

The Challenge of Love

by T. Austin-Sparks

The challenge of love is to have the love of God shed abroad in our hearts, which is the test of our relationship with God and the basis of everything for the child of God.

Scripture: John 15:12, Romans 5:5, 1 Corinthians 13:1, Galatians 5:22, Ephesians 2:4, Ephesians 4:30, 1 John 3:14, 1 John 4:11, 1 John 4:19-20

Topics: "Divine Love", "Love in Relationships"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the profound challenge of embodying Divine love as a reflection of God's love for us, as articulated in Ephesians 2:4 and Romans 5:5. He asserts that our relationship with God is fundamentally tested by our love for one another, highlighting that true love is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit within us. Sparks warns against allowing bitterness to hinder our love for fellow believers, as this can obstruct our communion with God and affect our prayer life. He concludes that genuine ministry and spiritual growth are rooted in the love of God, which must be the driving force behind our actions and relationships with others.

Transcript

"...His great love, wherewith he loved us" (Eph. 2:4).

"The love of God hath been shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit which was given unto us" (Rom. 5:5).

"Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another... We love, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:11,19).

The challenge of love, Divine love - "Beloved if..." then... "If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." There is a tremendous challenge in that. We have, I trust I can say, been seeing that Divine love, the love of God, is the key to everything from Genesis to Revelation; and if that is true, as we have said before, that the sum of all Divine revelation is vital union with God in Christ, if it is a matter from first to last of relationship with God as Father, then here in this fragment in John's letter, we are at once brought face to face with the test of our relationship with God. The test of that relationship is here resolved into a matter of love. There follows immediately another of the several "ifs" of John's letter - "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar" (1 John 4:20), he does not love God. The test of our relationship with God is this matter of love. It all hangs upon "if."

The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. The relationship with God in Christ is brought about by an act of the Holy Spirit's incoming, in our receiving Him. He is given to us, and He brings about the relatedness, and the immediate result and seal of that relationship by the indwelling Spirit is that the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts. It is the test of relationship. The very basis of our organic spiritual and vital union with God is this matter of the Divine love in us, and John will challenge us with this in his letter and say, "We know that we have passed out of death into life (i.e. that we are in vital union with God) because we love the brethren" (1 John 3:14). The Word of God makes this love a test of our having received the Spirit.

DIVINE LOVE DEMANDS LOVE OF THE BRETHREN

Well, of course, on the simple basis of our conversion we know that to be true at the beginning - that whereas, before, we had no particular love for Christians, afterward, when we had come to the Lord, we found we had an altogether new feeling toward other children of God. That was the simple beginning. But it is the beginning, the basis. John is carrying us beyond the beginning. He is speaking to us, as in the case of those to whom he wrote, as to people who know the Lord, to people of God who have the Spirit. He says, "The anointing which ye received of him abideth in you, and you need not that any one teach you; but... his anointing teacheth you concerning all things..." (1 John 2:27). He is writing to those who are getting on in the spiritual life. When we come there, it is possible that in some way a root of bitterness may spring up in us toward our brother. It is possible that you may fail of the love of God. It is possible that this very basic nature of your relationship with the Lord should be numbed for want of love, that your whole spiritual life should come under arrest and be paralyzed, and you cease to be a vital factor and have a real living communion with your Lord day by day, all because the basic love in some way has been arrested or injured. What was the mark of your initial relationship with the Lord? It was the love of God shed abroad in your heart, and you loved other Christians tremendously. That can be changed in such a way that you do not love other Christians as at the beginning. You thought then that all Christians were very wonderful: no questions were asked; they simply belonged to the Lord and that was all that mattered. Since then, you have begun to have questions about Christians, and not only Christians in general, but sometimes Christians in particular. You have come to know that Christians are still human beings and not angels, not that consummate thing you perhaps thought Christians were at the beginning. You have come to some disappointment about them and are really up against something now in them, and your basic relationship with God is being touched. If you do not somehow get over that and find a way through, if you do not have a new accession of Divine love, your very walk with God is going to be arrested, you are going to lose your precious and joyous communion with your Lord, and there will come a shadow between you and your Father. You will find that the only way to get rid of the shadow is to get victory over that un-love toward those of His children who are concerned.

HOW WE KNOW GOD'S LOVE FOR US

How do we know God's love for us? Well, that is a pertinent question. There are many difficulties and much mystery connected with His love - why, in the first place He should love us at all. But then He has said that He does love us. He has given us exceeding great and precious promises and assurances. We have, in what He has done for us, a very great amount of proof from God's side that He loves us. But even so, with all the doctrine of the gift of God, the great redemptive activity of God, with all the words that tell us that He loves us, there are times when all that is just something in the Book, something of the doctrine. But is it true? Does He love me? It may be true everywhere else, but does He love ME?

Now come back to that word in Romans 5:5 and you have the answer in principle and in substance. Let us ask the question - How can you and I know that God loves us, know in a way extra to our being told, to having an intellectual presentation of the truth of the love of God for man? I will tell you of one way in which you can know, and know very surely. If you are a child of God and have received the Holy Spirit in you (and remember that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Divine love) then if you should have a reservation of love toward another child or other children of God, some attitude of criticism, suspicion, or prejudice, within you something dies or seems to die. Your joy goes, you feel something has gone wrong, and within you there is a sense of grief. You know what it is to grieve, to have that awful feeling of grieving somewhere inside. But in this case it is not you at all who are grieving over that unlove, but there is Someone within you who is grieving: there is a sob at the center of your being. That is how we know that God loves us, that "the love of God hath been shed abroad in our hearts." When we grieve that love, we know that in us the Spirit says, "I cannot go on in happy fellowship with you, I am grieved, I am pained." It is only love that can be grieved. People who have no love never grieve, they are never pained, never hurt. You need to have love, and the more sensitive the love the more you register and are grieved when things are not right. The Holy Spirit is exceedingly sensitive in this matter of love, because that is His supreme characteristic. Remember, that is His inclusive characteristic. Paul wrote, "The fruit of the Spirit is love" (Gal. 5:22). He put it in the singular. It would have been wrong grammar to have said, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering," etc. He would have had to say, "The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace..." But he said, "The fruit of the Spirit is - love" and then he went on to tell you what love is - "joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control." Kill love and you kill all the rest; injure love and you injure all the rest. You cannot have the others, without the inclusive thing - love.

The Spirit, therefore, is inclusively and pre-eminently the Spirit of Divine love, and as such He is very sensitive and easily grieved. "Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God" (Eph. 4:30) is the exhortation. That is how we know that God loves us - that the love of God in us by the Holy Spirit suffers grief when love is injured.

Again, there is so much that the enemy points to and tells us is a mark that the Lord does not love us. For my part, I have to have some inward proof, a living proof, something right inside of me that proves He loves me; and this is one of the ways in which I have learned that God loves me - that if I say or do anything that is contrary to love, I have a terribly bad time. God's love for me is touched, grieved, when I violate that love, and I am at once conscious of the fact. Everything is bound up with that. We do not get anywhere until we say, "Lord, forgive me that, I go back on that, I confess that sin"; and so get it all cleared up and have no repetition of it. It involves the whole walk with God, it touches the very relationship with God. We need to be made sensitive to the Spirit of love so that our lips and hearts are purged by the fire of love, and so that it is not easy for us to be superior and pass superior judgments and to be of a criticizing and suspicious spirit. We shall never get anywhere with God if there is anything like that.

THE PRAYER LIFE AFFECTED BY LACK OF LOVE

It touches every aspect of our lives. It touches our prayer life. We cannot get on in prayer if it is like that; and what a need there is today of men and women who can pray; not of people who say prayers and yet do not pray. One does not want to despise any prayer, but oh, we do need men and women who can pray through, who can lead us into the presence of God, and take right hold on Him, and get a situation established by prayer. We shall never be able to do that unless this basic relationship with God is established, expressing itself in love for all those whom He loves, no matter what they are nor who they are. Prayer life will be interfered with, and the Word of God will be closed to us. The Lord will not go on if the foundation is hurt.

WE LOVE BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED

"If God SO loved..." Can you fathom that "so"? Can you understand that "so"? No, we cannot. "God so loved" - then "we also ought to love"; and we love, says John here, because He first loved us. As I pointed out earlier, the putting in of the word "him" in the Authorized Version is unfortunate. It is not in most of the original manuscripts. I am not sure that it would not be bad doctrine; it certainly is out of keeping with the context. John did not say that in his letter. He said, "We love, because He first loved us." You say you do not quite grasp that, and that it would be quite true to put the "him" in and to say, "We love him, because He first loved us." There are literally teeming millions in this world whom God first loved and they do not love Him; there are multitudes of the Lord's people whom He so loved but they do not love Him as they would. Is not the cry "I have not the love I ought to have, even for God, to say nothing of His people and the unsaved"? Not necessarily do we love Him, because He first loved us. When we come to a fuller apprehension of His love for us, then love for Him does flow out, but here the whole emphasis is upon the fact of love - "We love, because he first loved us." The challenge is there. The measure of my love for others is the measure of my apprehension of God's love for me. I could never have anything like an adequate apprehension of His love for me, and not love others. Oh, if we were really overwhelmed with the greatness of God's love for us, how could we take an attitude of judgment toward some other erring, mistaken, perhaps sinning, child of God? Not at all! It is herein that we know the love of God, in that we love the brethren. There is the test of our apprehension, the test of our relationship, and it is the basis of everything for the child of God.

GROWTH ON THE BASIS OF LOVE

If I am going to grow spiritually, I shall only do so on the basis of love. I shall never grow because I get a lot more teaching. You do not grow by teaching. That is the tragedy of attending conferences - that you may attend them for years and years and still be of the same spiritual measure afterward, and never grow: still making no greater contribution to the measure of Christ in the Church, still not counting any more than you did years ago in the spiritual battle. No, all the teaching does not necessarily mean that you grow. It is necessary as a background, but we grow by love. Do not let anybody think we can dispense with the teaching and have the love and get on all right. That would be a contradiction of the Word altogether. The teaching has its place, it is absolutely necessary; but though I have everything and have not love, I am nothing (1 Cor. 13). So all is based on this.

THE LOVE OF GOD, NOT NATURAL LOVE

But lest you should inadvertently misapprehend what I am saying, I must emphasize that I am talking about the love of God. You must not think I am talking about a generous disposition, a magnanimous temperament, of the kind of people who are made that way, and who cannot bear to be across someone else, even if there is a tremendous spiritual issue at stake. Such never "truth it in love" (Eph. 4:15) for fear of anything unpleasant. That is not the love I am talking about. This love is not temperamental love. The people who may be of that kindly, magnanimous, large-hearted disposition may find that they have to have that smashed up and broken by coming up against a spiritual situation for which no natural temperament is sufficient. They may have to be provoked to get on their feet. People who have never been angry may have to be stirred to anger. People who are always compromising rather than have unpleasantness may have to make a clean cut. The love of God may demand something like that. On the other hand, those who may not be at all of that generous, magnanimous disposition, by the love of God and an altogether new heart and nature become what they are now temperamentally. This of which we speak is not on a

natural ground at all - what we are or what we are not.

THE LOVE OF GOD TRIUMPHANT OVER EVIL

What I am trying to say is that God's love is a mighty, triumphant love that has triumphed over something immense. The love of God which now comes to us from Christ comes from Him as crucified. It flows to us from the Cross, from His wounds, from His riven side. That love came up against the most awful things in this universe which withstood it, and overcame them. It was not just a nice disposition that looked benignly upon everything wrong and excused it. Oh no! It came up against the fierceness of anti-love, anti-love of God in this universe, and overcame it. Calvary was the mighty triumph of God's love over everything contrary to it, and it is that kind of love we are to have, an overcoming love, a triumphant love.

It is, in a sense, an awful love. Come up against that, and it breaks and shatters; things have to go down before it. Things will not go down before our human niceness, things of the devil, things that are positively evil and antagonistic to God; but they will go down before tested, proved, enduring, patient, longsuffering love. You may have to wait a long time, suffer a lot, put up with a lot, have your love ignored, even resisted. Give it time, and all may go right down before Divine love. It is the longsuffering love of God that has won us. Is not that the deepest thing in your heart? - it is in mine - the infinite patience of Divine love, the bearing and forbearing of that love. It is a tremendous love. It is a power, it is a conquering love - something so much more than this (may I use the word?) sloppy kind of "love" which is always smoothing things over. Oh no, that is not God's love. God's love is overcoming love.

NO TRUE MINISTRY WITHOUT LOVE

There is challenge in this love of God to us. "We also ought..." It is a challenge. Nothing can be except as the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Let us come back to where we started. If you have ever had exercise with God on any matter, do so on this matter. If you are concerned about being of any use to the Lord at all, in any capacity, - as a preacher, a teacher, a personal witness, as a life lived here without any public place at all - let me tell you (and it is the ripening knowledge of a life that has not much further to go but has for forty years been concerned with this matter of being useful to the Lord) let me tell you that nothing of usefulness to the Lord is possible except on the basis of God's love shed abroad in our hearts. It must be this Holy Ghost love for the people to whom we would minister: love for them even to the laying down of our lives for them, suffering unto death for their sakes: love to the point of being brokenhearted - I use that word quite deliberately - over people for whom you have spiritual concern and in whom you have spiritual interest; love like that. No ministry will be ministry to the Lord that is not born of that; no testimony, no life, except as rooted and grounded in the love of God. You can have all the rest, a mass of Bible knowledge, a wealth of Biblical instruction and doctrinal information and all that, but it is all without any value unless its exercise is in a love, a passion, a heart beating with the heart of God for His great love wherewith He loved us.

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