

PAUL
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THE

INVITATION

TO LOVE



10 DEVOTIONALS FROM 1 JOHN 4:7-21

“The Invitation To Love”

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THE AUTHOR

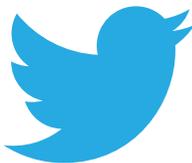
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THE INVITATION

Love. What is it? A quick Google search will produce several billion answers. Billion - with a B. Yet if you were to read through just a few of those websites, you would end up massively confused about this thing called love.

It's an inexhaustible topic, love. Philosophers, musicians, poets, authors, and playwrights have tried to defined it for centuries, but each generation, unsatisfied with the answer, chases after love once again.

With Valentine's Day right around the corner, I thought it would be appropriate to invite you to consider love once again. But instead of Googling the answer and relying on bloggers, we will turn to the source of Truth, written by the source of Love.

In the following pages of this devotional, you will spend a few moments reading an excerpt from First John 4. This chapter is one of the New Testament's most focused discussions of love, and in these 10 devotionals, you will take a brief look at what God has written, pray intentionally about what you just read, then apply two reflection questions to your specific situations and relationships of life.

You have been welcomed into eternity by the God of Love, and he welcomes you right here, right now to love others in the same way.

It's an invitation unlike any other!

God bless.

Paul David Tripp
2/10/2016



THE PASSAGE

God Is Love

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.

¹⁶ So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. ¹⁷ By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. ²¹ And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

1 John 4:7-21 (ESV)

THE CALL

“Beloved, let us love one another...” (1 John 4:7)

It’s the inescapable call of God to all his children.

You may not be called to be a pastor or ministry leader in God’s church, but you have been called to love. You may not be called to be an elder or deacon or missionary, but you have been called to love. If you claim to be God’s child, you have been called to love.

John logically builds this argument in the previous chapter. He writes: “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God.” (3:1) Because of the love of God, given to us freely, we have been called children of God. What a magnificent gift!

This gift of loving adoption is freely given, but it’s not free from responsibility. You have been called to practice righteousness: “Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous.” (3:7)

Immediately, John relates righteousness to love: “By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.” (3:10)

You cannot say that you are seriously committed to your relationship with God if you are not committed to loving others. Those two are inextricably glued together. If you have been made a child of God, you now are called to a life defined by your love of others.

Perhaps I should have titled this first devotion “The Impossible Call” because what I have just described is impossible for me. It makes me

shudder to think about this calling. I wish that I could look back on last week and say, “In all my situations, locations, and relationships, I lived out this calling.” But I can’t say that. In fact, there were many moments last week where I didn’t even care to try.

As long as sin remains, this call to love is an impossible call. But you have not been left on your own: “When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, “Who then can be saved?” But Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:25-26)

PRAY INTENTIONALLY

“Father, you gave me love – an eternal love that I could never deserve or achieve – and you gave it freely. Now, as your child, I have been called to practice righteousness in a way that love others like you loved me. But Lord, I fail every day to love others. My love of self and my love of idols interferes with the lifestyle of love that you call me to. Today I admit once again my failure to love and confess my deep need for your help. Will you empower me to love others in new ways today?”

APPLY PRACTICALLY

1. Whom have I been called to love in the situations and locations of my everyday life? Think of two or three specific individuals.
2. What idols will make me struggle to love these people in the way God has called me to love? Identify at least one major idol.

THE SOURCE

“For love is from God ... Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.” (1 John 4:7-8)

Love has a source, and it's not you.

I could say that you love, or that you're a loving person. I could say that you love committedly and faithfully. I could say you exercise love in a way that is generous and wise. But I could never say that you *are* love.

“God *is* love.” It's an amazing statement, one that we gloss over because we have heard it so many times. God *is* love – love is essential to everything he is. Everything the Lord desires, says and does, isn't only done out of love, but is itself a definition of love.

If you ceased to love, you would be a very unpleasant human being, but you would not cease to be human. The same cannot be true of God – if God ceased to love, he would cease to be God.

If God is the source of love, then you and I must admit that we are not. That means that we don't have within ourselves the natural capacity to love. How humbling!

You probably will want to push back against that statement. The self-righteousness inside you will argue that you can love as John describes. But you need to understand what this passage is calling you to. It's much deeper than being respectful or mannerly. It's much deeper than an occasional act of service or sacrifice.

Think about it – you can be respectful and polite to someone you hate! First John 4 is a much deeper standard of love than we hold ourselves to. We throw around the word love too frequently and

don't understand the true weight of the word.

God *is* love; we are not. But love is from God, and he gives us a new spirit of love: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh." (Ezekiel 36:26)

PRAY INTENTIONALLY

"God, you *are* love. What an amazing statement! I need to meditate more on your character. Everything you have done and will do in my life is done out of love. How quick am I to forget your love and accuse you of being unloving. Lord, I confess that I'm unloving, not only momentarily, but that the nature of my heart inclined to love only myself. Will you fill me with the humility to accept that I cannot love like you have commanded, and fill me once again with your Spirit so that I can love in a pure manner?"

APPLY PRACTICALLY

1. How has God revealed his love to you in the past? How often do you reflect on his past goodness in your life?
2. How can you move closer to the Source of love so as to love others better? What are some spiritual disciplines that you can participate in?

THE REBIRTH

*“Whoever loves has been born of God and knows God ... In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.”
(1 John 4:7, 9)*

The one who loves is born of God.

Before you came to Christ through saving faith, “you were dead in the trespasses and sins.” (Ephesians 2:1) That means you did not have spiritual life inside of you. But through an act of abundant grace, God gave you new life.

This “new life” isn’t as if God flicked a switch and all of a sudden, like a light bulb, you came to life. Rather, you were born of God. That means that God’s life literally resides inside of you, right here, right now. You have life because God, who is life, has made you the place where he dwells.

The Apostle Paul summarizes this beautifully: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” (Galatians 2:20) God Almighty, in his power, glory, grace and love, now lives inside you. What hope! What encouragement!

Jesus Christ came to earth and faced all the trials and temptations of life in this fallen world so that you might live through him. And while it would be theologically accurate to say that this statement refers to eternal life, ultimately, that is not the point of this passage. John’s focus is on the here and now.

Jesus was sent to earth so that you can live out your calling to love between the time of your salvation and the death of your earthly body. Because of your new birth in Christ, the power of sin has been

broken. You now have the capacity to love like God has called you to love, because God himself dwells in you.

This new birth, however, does not eradicate the presence of sin in your heart. God has ordained for you to live in a fallen world with indwelling sin until he calls you home. Every day you will wrestle with the desire to love in another way – the love of self.

This love of self is sturdy and powerful. It rears its ugly head every hour. It's shockingly self-centered and becomes the foundation on which you establish your hopes and dreams. It affects the way you treat your money, your time and your relationships.

But there is hope for you. The One who is love is committed to rescuing you daily from the love of self: “And he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.” (2 Corinthians 5:15)

PRAY INTENTIONALLY

“Creator, you have given me new life. You have removed my heart of stone and replaced it with a heart of flesh. I now have a new capacity to love as you love. Thank you! But Lord, a war still rages on the turf of my heart every day. I still want to love myself. I still seek to serve my own kingdom. Will you please send your Warrior Spirit on my behalf to fight the war that I cannot win on my own?”

APPLY PRACTICALLY

1. How have you been able to love in new ways since becoming a disciple of Christ? Celebrate the work of transforming grace in your life.
2. Where does the war of love rage most often in your everyday life? Think of one or two areas where you still struggle to love.

THE DEFINITION

“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” (1 John 4:10)

Love needs a definition.

I’m afraid that we throw the word “love” around way too easily. We say “I love you” to people all the time without actually knowing what we’re saying. We need to define this word.

You won’t find a definition of love in philosophy. You won’t find a definition of love in cultural research. You won’t even find your best definition of love in theology (by theology, I mean abstract concepts that never get applied to everyday life).

Love is best defined by an initiative – God’s willingness to satisfy his own anger by offering his Son as a sacrifice that would atone for our sin. Our definition of love must be nothing less than the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. Your life must be shaped by *cruciform love*.

Cruciform love should make you uncomfortable. Think about the word *cruciform*; it means “in the shape of a cross.” I don’t know about you, but my heart is filled with grief because my love falls so very short of the willing self-sacrifice of Jesus.

If your first reaction is to take that definition in stride and think, “Sure, my life is shaped by cruciform love,” I would ask you to slow down and reconsider. I’m afraid that our tendency is to define love as something much less than that action of sacrifice on the cross.

This definition of cruciform love should produce in you a sense of self-awareness; you have to be aware that your heart has no capacity to be driven by cruciform love. This definition should also produce

a sense of need; once you're aware of your condition, you know that you need help if you're ever going to love like this. And finally, this definition should produce a hunger for grace; oh, that you would desire to be a person shaped by cruciform love, a love that only grace can produce.

Cruciform love - God help us love like that! And he will: "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness."
(2 Peter 1:3)

PRAY INTENTIONALLY

"Loving Father, the only definition of love is found at Calvary. Love is defined by your willing self-sacrifice on the cross. What a beautiful definition! And by that love, I am now defined as your child. But Lord, I fall so short as your child, failing to love others with cruciform love. Will you produce in me a sense of self-awareness, need, and hunger as I become a person shaped by cruciform love?"

APPLY PRACTICALLY

1. How does your culture define love, and how does it differ from cruciform love?
2. In what ways this week did you live out of a culture definition of love instead of a biblical definition of cruciform love? Think of two or three examples.

THE DESIGN

*“Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”
(1 John 4:11)*

Love is not a moral obligation – it’s a created design.

I want to spend this devotional just unpacking one word - **ought** - because when I hear the word ought, my immediate reaction is to think moral obligation. You ought to love; it’s your moral obligation to love; you’re commanded by your Lord and King to love.

You can certainly argue that ought means moral obligation, but it needs to go deeper. Ought is a word of design. You were designed to love. When Jesus Christ reduces human calling down to two commands, they are commands of love: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...and...You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-39)

Birds ought to fly. Fish ought to swim. Honey ought to be sweet. Night ought to be dark. The sun ought to be bright. Things in creation were designed for a particular purpose. You don’t keep your poodle in an aquarium and you don’t see your neighbor taking his goldfish for a walk – that violates their created design.

In the same way, God designed humans to love. We were created to glorify God and love others. Something horrible results when we violate that design. Every act of violence, murder, corruption and hate is a result of human beings violating their design to love.

The world will tell you that the most lovely, most glorious and most fulfilling lifestyle is found when you prioritize yourself and your own desires. Be absorbed with you, they cry. Love yourself first and

foremost. But those lies violate your created design. What a horrible and dehumanizing trap they are trying to lure you into.

I wish I could say that I reject that lie and that I fulfill my created design. But there are many times when I'm a fish on a leash. Like a poodle in an aquarium, I live more selfishly than lovingly, caught up in my own agenda, absorbed with my own feelings, and propelled by my own desires.

You were created to love and sin destroyed that. But because of grace, you can be re-created daily in Christ. Like David, you must pray: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." (Psalm 51:10)

PRAY INTENTIONALLY

"Creator God, your original design was perfect and wise. Everything operated as it ought; harmony, peace and joy ruled the world. But when humans violated their design to love, chaos entered the cosmos. I wish I could say that I'm innocent of that violation, but every day I live like a poodle in an aquarium. I ask, like David, that you would re-create my heart and allow me to love as I ought."

APPLY PRACTICALLY

1. How would society change if everyone loved according to their design?
2. How would your relationships change if you loved everyone as you ought? Highlight one or two relationships in particular.

THE INCARNATION

“No one has ever seen God; if we love on another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.” (1 John 4:12)

Invisible love needs an incarnation.

No one has ever seen God. How, then, do you witness to those around you about the God we worship? If people can't see him, how will they believe?

Think about this. If you experienced the benefits of a diet or workout plan, you witness to others with the evidence of fat lost or muscle gained. If you experienced the wonder of creation during a family vacation to an exotic location, you witness to others with photos and souvenirs from your trip.

So how do you make an invisible God of love visible to those around you? Maybe the ultimate apologetic in the human community for the veracity of the gospel is the love of God's people for one another. In simple words, the best defense for the existence of Jesus is two or more Christians living together in self-sacrificing love.

If you take two self-oriented human beings, and they begin to live in cruciform love with each other, you know that divine grace has visited those people because that's the only way they would ever be able to live in that way. It's the ultimate argument for the work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus communicates this principle during his earthly ministry. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)

I know that there will be people reading this devotional who have unresolved issues with one another. I would encourage you, after reading this devotional, to seek or grant forgiveness to these people.

Husbands and wives, you need to find your spouse and confess that you haven't loved as you have been called. Parents, you need to hug your children and confess that you haven't loved as you have been called. Children, you need find your parents and confess to making their life hard because you haven't loved as you have been called.

Whoever you are, find the people in your life whom you have wronged and seek their forgiveness. If someone seeks your forgiveness, give it freely as Christ forgave you.

It might not an easy conversation, but Jesus is on your side. Before he left earth, he prayed over this very issue: "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." (John 17:20-21)

PRAY INTENTIONALLY

"Forgiving Savior, you loved me while I was still at war with you, yet you invited me into eternal glory. I thank you for the freedom that you have given me, but I confess that I don't live with the same freedom in my relationships. I'm hesitant to confess my sin and slow to forgive others. Lord, strengthen me in difficult conversations that I need to have with others, and let the peace we find in relationships represent your invisible love to a dying world."

APPLY PRACTICALLY

1. To whom do you need to confess and seek forgiveness from?
2. If someone confesses to you, why might you struggle to forgive?

THE EVIDENCE

“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 testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.” (1 John 4:13-16)

It’s natural to seek evidence prior to belief.

Suppose your car is broken. You take it to a mechanic and he tells you to come back in a few days with \$500. You pay the mechanic and get your car back, but on the drive home, it makes the same noises it did when you first brought it in.

How are you supposed to believe that your car was ever touched, or that the mechanic is qualified, honest, and reliable? There was no evidence of change. The same can be said of the Christian life.

The Bible says on many occasions that fruit will result if the Spirit of God lives inside you (Romans 1:5, Phillipians 1:11, James 2:26, and many more). This passage in 1 John 4 echoes that Biblical theme. If you have the Spirit of God living in you, you will produce evidence, specifically the fruit of love, for the sake our this devotional.

I don’t know about you, but I have been tempted to think that the principles of Scripture don’t actually work in the real world. I have doubted that the grace of Christ really is powerful enough to produce good fruit in our difficult circumstances. I know that I’m not alone.

As a counselor, I’ve heard it all. “I know a ‘soft answer turns away wrath,’ but whoever wrote that didn’t have my children!!!” Or, “I

know I'm supposed to love my wife like Christ loved the church, but have you ever spent time with her!?!” Or, “Jesus said to turn the other cheek, but you haven't heard how my neighbor talks to me!?!”

I think that many Christians are tempted to limit their expectation of what God can do in their heart. When you assume such things, you quit believing that good fruit can grow, and you give up trying. When difficulty comes your way, you no longer even attempt to take advantage of the Holy Spirit's power that resides in your soul.

If you want to see more evidence of love in your life, plant your roots by the waters of the Holy Spirit. Avail yourself to the streams of grace God provides. The Lord said through Jeremiah: “Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord ... He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream.” (Jeremiah 17:7-8)

Even in tremendous heat, God will send his waters and you can bear fruit: “[He] does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.” (Jeremiah 17:7-8)

PRAY INTENTIONALLY

“Holy Spirit, you provide me with a supernatural ability to love. Your presence enables me to be a person driven by cruciform love every day, regardless of what I'm facing. But Holy Spirit, I confess that I give up too quickly. I doubt your power and I look for an easy escape. Will you remind me of your presence and power? Will you encourage me to plant my roots by your living waters?”

APPLY PRACTICALLY

1. Where has the Holy Spirit recently produced fruit in your life?
2. Where are you doubting the power of the Holy Spirit and giving into sin too easily?

THE FEAR

“By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also 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 been perfected in love.” (1 John 4:17-18)

Human beings are filled with fear.

I was doing some Googling, and I found over 500 types of phobias. I’m not sure if they are all medically endorsed as official phobias, but the point remains – human beings are filled with fear.

In these verses, John is encouraging us not to fear, specifically death and judgement. We all have an expiration date, and when we die, we will face a holy God. Humanity is marching towards judgement.

Most Christians I come into contact with have been taught to believe with theological assurance that “there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 8:1) For the Christian, there is no reason to fear death.

I heard a godly man say once, “I don’t fear death. I fear the process of dying – how much it will hurt, how long it will last, and the effect it will have on my loved ones – but I don’t fear death.” Certainly, death is not pleasant, but for those in Christ, there is no reason to fear.

That being said, I find a contradiction in our theology. We say that we don’t fear judgement, and we celebrate the finished work of Christ on the cross, but many Christians are still terrified with their sin. They know that they fail to measure up to God’s holy standard, but instead of resting in Christ’s atoning work, they try to justify their failure and fake a righteousness to themselves and to others.

This is simply bad theology. Think about it - at the time Jesus went to the cross, you had yet to be born, which means that 100% of your sins were future sins. Jesus Christ, fully knowing your future failures, went to the cross and took your punishment regardless.

God will never respond to you in shock or disgust because he knew in advance what he was dying for! One of the most comforting messages in the entire Bible is that, in all of your sin, weakness, and failure, you don't have to hide from God.

If the Bible does anything, it welcomes you out of your self-imposed prison of fear and shame. The Bible welcomes you to step out of the darkness and into the light, to face reality honestly and with hope. If God's love covered your future sins and casts out the fear of eternal punishment, the same love should cast out fear of present failure.

The love of God welcomes you to be known, right here, right now. God's love covers your weakness: "But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me." (2 Corinthians 12:9-10)

PRAY INTENTIONALLY

"Merciful Savior, you went to the cross on my behalf, bearing my punishment in love so that I no longer have to fear eternal death. By that same love, I don't have to fear being known today. But I confess that I still put on a façade of righteousness, hiding my sins and weaknesses from others. Would you comfort me again with the knowledge that I can be fully known and completely unafraid?"

APPLY PRACTICALLY

1. Why might you be hesitant to reveal your moral failure to others?
2. How can you be better known in the community of faith?

THE MOTIVATION

“We love because he first loved us.” (1 John 4:19)

Biblical love isn't motivated by obligation.

Cruciform love - willing self-sacrifice for the good of your neighbor - is only motivated by a heart exploding with gratitude. When you remember the magnificent love by which you have been loved, you will then be motivated to love others with cruciform love.

When you remember that you are eternally loved by God, and that you are being currently transformed by the same love, then you will love. When you recognize that every good and perfect gift comes from above, you will be motivated to bless others with similar gifts.

It makes sense to me that the longer you walk with the Lord, the more you would study his word and be amazed by his character. So, it makes sense to me that the longer you walk with God, the more loving you will become. But I haven't always found that to be true.

I believe that what often happens is this: our walk with God becomes a migration from neediness to self-righteousness. When you first come to Christ, you're constantly filled with a sense of your need. You don't know very much and your sinful habits keep popping up – you can't help but recognize your need for God's help.

But as you grow and learn more, you begin to tell yourself that you are part of the good crowd. You understand your theology and doctrine. You can point out the people struggling with sin. In short, you begin to live with feelings of arrival.

Those feelings of arrival are heretical, because you only exist as a believer based on the continual blessings of grace! You need it today

as much as the first day you believed. You don't have independent strength, wisdom, or righteousness. Sure, you have grown in many areas, but it's a testimony to God's grace and faithfulness.

You need to remain needy and thankful every day, because when your heart is filled with gratitude, it's hard not to love. When you are soaking wet with the overflow of God's love in your life, people around you will find it hard not to get wet as well! Cruciform love explodes out of a heart of gratitude.

There's an inextricable connection between a grateful heart and a motivated lover: "Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe." (Hebrews 12:28)

PRAY INTENTIONALLY

"Loving God, I love because you first loved me. If it wasn't for the cross, I would not know what love was or how to love. You were and are the perfect example; I thank you for your love. But I confess that I so quickly migrate from neediness to self-righteousness. I migrate from gratefulness to entitlement. I forget about your love, and without it, I have no motivation to love others. Would your love keep my heart grateful and needy, motivating me to shower love upon others?"

APPLY PRACTICALLY

1. Are you at risk of migrating from neediness to self-righteousness? How have you become "numb" to your sin and sense of need?
2. How can you be more deeply aware of your sin and motivated to run to the cross of Christ for help?

THE CONTRADICTION

“If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.” (1 John 4:20-21)

I am a contradiction.

I wish I could say that I’m not, but it’s much easier to proclaim a verbal allegiance to a God I can’t see than it is to live in self-sacrificing love with the people I see every day.

Whenever I read this passage, I’m hit by the strength of the language John uses. **Hate** and **Liar** are strong words; I don’t want to think that I hate anyone, and I’m certainly not comfortable being identified as a liar by the God of the universe.

But I know that the Bible is the world’s most accurate diagnostic, so I have to accept that I am a hater and a liar. I also know that the Bible provides the world’s most effective cure, so there’s hope!

What’s the cure? This verse points us in a very important direction, but it might not be the direction you first think of. When you read, “If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar,” it makes sense to think that you need to love your brother more. But that’s not the primary problem.

The problem is between the love of self and the love of God. Our love problem is not the second great commandment; our love problem is the first great commandment. The reason I don’t love people in my life the way I should is because I don’t love God in the way I claim. Our problem is vertical before it is ever horizontal.

King David communicates this in one of the clearest (and most confusing) verses in the Bible. “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.” (Psalm 51:4) It seems like an absurd statement! Without a doubt, David sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah, but he doesn’t confess to that.

Now, you have to understand what David is saying. You can’t use this verse out of context to justify an unwillingness to confess and repent to brothers and sisters that you have wronged. What David is saying is that the only hope for lasting change takes place with God.

If you want to live and love in the way God has called you to, you must fight the war of love that rages vertically before you ever find victory horizontally.

Call to the Lord for help; he will not turn his back on you: “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” (Psalm 51:17)

PRAY INTENTIONALLY

“Gracious Father, I am a contradiction. I wish that I didn’t struggle like the Apostle Paul in Romans 7, but I do. I celebrate a gospel of peace, but my relationships are often marked by conflict. I celebrate a theology of grace, but I often withhold grace from those closest to me. But my greatest offense is against you. I celebrate your power, but my heart often fights for control. Like David, I confess my sin against you, which in turn affects all my relationships.

APPLY PRACTICALLY

1. Where do you find the biggest contradictions between your theology and everyday life?
2. How can you take steps to increase your love for God and decrease your love of self?

LOVE IS...

The following list is adapted from my book, *“What Did You Expect? Redeeming the Realities of Marriage”* (Crossway, 2010). These can be applied to any relationship, not just marriage.

1. Love is being willing to have your life complicated by the needs and struggles of others without impatience or anger.
2. Love is actively fighting the temptation to be critical and judgmental toward another while looking for ways to encourage and praise.
3. Love is making a daily commitment to resist the needless moments of conflict that come from pointing out and responding to minor offenses.
4. Love is being lovingly honest and humbly approachable in times of misunderstanding.
5. Love is being more committed to unity and understanding than you are to winning, accusing, or being right.
6. Love is a making a daily commitment to admit your sin, weakness, and failure and to resist the temptation to offer an excuse or shift the blame.
7. Love is being willing, when confronted by another, to examine your heart rather than rising to your defense or shifting the focus.
8. Love is making a daily commitment to grow in love so that the love you offer to another is increasingly selfless, mature, and patient.

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9. Love is being unwilling to do what is wrong when you have been wronged, but looking for concrete and specific ways to overcome evil with good.
10. Love is being a good student of another, looking for their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs so that in some way you can remove the burden, support them as they carry it, or encourage them along the way.
11. Love is being willing to invest the time necessary to discuss, examine, and understand the relational problems you face, staying on task until the problem is removed or you have agreed upon a strategy of response.
12. Love is being willing to always ask for forgiveness and always being committed to grant forgiveness when it is requested.
13. Love is recognizing the high value of trust in a relationship and being faithful to your promises and true to your word.
14. Love is speaking kindly and gently, even in moments of disagreement, refusing to attack the other person's character or assault their intelligence.
15. Love is being unwilling to flatter, lie, manipulate, or deceive in any way in order to co-opt the other person into giving you what you want or doing something your way.
16. Love is being unwilling to ask another person to be the source of your identity, meaning, and purpose, or inner sense of well being, while refusing to be the source of theirs.
17. Love is the willingness to have less free time, less sleep, and a busier schedule in order to be faithful to what God has called you to be and to do as a spouse, parent, neighbor, etc.

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18. Love is a commitment to say no to selfish instincts and to do everything that is within your ability to promote real unity, functional understanding, and active love in your relationships.
19. Love is staying faithful to your commitment to treat another with appreciation, respect, and grace, even in moments when the other person doesn't seem deserving or is unwilling to reciprocate.
20. Love is the willingness to make regular and costly sacrifices for the sake of a relationship without asking for anything in return or using your sacrifices to place the other person in your debt.
21. Love is being unwilling to make any personal decision or choice that would harm a relationship, hurt the other person, or weaken the bond of trust between you.
22. Love is refusing to be self-focused or demanding, but instead looking for specific ways to serve, support, and encourage, even when you are busy or tired.
23. Love is daily admitting to yourself, the other person, and God that you are unable to be driven by a cruciform love without God's protecting, providing, forgiving, rescuing, and delivering grace.

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