preparation: Prepare for today’s opportunities to love others. Immerse yourself in God’s love in meditation and prayer, then plan how you will share that love with the people around you.*



### 3 A Slippery Slope

*Surely You set them in slippery places;  
You cast them down to destruction.  
Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment!  
They are utterly consumed with terrors.* Psalm 73:18, 19

#### *One sin leads to another*

We want our hearts to be set for loving God and our neighbors. As we increase in love for God, He fills us with more of Himself, the experience of which is exhilarating beyond compare. We realize that to love our self truly is to bask in God's love and to increase in love for Him. From that river of delights (Ps. 36:7-9), love for our neighbors overflows, by the indwelling Spirit of God, to bathe and refresh them in His grace (Jn. 7:37-39).

The only thing that can ruin this grand design is corrupting self-love – love for self that puts our desires above God's. This has been the devil's trump card for foiling our joy from the very beginning, and it remains in his hand to play against every one of us yet today (cf. Matt. 4:1-11).

We will not get love right until we recognize and control our natural inclination to love ourselves above all. Love as God intends grows where such self-love is suppressed, out of fear of God and the consequences of disobeying His order, and because of increasing love for Him.

The problem with self-love is that it tends to take off and soar in directions which, in retrospect, we might wish we'd controlled a little better. Failure to rein in self-love can set one's feet on a slippery slope of sin and more sin, the effects of which can be devastating in the extreme.

No one in Scripture illustrates this better than King David. In the affair of David and Bathsheba, self-love got the best of two people, with dreadful effects on many others. We read about this sorry account in 2 Samuel 11.

#### *Wrong from the beginning*

From the beginning it's clear that David's head was in the wrong place. And that was because he was not keeping his heart with all diligence. Rather than fulfill his duty as king, by going out to reinforce Israel's borders in the spring of the year (2 Sam. 11:1), David stayed back in Jerusalem and let the army fend for themselves under the leadership of the no-account Joab. David loved himself and his convenience and leisure more than his duty as king. This may have seemed a harmless bit of self-indulgence to him, but it lit a fuse of self-love that would explode in sordid, deceitful, murderous ways. It was the first step on a slippery slope to disaster.

"Then it happened," we read in verse 2, that David was lolling about on his roof one afternoon, and he "happened" to notice one of his neighbors as she was bathing. He observed, our text tells us, that "she was very beautiful." No harm in noticing that, right? Wrong.

David's neglect of duty was about to lead to worse sin. His self-interest in failing to lead the army out to battle led to lust, and lust – a form of covetousness – led to David's transgressing not only the tenth but also the seventh commandment and, ultimately, the ninth and sixth as well.

Neglect of duty, then lust, voyeurism, adultery. One indulgence of unbridled self-love led to another on a slippery slope of sin, just as Asaph warned in Psalm 73.

But worse was yet to come. Bathsheba, in an act of unbridled self-love, consented to the king's advances and lay with him. Subsequently, she advised David that she had become pregnant. David, seeking to cover his sin, sent for her husband from the war front, ostensibly to hear a report of the battle. What he really wanted was for Uriah to spend time with his wife, enjoy his conjugal rights, and thus provide an explanation for Bathsheba's pregnancy that would keep David out of the public eye. Neglect of duty, then lust, voyeurism, adultery, deceit.

When this ploy failed, because of Uriah's superior moral convictions, David, now totally in the grip of self-love, arranged for Bathsheba's husband to be killed in the heat of battle; and he drew Joab into the web of his transgression, making him, like Bathsheba, a willing participant in sin. Neglect of duty, then lust, voyeurism, adultery, deceit, conspiracy, murder, corrupting one's neighbor. A slippery slope, indeed.

*No fear of God*

David feared not having the ease and pleasure he imagined more than he feared the God Who had charged him with certain duties as king of Israel. Self-love ran his heart, and David shoved the Law of God aside as he resolved on a course of mere convenience and self-interest. It did not matter to him who got hurt, or how. All he cared about was himself. As if pleasing himself, rather than God, were his highest purpose in life.

Sin is a slippery slope, and it can find its way into our hearts from even the slightest act of deferring to corrupting self-interest. Little deviations of self-love can lead to greater misadventures in sin, with the result that our heart becomes hardened, people get hurt, and God has to step in to re-establish us in the fear of Him (Heb. 12.3-11).

Our age that knows no fear of God. Nor does it fear endorsing many of the worst forms of self-love. Some restraints remain, it's true, but will they also ultimately go the way of all that previous generations guarded against so carefully?

In the Christian community, we must keep our hearts with all diligence against the corroding power of unbridled self-love, by fearing God and looking to Him to nurture love's true and proper forms. Wherever self-love seeks to capture the flag of our hearts, we need to resist it, and raise the banner of Christ our King in the holy fear of God.

*For reflection*

1. Can you think of any contemporary examples of the "slippery slope" of self-love? How about in your own life?
2. Looking at our society over the past generation, how do you see that we are already far down the slippery slope of unbridled self-love?
3. Can you see how failing to fear God opens the door to unbridled self-love in the human heart? Explain.

*Next steps – Transformation: Meditate on Psalm 73. Paul said that when temptation appears before us, God has provided a way of escape to help us bear up (1 Cor. 10.13). What "ways of escape" did Asaph use to avoid falling into the sin of covetousness and self-interest? How would you translate Asaph's experience into a strategy for dealing with the temptation to put self-love first in any situation?*

## 4 “Love” that Uses God and Others

*But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet. Acts 5.1, 2*

### *The guise of good*

A well-kept heart is the key to a strong soul. Fearing and loving God we find the proper ground and focus for loving our neighbors as ourselves. We love ourselves as we engage more fully with the grace of God, and are transformed increasingly into the image of Jesus Christ. But self-love can go sadly awry if we fail to keep it in check. We must be very diligent against unbridled self-love, because self-love is very subtle and ingenious in asserting itself.

In the case of Ananias and Sapphira, for example, unbridled self-love donned the guise of good works to steal honor from God and refocus it on people. This couple witnessed the good work of generosity which Barnabas did, selling a piece of property and bringing the proceeds for meeting the needs of others (Acts 4.36, 37). We can imagine, from what we know of him, that Barnabas did this work without show, and in a way that many voices of praise and thanks went up to God. His work was known in the community, it's true, but not because he in any way sought to advance or aggrandize himself through this expression of love.

But Ananias witnessed this gesture, and he saw in this good work of love a way of doing good, at least outwardly, and thereby gaining the esteem of his neighbors, and even improving his material lot in certain ways. And he, like David with Joab, persuaded his wife to join him in this bit of selfish indulgence.

And this was all the opening unbridled self-love required.

### *From self-love to deceit*

As we have seen, unbridled self-love is a slippery slope. Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, sold a possession, just like Barnabas and others had done, but they kept back for themselves a certain portion of the proceeds of the sale. In itself, this was not wrong, as Peter observed (v. 4). The property was theirs, as were the proceeds from the sale. They decided, however, to make it seem that they were wholly selfless and loving in this action, by claiming that what they contributed from the sale was all the proceeds, instead of merely just some. This decision should have sent up a warning flare for Ananias and Sapphira, alerting them that self-love was gaining the upper hand in this situation. This is not what Barnabas or any of the others had done. But it was the course this husband and wife chose to follow.

When Ananias brought the proceeds of the sale to the apostles, he represented their gift as the *entire* proceeds of the sale, so that they might be seen to be estimable folk like Barnabas. They hoped to impress their neighbors and gain the plaudits of the apostles by their act. But they failed to reckon on one thing: The apostle Peter, filled with the Spirit of Jesus, saw through their selfish action and their attempt to *use* God and *His people* for their own selfish ends.

We don't know exactly how Peter was able to discern this, except that, being filled with Jesus, he could discern what was in this man and his wife and this ostensible act of goodness (cf. Jn. 2.24, 25). In trying to gain some advantage for themselves, this couple had *lied* to God. Failing in love for God, because of self-love having seized the throne in their hearts, they failed to love their neighbors, and instead injected into the community of faith a stain of deceit, disingenuousness, and mere self-interest. Had the apostles allowed this “good work” to go unchecked, we can only imagine what other ills might have followed in its train.

### *God's judgment*

In many ways, this situation resembles that of Achan in the book of Joshua (Josh. 7). There, the people of

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God had just begun to realize His victories and promises, when an act of unbridled self-love by one man jeopardized the wellbeing and future of the entire nation. God acted decisively both to expunge this stain from His people and to warn others against failing to guard their hearts with all diligence.

In Acts 5, the people of God had just begun to realize His Presence and promises, and now a cancer of self-interest threatened the wellbeing and future of the entire community. God acted decisively against Ananias and Sapphira, perhaps intentionally to recall the situation with Achan and to emphasize how important it is to guard our hearts against unbridled self-love.

The result of God's action was to increase His blessings in the community, *by increasing among them the fear of God*, first of all, and extending His power to bless and increase the community as well (Acts 5.11-16).

When through self-love we stray from the path of love for God and neighbors, we may expect that God will, by some means, confront us with our sin and work to help us get love right again (Heb. 12.3-11). His discipline is not pleasant, but the effects of self-love gone awry are pleasant neither to God nor our neighbors. If He must discipline us – by exposing our selfish ways, as Paul did with Peter in Antioch (Gal. 2), and bringing us to confession and repentance – then He will do so. He loves us too much to leave us in the grip of unbridled self-love. He intends His discipline to renew us in fearing Him, so that we might again know His Presence for love.

In many ways we may be tempted to use God and our neighbors, whether by seeking material advantages or simply the praise of our neighbors. We must be on guard and diligent against all such tendencies of self-love, for true love cannot flourish where self-love rules the heart.

#### *For reflection*

1. What are some ways you might be tempted to use God or your neighbors to your advantage?
2. Why did Luke make a point of saying that the *fear* of God “came upon all the church” after this situation was resolved?
3. What are some ways we might prevent self-love from going awry in our heart?

*Next steps – Preparation: Make a list of the ways you think self-love might try to gain the ascendance in your heart. Pray over these daily, until you find that you are continually mindful and therefore diligently on guard against them.*

## 5 Denying Christ

*But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are saying!" Immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said to him, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." So Peter went out and wept bitterly. Luke 22:60-62*

### *Called to be witnesses*

Whatever in our lives brings delight or joy, we talk about with others. Seen a new film that you really *loved*? You'll tell others. Excited about an upcoming vacation? You'll make sure others know. Thrilled about your marriage or proud of your kids? You'll talk about them. Get a promotion? Buy a new gadget? Download a new app? You'll talk about such things, because they are important to you, and they bring you a measure of delight.

When we love God as He intends, His Spirit will be very active within us for pleasure and joy, and we'll talk about Him with others who love Him, as well as with those who don't. We will not be able to help ourselves. So rich and wonderful is His love, so greatly does love for Him swell within us, that *not* talking about God is unnatural. We want to talk about Him, because we want others to know His love as well.

The more we drink from the river of our Lord's delights, the more that will become rivers of living water, overflowing from us to touch others with God's grace and truth (Ps. 36:8, Jn. 7:37-39).

And we don't need to worry about where the ability to do this will come from. It's not necessary to learn lots of tedious outlines or answers to objections or clever illustrations. The power of God within us, which brings us into His Presence and love, will exert itself through us as the Holy Spirit leads and enables us to bear witness to Him Who loved us and gave Himself for us (Acts 1:8).

We are called to be witnesses to Jesus Christ, to the love God embodies in Him and that we know and enjoy in and through Him. When that love has captured our hearts, our hearts will overflow with it, and we will talk to others about Him.

### *Obstacles to witness*

Affections play a large part in our witness for God and His love. When we fear God and love Him, we will talk about Him and His love with others. When we fear men and love ourselves, we may be reluctant to identify with Jesus, or at least, to talk about Him freely and openly. Indeed, we may fall into a spiral of guilty silence in which we convince ourselves that talking about Jesus isn't essential to believing in Him. And at that point, we will be perilously close to a failure of love for the Lord that can lead to betrayal.

Jesus warned us about this snare. He said, "And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!" (Lk. 12:4, 5) And in practically the same breath, He promised, "Now when they bring you to the synagogues and magistrates and authorities, do not worry about how or what you should answer, or what you should say. For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say" (Lk. 12:11, 12).

The fear of men is but another way that self-love goes awry. Misplaced fear leads to misguided love. When we are afraid of what others may think of us or do to us because of our witness for Christ, self-love can lead us to keep quiet about Jesus, or worse, to deny Him before others. We love ourselves more than we love the Lord when, given the opportunity to bear witness to His love, we fall into the snare of fearing men rather than God.

*Exhibit A*

Just look at Peter. He is exhibit A in how self-love, fueled by the fear of man, can compromise our witness for Christ. Peter loved Jesus. He'd spent some three years with Him, had heard His many wonderful teachings, seen His great works, and enjoyed intimate fellowship with Him. He loved Jesus, he really did, as he would insist over and over in John 21.

But in a moment of fearing men, Peter's self-love took over, and rather than die with Christ, as he had said he would, Peter denied Jesus three times. He feared a servant girl who challenged him as a follower of Christ. He feared the people around him who suspected him of being a disciple. He was afraid of what might happen to him if he owned up to knowing the Lord, so he denied Him vigorously, and ended up broken-hearted and in shame.

We're no different than Peter. The fear which we owe to God can, in the grip of self-love, be redirected to people, and then love for God and neighbor goes out the window. Rather than being moved by love to speak the truth in love, we give in to fear and self-love, and fail to make the most of the opportunity for proclaiming, embodying, and celebrating the love of God in Christ Jesus (Eph. 5.15-17).

Jesus promised that whenever we feel the fear of men rising, we should know that the power of God is present in us to overcome that fear. The Holy Spirit can bridle self-love and keep fear rightly focused on God, so that *in obedience to our calling*, we will bear witness to Jesus and the love God has for us in Him. What Peter lacked on that terrible night – the indwelling Spirit of God – we have with us always, to empower us to overcome the evil of unbridled self-love with the good of faithful witness (Rom. 12.21).

Fearing God, let us obey Him as His witnesses, so that, as His love grows in us and flows through us, we will fulfill our calling to make His love known to the people to whom He sends us.

*For reflection*

1. What does it mean to “be” a witness for Jesus Christ? What should *being* a witness look like in our daily lives?
2. Why does the fear of man present such a formidable obstacle to our being witnesses for the Lord?
3. What can you do, whenever you feel the fear of man rising in your soul, to tap into the Spirit's power to bear witness to God's love in Jesus?

*Next steps – Conversation: Pray for an opportunity to talk with someone about Jesus today. Go expectantly, and listen for the leading of God's Spirit as He turns open the spigot of God's love in your soul.*

## 6 Love of the World

*Be diligent to come to me quickly; for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world...* 2 Timothy 4.9, 10

### *The idols of covetousness*

The fear of God is the first affection that must be in place in a well-kept heart. Love, issuing from that fear, is the greatest affection, and it's important that we work hard at getting love right. Because love involves self-love, it can easily become corrupted. So we need to be on guard against the various ways that self-love can undermine true love and compromise our effort to realize a strong soul.

The apostle Paul warned against covetousness, against desiring unlawfully things that might satisfy our self-love, but that undermine love for God (cf. Col. 3.5-7). Where covetousness rules our heart, we are in danger of coming under the judgment of God, which He uses to help us in getting love right in our souls.

Covetousness is the gateway to all sin, as we see in Adam and Eve, and in Satan's attempts to use covetousness to derail Christ and His mission. Covetousness is an inordinate desire for things, which take the place of God as our source of fulfillment, satisfaction, delight, and joy. As we fear God, and study diligently to nurture love for Him in our hearts, we should be able, like Asaph (Ps. 73), to recognize when covetousness is seeking to assert itself within us. Then we must be quick to denounce the inclination to covet, and seek those ways of escape through temptation that will keep us focused on God, fearing His judgment, resting in His love for us, and trusting in the sufficiency of His provision in Jesus Christ.

Giving in to covetousness is merely another form of self-love gone awry. David coveted a little peace and quiet. Ananias and Sapphira coveted things and esteem. Peter coveted safety and peace. Each of them fell through the temptation of covetousness onto the slippery slope of unbridled self-love and sin.

Demas was different from them only in the *thing* that he coveted. His desire to gratify himself with worldly things and ways caused him to fail in his calling from the Lord, for he no longer believed in the sufficiency of God and His love to meet all his needs through His riches in glory by Christ Jesus (Phil. 4.19).

### *Love of the world*

The Scriptures counsel against loving the world. We cannot love the world and love God at the same time (cf. Matt. 6.24; Jms. 4.4; 1 Jn. 2.15-17). Loving the world to satisfy the lusts of self-love will cause us to set love for God and neighbor aside, so that love for self can receive all our best attention.

So it was with Demas. We don't know what form of world-love Demas fell prey to – whether the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, or the pride of life (1 Jn. 2.16). It may have been some particular sin that he longed to indulge, or that he found the work of the Gospel too demanding, or perhaps desired a more regular income and the material pleasures it could afford. We don't know. We do know that, whatever it was, Demas loved *this present world* more than *the Kingdom which is coming in this world as it is in heaven by means of the love of God*.

Demas' love for the world led him to abandon Paul and his mission and return to the familiar and more agreeable confines of Thessalonica. Doing the work of the Gospel was not as satisfying to Demas as pursuing the pleasures of the world.

But where Demas *abandoned* the work of the Gospel, covetousness and love of the world keep many believers from entering that work in the first place. The comforts of life, the security of settled ways, the longing to be liked, and the desire for things keep many believers mired in unbridled self-love, so that they never seek their proper calling from God, to love Him and their neighbors as His witnesses.

*Overcoming love of the world*

It's not that we may not love the world and enjoy its many benefits. After all, the goodness of the Lord is throughout all the earth (Ps. 33.5). We would be wretched churls if we did not seek out that goodness wherever in the world it might be found. God Himself loved the world so much that He gave His only-begotten Son for its redemption and restoration. God, Who owns and rules the world, is pleased to give us *in* the world many good blessings and wonderful gifts *from* the world. But He gives these to us as *expressions* of His love, so that we may *receive* them with love and *use* them in love as witnesses to God's love in Jesus Christ.

We get in trouble when we allow the *gifts* of God to become idols, ultimate sources of our happiness, which we must possess more and more of to maintain wellbeing. We can recognize when love of the world is seeking to assert itself within us whenever we find ourselves thinking we simply *must have something, or do something, or become something* or else our happiness will not be complete. When things or conditions or agreeable situations come to fill our minds more than Jesus Christ and His love, self-love has become unhitched from its tethers, and we will soon be on our way to Thessalonica.

If acquiring and holding onto the world too much is an evil manifestation of self-love, then the remedy is to give away the world, and cling to Jesus (Rom. 12.21). It is better to give than to receive, as Jesus explained, because giving is a gesture of love which reflects the giving love of God (Acts 20.34, 35). Whatever in your life – or in your imagination – might distract you from loving God and your neighbor, you need to forfeit, relinquish, give away, or get it in right perspective, lest you, like Demas, find that your proper love for the world has been taken captive by corrupt self-love, and your well-kept heart is falling gradually into disarray.

If the world is too much with us, it will soon weigh us down and keep us from soaring in the love of God. Empty your hands of whatever in the world is keeping you from reaching up to God and being renewed in the sufficiency of Christ and His love; and do not let love of self, in the form of love of this present world, rob you of your true calling.

*For reflection*

1. What forms does love of the world take in our day? What does loving the world too much do to our time for loving God and others?
2. How can we train ourselves to find our sufficiency in Christ rather than in things or situations?
3. How can you see that love of this present world is keeping many Christians from fulfilling their calling as witnesses for Christ?

*Next steps – Conversation: How can we love the world as God intends, so that we use His gifts to get love right? Spend some time before the Lord meditating on this question. Let Him search your life as you do, to show you any places where you might be in danger of loving the world improperly.*



## 7 Filled with the Fullness of God

*For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height— to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Ephesians 3.14-19*

### *More love to know*

Nothing is more important than that we know the love God has for us, that we delight in that love, bask in it, and spread that love abroad lavishly and consistently. Paul says as much in our passage: the love that Jesus has for us, and that He can show through us, is more than we know at present, more than we can ever know, and yet within reach of our knowing at every moment.

That love issues from the riches of the glory of God. Thus, it brings glory with it, immerses and surrounds us in glory, and transforms us from glory to glory into the image of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3.12-18). The Spirit of God brings that love to us, revealing it to us in the Word of God, applying it to our heart, and empowering us for love as witnesses for the Lord. The more we look to Jesus, contemplating His exalted beauty and power, making our heart His home, and trusting in Him for all our needs, the more we will be rooted and grounded in love, properly known and expressed.

And the more we know this love, the more we will delight in knowing it, so that, increasingly, “we may be able to comprehend with all the saints what *is* the width and length and depth and height – to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; *that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*”

And if being filled with all the fullness of God doesn’t electrify your soul with strong currents of desire, then you need to consider whether you have begun to know God and His love at all.

A strong soul begins in a well-kept heart, grounded in the fear of God and daily transformed by His love, so that love – which is the end of all Christian instruction (1 Tim. 1.5) – flows from us, by the Holy Spirit, to fill our world with Jesus (Eph. 4.8-10).

But we must earnestly desire for this to be the case, because it doesn’t just happen.

### *More love in which to grow*

We are too easily satisfied, as C. S. Lewis explained in *Weight of Glory*. There he wrote, “Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

Just so, we are too easily satisfied with the measure of God’s love we have known and the consistency of the love we have shown to Him and our neighbors. If we were keeping our heart diligently in this matter, we would realize that the love of Christ is greater by far than what we can ever completely know, but always more within our grasp than it ever has been before.

And knowing this, we would set a course for growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, that would find us increasing in His love as the greatest affection our hearts can know, harbor, or express (2 Pet. 3.18).

*More love to show*

“What the world needs now is love, sweet love.” So sang Dionne Warwick way back in the ‘60s. She was right, of course, and many all over the world heard her clearly, cheered her sincerely, but then followed her wrongly into one or another form of unbridled self-love.

The love the world needs is the love God has shown in Jesus Christ – love that is self-denying, totally giving, sacrificial even to the point of suffering, and which brings the beauty, goodness, and truth of God to people and the world, in ways that redound to God’s glory and praise.

As a community, and as individuals, we have been entrusted with this mission of love. Paul prayed for us that we might know more of Christ’s love, so that, knowing it, we might be more joyful and blessed *in* it, and more faithful in *showing and proclaiming* it to the world around. All the fullness of God awaits us, percolating with divine love, radiant in glory, and overflowing to refresh the people we see each day. Paul prayed that we might know this, and we must join that prayer as well, and nurture our hearts for more of the fullness of love our loving Father promises.

We are ambassadors of a Kingdom of love, and our calling is to hope all things, bear all things, and give whatever we can so that the world can know the love of God that passes understanding. This great work of love begins in our Personal Mission Field and reaches to the ends of the earth. But it will not begin at all if we do not monitor and check self-love and all its attendant ills.

Let us stay close to the Lord and abide in Him. And let us consider how to stimulate and encourage one another to love and good works (Heb. 10.24). The wellbeing and salvation of the world depend on knowing the love of God. And it is God’s good pleasure to bring the world to that knowledge through the everyday opportunities and callings of us, His witnesses.

Keep your heart with all vigilance, guarding against corrupt self-love and longing more and more to dwell in the love of Christ which passes knowledge – love which is greater than we could ever entirely know – so that you may be filled throughout your strong soul with the fullness of God.

*For reflection*

1. Can Christians expect to bring the love of God to our generation apart from proper fear of God? Explain.
2. How does Jesus embody the love of God? How does He bring that love to light in those who know Him?
3. Growing in love begins in prayer. Suggest some ways Christians could pray for their neighbors, so that they grow in love for them and for God.

*Next steps – Demonstration: Who are the people in your life who need to hear the Good News of Jesus? Begin praying for them daily. Look for opportunities to talk with them about God’s love, as this is expressed in Jesus, and invite them to consider reading through the Gospel of John with you.*

*Getting Love Right*

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. Explain the difference between proper self-love and unbridled self-love. How do these manifest in our society?
2. Why is unbridled self-love so dangerous? To what can it lead?
3. How can we know when we are living more out of unbridled self-love than love for God and our neighbors? How can we get love right again?
4. Suggest some ways your church could show more of God's love to its community.
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned about love from this study? How are you putting that to work in your life?

*For prayer:*

## The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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Thank you.