

Melva's Corner



A Life Without Failure (Learn To Love) Part III

September 10, 2007

Central Truth: To say that God's love is perfected in us simply means that the love Christians learn to show one another in 'community' is really God's own love flowing through us.

Early in our lives, we get "scripted" for much of what will follow. Although much of the research about this phenomenon focuses on such horrible things as violence and sexual abuse, it is true for the positives of life as well. It is critical for a child to be loved in order to feel secure, develop into a healthy person, and know how to love.

Here is a report I read a couple of years ago:

There is a deep hunger within America's children for something they don't know they are missing: close attachments. That means a connectedness to people and to a sense of moral and spiritual meaning hard to find in today's fast-paced society, says a report by the Commission on Children at Risk. It cites brain research indicating people are "hard-wired" for connection that can influence their well-being. The commission calls for increased "authoritative communities," or "groups of people who are committed to one another over time and who model and pass on at least part of what it means to be a good person and live a good life."

A concept that simple sounds self-evident when put into words. Children need loving attachments to safe, nurturing people in order to develop properly. They need the context of a stable, authoritative community in which they learn the parameters of their freedom. They need teachers who pass along the received wisdom of the community about right and wrong, acceptable

and unacceptable behaviors. They need to experience authentic love in order to someday know how to love others themselves.

Suppose a child is emotionally or verbally abused. Perhaps he is physically or sexually abused. Or maybe the child simply grows up in a sterile emotional environment where it's "every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost." Have compassion for that little boy or girl for the man or woman who will result! And for those who will have to interact with them socially or in families!

People cannot change their childhood. What they can do is experience God in their adolescent or adult years, enter the safe and nurturing environment of a 'holy community' of God, face up to the negative scripting they got as children and begin to live as regenerated children of God. The holy community is the Church. The gift of eternal life is God's gift of newness, healing, and spiritual health here and now! Defensive, obsessive postures that evolved in response to negative environments give way to a new atmosphere in which the presence of God is experienced. People who have been frightened, anxious and out of control are given a new heart and a new life by the power of the Spirit of God living in them.

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us" (4:7-12).

The affirmation "love is from God" could be translated "love is out of God" or paraphrased "love originates in and flows from God." That is, love is to God as light is to the sun of our solar system. John himself has introduced the light metaphor for God in 1:5 when he wrote: "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all." Darkness doesn't originate with God. Sin does not have its origin in Him. Neglect, abuse, and hatred are not part of His nature. God can only act in ways that are consistent with His nature, and God's nature is love. So a community that does not live in, affirm, and share love does not belong to Him.

“Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love” (4:8).

You’ve been told before that there are multiple words in the Greek language to express various dimensions of the sentiment we call love. Neil Alexander summarizes the fundamental distinction among three of those words in a helpful way. Eros is acquisitive love; it is the desire to possess and use – perhaps the desire for sex, money, truth, or power. Philia is the love of sisterhood and brotherhood; it is used of friendship that tends to be mutually beneficial and mutually satisfying. Agape is not so much an emotion of attraction, desire, or calculation of mutual benefit as it is an act of the will; it is a conscious decision to do what is in another’s best interest. Alexander summarizes this way: Eros is all take, Philia is give and take, Agape is all give.

God alone has pure, self-giving love as the essence of His nature. This sort of love, whenever and wherever practiced, has its origin with God. His image and likeness are stamped on the human heart, and we occasionally see someone act with what we call altruism or true unselfishness – a rescue worker rushing toward the Twin Towers on 9/11 rather than fleeing. That spirit is within the human heart because we are created with the capacity to reflect His nature as our creator. But the only one who can act in that spirit of self-giving constantly and without exception is God Himself. As an event, that love was exhibited in the advent, life, and atoning death of Jesus Christ (4:9-10); as a process, it is to be carried from generation to generation through Christ’s people (4:11-12).

Many people have experienced “love” only as someone else’s desire to possess and use them; they have been manipulated, hurt, and abandoned in the name of love. Others know “love” only in the sense of bartering; they have been taught to give of themselves only when they can be sure of getting something back. And these wounded, jaded, sad people make up the vast majority of the population of our world. The church is supposed to be an alternative community of holy living in which people love one another as God has loved them. When that goal is achieved, “God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us” (4:12b). To say that God’s love is perfected in us simply means that the love Christians learn to show one another in community is really God’s own love flowing through us. And that community becomes a proof to the world that God’s love is

real. People who did not experience care, nurture, and protection in other communities (i.e., family, neighborhood, school) are supposed to discover it in this community (i.e., the church).

Perfect Love Casts Out Fear

What a shame that churches have too often preached the gospel not as love and grace but as fear and guilt. You hear things like; "If you died tonight, would you go to hell?" "Is sex with someone who is not your husband worth the fires of hell?" "Don't you know that alcoholics and drug addicts are destined for hell?" Do you really think the best way to call people to Christ is by preaching the fear of hell?

To the contrary, John believed and taught that the love of God is more powerful as a motivation to righteousness than the fear of hell.

"By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also" (4:13-21).

The fundamental message of the gospel is not that Christ saves from hell but that He embodies the Father's love. The driving force for new life in Christ is not the fear of hell but the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. And the sustaining power for faithfulness until Christ's return is not the fear of judgment but the assurance and boldness that result from living in a supportive community of authentic Christian love.

Brennan Manning has said: "To me, it is more important to be loved than to love. When I have not had the experience of being loved by God, just as I am and not as I should be, then loving others becomes a duty, a responsibility, a chore. But if I let myself be loved as I am, with the love of God poured into my heart by the Holy Spirit, then I can reach out to others in a more effortless way." Maybe that is the problem with the spiritual life of some of us! We have not heard, been educated in, and had modeled for us the gospel as grace. We know it better as guilt and shame. We experience it as judgment. We receive it as rescue from hell. No, it is the message that love became a baby at Bethlehem and the atonement has been secured by the self-giving of the cross!

Summary

To call the church God's "holy community" is to say it is the place where His children tell the story of Christ, affirm the reality of God's love in Him, and learn how to pay attention to one another. After all, to "love the whole world" or to "love my (faceless) neighbor as myself" can be nothing more than pious profession. In the church of the living God we rub elbows with real people, notice their foibles, pay attention to the hurts and needs of these imperfect people and allow God to perfect His love in us by teaching us to deal with one another in love. Have you ever heard "Oh, I love humanity; its people I can't stand." The church is where God reassures me that I am loved securely enough that I can take the risk of loving you. And that is His message for us all.

People who have been loved as much as Christians should know how to love one another. May it be so in this ministry and in every holy community that has been formed around the gospel of the grace of God. How about asking God, right now, to show you a way to bless someone in your family, in your workplace or in your neighborhood with a kindness you know that person needs this week?

Scriptural References:

**" Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away."
(Corinthians 13:8 NIV)**