

Holy Love

Jonathan K. Dodson | 1 Thess 3:11-13 | September 18, 2018

What Love?

This whole chapter unfolds one major theme, which culminates at the end in verses 12-13 summarizing the point of the chapter: “*may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.*” We’re looking at love: the what of love, the why of love, and the how of love. This is what commentators call a wish-prayer. It’s a genuine wish, or desire, for the church right now, but it’s also a prayer. So it’s a combination of instruction *and* intercession for essentially two things: 1) the church be established in holiness and 2) increase in love for one another. Holy-love. That’s his ultimate wish. He writes later, “*Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another...But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more*” (1 Th 4:9–10). Even if you think you’re A+ on loving others, you have room to grow, to do it more *and more*. Major in love. “Increase and abound in love” means “superabound” *and* “over and above.” So, if you’re a Christian, you should strive to be marked by a super-abounding love, *that is over and above* everything else. *Everything*. We find this all over the Bible. Love is *the mark* of true Christianity. Jesus says, the world will know you—not by your evangelism, not by your good works, not by your apologetics, but *by your love* for one another. St. Paul, “*faith, hope, love abide, but the greatest of these is love*” (1 Cor 13:13). The greatest expression of the gospel is *a church devoted to one another in an inexplicable love*. Now, what does this mean practically? In that very famous passage on love, 1 Cor 13, we learn several things. Let me point out couple. *Love is patient and kind*. **Patience** and kindness assume the presence of something else, disappointment, hardship, conflict. You don’t need to be patient, unless, you’re upset or irritated by something or someone. What they’re doing or not doing. Say a child is jumping up and down on your nice, new couch with a cup of juice. You tell them once, you tell them twice, and by the third time you’re teeth gritting, huffing, out comes an angry threat. If you don’t stop, I’ll—! Now, is the child doing something morally wrong? No. But you don’t understand. We just bought the couch. And then you look over at your wife, and she says, “Just let them play, honey, their kids, take the juice and let them have fun.” *Incredible patience, flows from a heart of love*. Patience means having a **long fuse**, with no dynamite at the end. And that’s just for a harmless act. How much more do we need patient *love* with people who disappoint or hurt us? Love is patient. Do you have a short fuse? What’s it connected to? Follow the fuse and it will lead you to the thing, *that in the moment you love most*, to a thing so important *you’re willing to sacrifice love to get it*. Love “*does not insist on its own way*.” It doesn’t say, my way or the highway. Love is self-emptying *not demanding*. When I was a young adults pastor, I had a seminary student serving under my supervision. He took issue with just about anything I did, thought he could run the ministry better. Objections became so frequent, I asked him to meet at Starbucks to talk about his concerns. When I got there, he was sitting down, so I grabbed a coffee and joined him. Joe, what would you like to talk about? Staring into my chest, he began to shake, slammed his fist on the table, stood up, and hurled his hot, venti, coffee into my chest; the coffee splashing onto people around me. I cleaned it up, apologized to the customers, and told him the meeting was over. When the pastor heard about it he pulled

him from our ministry. What's the point? When we become self-absorbed about how we want things done, even good ministry things, we'll find ourselves *insisting on our own way*. And if that goes unchecked, it will boil into anger damaging those around us. Love does not insist on its own way. Is there a thing you're insisting on? Perhaps so strongly it's distorting you, hurting others? CSL tells the story of a man who wanted to get into heaven, but he had a lizard on his shoulder, and the angel told him he had to get rid of the lizard first. He refuses so the angel rips it off and throws it to the ground. Then suddenly, the man begins to grow and shimmer until "his face was like liquid love and light." Is your face shining with love? To glow with love, we have to get rid of the lizard. Will you part with *your* lizard?

Why Love?

Why should we do it? Paul says super-abound in love *so that the Lord may establish your hearts blameless in holiness*. Major in love *so that* you're established in holiness. How does love result holiness? Because love is humble, not insisting on its own way, and therefore willing to change. Pride puts us at a distance from God, unable to change, but love puts us close to a holy God so we can change. This holy love will make us more confident when we stand before God. This is particularly important given the community Paul is writing to. Their diversity (Jew, Gentile, high and low social class) presents challenges in getting along. Above all, we need love to cross the lines of ethnic, socio-economic difference. Perhaps another reason he makes the love-holiness connection is that we can do things—*for one another and for all*, those outside the faith—that *look* loving but aren't holy. We can do evangelism, hospitality, mercy without *holy* love. How do you know you're doing this? You insist on your own way, impatient. Churches fight about how things because people insist on their own way. Christians judge one another, gossip, complain. How do you think that looks to the outside world? It's clearly not being done in love, the greatest apologetic, the defining mark of Christianity. It's dry crusty, empty religion *hollowed of holiness*. We can have all *knowledge, faith* to move a mountain, *give away* all we have, but if we have not love, *we have nothing*. God is calling us to *holy* love.

How Love?

How does our love become *holy*? He says it's established, rooted, fixed *in the heart* by the Lord Jesus. *In the heart*: Holiness isn't primarily what you do; it's why you do it. The word means "set apart, devoted to." Our outward actions of evangelism, mercy, hospitality are holy only if they are set apart to God as an expression of adoration of who he is, *worship*. Holy love starts inside not outside, with motivation not action, which is why it requires Jesus, the Holy One, to deposit it in our hearts. We are incapable of generating holy love, holy anything, apart from the Holy One. We cannot increase and abound in love without the Lord of love. *How* do we mature in holy love? He gives two ways: Lord and Jesus. He calls Jesus **Lord** three times in these verses. Why? Because Jesus is coming back as LORD, King, and all will stand *before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints*. It's judgment language: the coming of God in Christ. 2 Cor 5:10: *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil*. What makes something ultimately good or evil?—if it's done in holy love—God first, others second. We should practice holy, patient, self-emptying love *because when Jesus arrives this is what he'll be looking for, what he'll judge us on. May God change our hearts even now!* Second way to mature in holy love is

Jesus. Jesus is our only hope for love now, and for passing the judgment then. In another wish-prayer he says, “**Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (23-24).** He’s saying the only way your whole person *can make progress* in holy love *and* pass the end-time test with “Blameless!” is Jesus. Jesus sanctifies, establishes, deposits *holy love* through the Spirit. Jesus because he’s the blameless Lamb of God: arrested, tried, convicted, and slaughtered like an animal *in our place*. The Lord of love! *See what love, his hands his side, love and sorrow flow mingled down, thorns compose so rich a crown?!* **Jesus** suffered our judgment day so we get the verdict, “Blameless!” Let’s cast ourselves upon Christ, to be sanctified in our hearts, and plead with the Spirit with super abounding, over and above love—for one another, for all, *but infinitely more for the Lord Jesus*. Holy Spirit show us the worthiness of Christ and purify our love for him.