



HOW DOES THE LOVE OF GOD ABIDE IN HIM?

Is there a verse or two in the Bible that you wish were not there? I think all of us do. Like, maybe, *love your enemies* (Matthew 5:44, NASB), or *forgiving people seventy times seven* (Matthew 18:22), or *regard one another as more important than yourselves* (Philippians 2:3)? These verses are like spiritual “thorns in the flesh” that continue to expose our lingering sinful, fleshly natures. There is another verse in the Bible you may wish were gone as well...

In the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy, Scarecrow, Lion, and Tin Man are cowering before the Wizard. Dorothy's dog Toto runs over to a curtain and pulls it back, exposing a mere man pretending to be the great and powerful Wizard. Do you remember what this man said to all of them as they stood there staring at him in shock? Still trying to perpetuate the fraud, still acting the part of the Wizard, he yells out over the loud speaker, “Ignore that man behind the curtain!”

After reading this verse, it will be very difficult to “ignore the man behind the curtain.” The jig will be up, and the real you will be exposed. It is likely that when the curtain is pulled back, you will not at all like what others will see. This troubling passage is found in I John 3:17, and it says (are you ready?), *But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Ouch!*

Whoever—Does *whoever* include me?

...has the world's goods—Any goods? Does He mean surplus goods that I do not need or want—goods that, if I gave them away, would not affect my lifestyle? Or does this include worldly goods that I like and want to keep?

...and sees his brother —Any brother? Living anywhere in the world?

...in need—Any material need? Such as hunger, thirst, nakedness, sickness or persecution?

...and closes his heart against him—You mean if I refuse to do something about his need?

...how does the love of God abide in him?—Are you asking how does the love of God abide in *me*?

Does this mean that unless we use our material possessions to meet people's needs when we are aware of them, John is calling our love of God into question? It seems that way. Ouch...no, double ouch! Does this mean that whenever we walk by a homeless person, we are supposed to respond to his/her need? What about when we see or hear about believers in other parts of the world who are suffering terribly? Is the love of God supposed to move us to do something about it with the worldly possessions we have at our disposal? When we hear about an orphan in Haiti who needs food, are we supposed to send him the \$15 a month he needs, if God's love abides in us?

Jesus said it this way in Matthew 25:35-40,

‘For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.’ Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and

give You something to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You? The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.'

Does that mean that when we look into the face of a suffering and needy believer, we are, in a very real sense, looking into the face of Christ? And if we were to help that needy person using our worldly goods, we are actually giving to Jesus? Proverbs 19:17 (NIV) says, *He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord.* James 1:27 (NASB) says, *Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress.*

“Pure religion” is helping the helpless in their time of need. James goes on to ask in James 2:15-16, *If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,' and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?*

Is closing your heart against the poor easy? Are you able to see a need, feel compassion in a matter of seconds, and then almost instantly dismiss it with thoughts like, “Well, it is probably their own fault that they are in this mess anyway; they need to learn the hard lesson that God wants to teach them?” Or, “If I helped them out with some money, they would probably just use it for alcohol or drugs instead of food. That would not be a good use of God’s money.” Or, “The needs in that country are so massive that my little bit of money will not really make any difference, so why give anything?” Or, maybe, do you just look the other way and ignore them? Feelings of sadness and pity for the plight of the needy that might lead to actually doing something about their need will usually pass quite quickly if ignored.

There was a family who had allocated to each member a certain sum of money to be used to meet the need of someone whose path they might cross. As they were discussing what and how the help was going to be given, one of them spoke up and said, “You know, just in the few minutes we have been discussing this, I have already come up with several ways to help.” Other family members chimed in that they were thinking of ways to give too. Once you have a mindset that says, “I have money to help and I want to get involved in making a difference in someone’s life who has a need,” the needs and the opportunities seem to appear at every turn.

What has changed? Were these needs not there before this meeting? No, the needs were there. What was missing was the mindset of, “I am here on this earth to help those in need and I have some money set aside with which to do it.” It is a heart change that all of us need. For some of us with substantial wealth, we may need major heart surgery to extract ourselves from our tight grip on our possessions so that they can be used to impact the lives of people whom God has put in our path and graciously given us the funds to help.

Just try it. Allocate a certain sum of money, \$10,000 for example, and give yourself sixty days to find and meet the need of a person or people whom the Lord brings into your life. You will learn a few things with this little exercise. One, God will show you more needs than your \$10,000 can meet. Two, you will be personally and deeply impacted by seeing the results in the lives of those who have been the beneficiaries of your kindness and generosity. Three, you will want to do it again. It is addictive! Start small, and as God softens your heart and loosens your grip on your worldly possessions, your giving and need-meeting efforts—as well as your enthusiasm to give—will grow.

After completing this giving exercise, get your Bible back out and re-read 1 John 3:17: *But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?* You will find that this verse no longer convicts and haunts you. It only affirms you and confirms your love for

God. Now you can say, “I have the world’s goods, and I am constantly opening my heart and my hands to help my brothers in need. In so doing, the love of God is manifested in my acts of love and kindness to those in need!” When we start giving to meet the needs of those who have a shortfall, we will rejoice over the words of 1 John 3:17 instead of feeling condemned by them. This is a much better way to feel about the Word of God, and a much better way to live.

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