

## **GROWING IN LOVE**

**2 Peter 1:5-7**

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The title of this sermon is “Growing in Love.” In about 1880 a pastor by the name of Henry Drummond wrote a sermon called “The Greatest Thing in the World.” It is still one of the most famous sermons of all time. In that sermon he wrote about one thing that he called “the greatest thing in the world.” He said that one thing is the “summum bonum – the supreme good.” He said that one thing is the “noblest object of desire”; “the supreme gift to covet”; “the rule for fulfilling all rules”; “the new commandment for keeping all the old commandments.” He called it “Christ’s one secret to the Christian life.” He said this is “not a thing of enthusiastic emotion. It is a rich, strong, manly, vigorous expression of the whole round of Christian character – the Christlike nature in its fullest development.” He called it “the supreme possession.” What was he talking about? The greatest thing in the world is love. And that’s our subject today – growing in love.

**2 Peter 1:5-7** “For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with... love.” We have not made it to the end of our list of eight virtues in 2 Peter 1:5-7. We’ve studied each one – faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, brotherly affection, and now we end with perhaps the most important of all – love.

**Thomas Watson** said, “Love is the soul of religion, and that which constitutes a real Christian. Love is the queen of graces.”

**Richard Swenson**, author of *The Overload Syndrome* wrote, “We were put here to love and serve people every day of our lives. Success is nothing more than that.”

### **WHAT IS LOVE?**

There are three primary Greek words for love. *Eros* is sexual or romantic love; it is not found in the Bible. *Philia* means brotherly affection, and in the Bible it is primarily referring to the special love that we are to show fellow believers. We are to love each other like family. The their and most common Greek word for love in the Bible is *agape*. *Agape* is God-like love. This is the word that is used in the Bible when speaks of God’s love for us, and our love for God, and our love for others. *Agape* love is very different than the world’s definition of love:

- *Agape* love is not the same as liking someone. You’re supposed to love people even if you don’t like them.
- *Agape* love is not approving of someone’s behavior. You can love somebody and hate their sin at the same time.
- *Agape* love is not agreeing with somebody. *Agape* love has strong convictions and opinions. You can disagree with somebody and still love them. You are commanded to love those you disagree with.

- Agape love is not being a doormat. Love knows how and when to say, “No.” Love has boundaries. Love is not a push-over. It is not gullible. It is not naïve.
- Agape love is not the same as being “in-love.” Being in love with someone is just a strong, romantic, sexual attraction to someone in response to how that person makes you feel.

So what is agape love? Here’s my definition: **Love is doing what is best for people, not what makes them feel good; it is giving them what they need, not what they want.**

Another **definition** that I have used over the years says, “Agape-love is a deliberate choice of the will, characterized by self-denial and self-sacrifice for the benefit of others, without regard to their due.”

## **12 BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES ABOUT LOVE**

### **1. Love is an objective reality.**

**1 Corinthians 13:1** “Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, is not boastful, is not arrogant.”

Love is objective. That means that it is a real thing, and it is outside of yourself. In other words, there is a real definition of love. If your definition of love and my definition of love are completely different and even contradictory, then we can’t both be right. We may both be wrong, but we can’t both be right. We don’t just get to act however we want, and then call it love. We don’t just get to make up our own definition of love. Our definition of love is only correct if it matches the actual, true, objective definition of love. Love is not a man-made concept. It existed before man. It has existed for all eternity because it is part of the nature of God. And therefore we are only loving if we are acting in accordance with the objective definition of love. Love is not everything. It is not anything you want it to be. It is not one thing to this person, and another to another person. Love is not different in Asia than it is in America. Love is not different today than it was 6,000 years ago. Love is an objective reality. It is not based on our feelings or opinions; it is not based on time or culture; it is unchanging and constant. There are some things that love is, and there are some things that love is not. Some behaviors are loving; some are unloving.

### **2. We learn the true definition of love from the Bible.**

**1 John 4:8** “God is love.” Love exists because God does, and God is loving. Love is part of God’s nature and character. And we are able to give and receive love because we are made in the image of a loving God.

Love is not merely something God is able to do; it is all God does. He is love. Everything He says and does is an act of love. Even when He disciplines, it is out of love. Even when He pours out His wrath, it is an act of love. Even in His anger and jealousy, He is still perfectly loving.

Therefore the way to learn the true definition of love is to study God. And we study God through Scripture, which is His self-revelation to us. As we observe God's attributes and His interactions with creation, and as we discover His commands and principles, we can learn the objective, universal, unchanging definition of love.

### **3. The ultimate demonstration of God's love is the cross of Jesus Christ.**

**Romans 5:8** "But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." If we want to see the ultimate expression and demonstration of true love, then we need look no further than the cross of Jesus Christ. In the cross we see God loving His enemies; loving the unlovable; loving unconditionally; loving sacrificially; loving perfectly.

### **4. Love is not dependent upon feelings.**

**1 Corinthians 16:14** "Do everything in love." The command to love others is about doing what good for others, not feeling good about others. We should learn to feel affection and sympathy and compassion for all human beings, even our enemies, because they are created and loved by God, but it is very difficult to control one's feelings. Instead, we show love even if we don't feel love. Our feelings and emotions will come and go like the changing seasons, but we must act in love always. We don't just love people we like, or people that we are attracted to; we love everyone.

### **5. Love does what is best for people, not what makes them feel good.**

**Proverbs 3:12** "for the Lord disciplines the one he loves, just as a father disciplines the son in whom he delights." True love is doing what is best for people, not what makes them feel good. Sometimes love hurts. Sometimes love will mean speaking a hard truth to someone. Sometimes love will mean telling an adult child that they will need to move out on their own. Sometimes love will mean a surgeon cutting a patient, or giving a patient chemotherapy. Sometimes love will mean a parent spanking or punishing a rebellious child. Sometimes love will mean telling a child no when they ask for something that is not good for them. Sometimes love will mean telling a church member that they will either need to repent or leave the church.

### **6. Love gives people what they need, not what they want.**

**Philippians 4:19** "And my God will supply all your *needs* according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." God is perfectly loving, but He doesn't give us everything we want. He doesn't give us everything we ask for. And it's a good thing, because we don't always know what's best for us. So keep that in mind as you are trying to love your spouse, your kids, your parents, your friends, your coworkers. Love is about meeting needs, not wants. If I gave my kids everything they wanted, they'd all be dead by now! Pastor **Mark Dever** said, "Love doesn't always let. Indeed, sometimes love prevents and sometimes love even punishes."

## 7. Love is unconditional.

**Romans 5:8** “But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Agape love doesn’t just love the lovely, the loveable, the beautiful, the rich, the kind, the virtuous, the respectable. Agape love doesn’t just love those who love you back; those who can help you; those who are kind to you; those who treat you right. It doesn’t just love people in your family, on your team, in your company, in your school, in your circle of friends, in your religion, in your political party. Agape love is unconditional.

## 8. Love is willing to sacrifice.

**Romans 5:8** “But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Agape love doesn’t just love when it is convenient, and cheap, and comfortable. It loves even when it is costly. Agape love is willing sacrifice for others. To hurt so others can heal. To lose so others can win. To give up so others can go up. To suffer so others can be saved.

## 9. Love is unending.

**1 Corinthians 13:7** “Love endures all things.” Agape love has no ending point. It has no expiration date. It has no “three-strikes-and-you’re-out-rule.” Agape love doesn’t stop when someone has hurt you badly enough; when they have sinned against you too many times. Agape love keeps going. It is unending. It endures all things.

## 10. Love discriminates.

**1 John 2:15** “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” We are commanded to love everyone, but we are not commanded to love everything. Agape love loves everyone, but it doesn’t love those things that are displeasing to God. The Bible commands us not to love many things: the world or the things in the world (1 Jn 2:15); what is worthless (Ps 4:2); evil (Ps 52:3); Lying (Ps 52:3); words that destroy (Ps 52:4); cursing (Ps 109:17); Ignorance (Pr 1:22); to offend (Pr 17:19); strife (Pr 17:19); the tongue (Pr 18:21); sleep (Pr 20:13); pleasure (Pr 21:17); money (Heb 13:5); bribery (Is 1:23); luxury (Is 47:8); false teaching (Jer 5:31); false gods (Jer 8:2); to wander from God (Jer 14:10); sin (Hos 4:18); extortion (Hos 12:7); dishonest scales (Hos 12:7); perjury (Zech 8:17); to be seen by people when you pray (Mt 6:5); the place of honor at banquets, and the front seats in the synagogues (Mt 23:6); popularity (Lk 20:46); darkness (Jn 3:19); your life (Jn 12:25); human praise (Jn 12:43); or first place among others (3 Jn 1:9).

Not only does love discriminate, not only does it NOT love everything, but there are some things that we are commanded to hate. To be truly loving, you must be a hater. There must be certain things that you hate. We must hate evil (Ps 97:10); every false way (Ps 119:104); pride (Pr 8:13); perverse speech (Pr 8:13); bribery (Pr 15:27); dishonest profit (Pr 28:16); bloodshed (Ez 35:6); plotting evil against your neighbor (Zech 8:17); and lawlessness (Heb 1:9).

The point is that you cannot be a truly loving person if you also love sin. To be a loving person, you must hate sin. Agape loves the person without loving their sin; agape accepts the person without accepting their sin.

**11. Our love for others must never cause us to compromise our love for God.**

**Luke 14:26** “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, and even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.” What did Jesus mean? Surely we’re not to hate our family. This is an example of a figure of speech called hyperbole, which is an exaggeration used to make a point. Jesus was saying that compared to your love for God, your love for anyone else should seem like hate. The point Jesus was making was that we must never compromise our love for God in the name of loving others. Sin is never loving. Disobeying God is never the way to love people. Lying for someone, stealing for someone, breaking the law for someone, committing sexual sin for someone, cheating for someone – these are never expressions of love.

**12. God’s standard of love should humble us and drive us to the cross.**

**Romans 3:20 (NLT)** “For no one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are.” Love is a command, a law of God. And like all of God’s laws, you cannot be made right with God by keeping the law. Why not? Because you would have to keep the law perfectly. And the more you understand the true biblical definition of love, the more you will see how sinful you are. The more you understand love, the more you will see how unloving you are. If there is anything in the Bible that can show you how sinful you are, it is the command to show agape love. We all fall short.

This doesn’t mean that we should stop trying to obey the law, it means that we should give up trying to be made right with God by keeping the law. We should give up the hope that we can be loving enough to earn entrance into heaven. And instead, we should admit our sin and unworthiness and place all of our hope and trust in Jesus Christ, who was crucified in our place, for our sins, so that we can be made right with God. **Romans 5:1** “Therefore, since we have been declared righteous by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Peace with God not by obeying the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.

**WHY LOVE?**

**1. It is a command.**

**Galatians 5:14** “For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement: Love your neighbor as yourself.” By obeying the command to love, you will obey all of God’s commands.

**2. To imitate God.**

**1 John 4:8** “God is love.” As Christians we are called to imitate God (Eph 5:1). That is how we glorify Him. What is God like? God is loving.

**3. People are worth it.**

Think about who people are. They image bearers of almighty God (Gen 1:27). They are immortal and will live forever, either in heaven or hell (Heb 9:27). They are loved deeply by God (John 3:16).

**4. God will reward you.**

**Proverbs 21:21 (NIV)** “Whoever pursues righteousness and love finds life, prosperity, and honor.”

**5. It is a sign of spiritual maturity.**

**1 Corinthians 13:1-3** “If I speak human or angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so that I can move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 And if I give away all my possessions, and if I give over my body in order to boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.” Here Paul contrasts love with eloquence, prophecy, spiritual knowledge, sacrifice, and even martyrdom. It is possible to do all of those things without love, and if that is the case, “you are nothing.” The true test of spiritual maturity, of a person who loves God and who walks with God, is love.

**6. To foster healthy relationships.**

**Colossians 3:14** “Above all, put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.” **1 Peter 4:8** “Above all, maintain constant love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins.” Love is the oil in the engine of relationships. Oil allows the parts of an engine to rub up against each other without destroying each other and breaking down. The oil of love allows you to be in close proximity with people without hurting each other to the point of relational breakdown and destruction.

**7. To confirm our salvation.**

**1 John 4:8** “The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love.” One of the evidences of authentic salvation is love. When you live a life of love, it is evidence that you have truly been saved. It is confirmation that you have been born again.

**8. To find happiness.**

**Acts 20:35** “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” The path to happiness is not in how many people love you, but in how many people you love. Love is about giving, and it is more blessed to give than to receive. If you really want to enjoy life, then live a life of love.

### **WHO MUST WE LOVE?**

God (Matthew 22:37); Your neighbor-- everyone (Matthew 22:38); Yourself (Matthew 22:38); Your spouse (Eph 5:25; Titus 2:4); your children (Titus 2:4); Other believers (Romans 12:10); Enemies (Matthew 5:43-46); People who do not love you back (Matthew 5:43-46); People who hate you (Luke 6:27); and the unconverted (Mark 10:21).

### **WHAT ARE WE TO LOVE?**

God’s word (Psalm 119:40). Wisdom (Pr 4:6). Discipline (Pr 12:1). A pure heart (Pr 22:11). Gracious lips (Pr 22:11). Good (Am 5:15). Mercy (Micah 6:8). Faithfulness (Micah 6:8). Truth (Zech 8:19). Peace (Zech 8:19).

### **HOW TO LOVE?**

The Bible is filled with examples of how to love. Give gifts (Gen 37:3); forgive (**Leviticus 19:18** “Do not take revenge or bear a grudge against members of your community, but love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord.”); relieve suffering (Is 63:9); help the oppressed (Deut 7:8); save the lost (Rev 1:5); give to those in need (1 Jn 3:17); rescue the perishing (Ps 86:13); protect people who are in danger (Ps 36:7); Notice the afflicted (**Psalm 31:7** “I will rejoice and be glad in your faithful love because you have seen my affliction. You know the troubles of my soul.”); lead those under your care to the best destination (Ps 26:3); comfort the troubled (Ps 119:76); teach people God’s word (**Psalm 119:124** “Deal with your servant based on your faithful love; teach me your statutes.”); listen to people (Ps 119:149); give people rest (**Psalm 127:2** “he gives sleep to the one he loves.”); rebuke fellow believers when they sin (Pr 27:5); discipline people under your authority (**Proverbs 3:12** “for the Lord disciplines the one he loves, just as a father disciplines the son in whom he delights.”); do good deeds for people (Is 63:7); love people as much as you love yourself (Ps 22:39); love freely, without expecting anything in return (Lk 6:35); Seek their spiritual good (**1 Corinthians 8:1** “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”); love as Christ has loved you (Jn 13:34); lay down your life for others (**1 John 3:16** “This is how we have come to know love: He laid down his life for us. We should also lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.”); love without hypocrisy – don’t just pretend to love; don’t just love when people are watching you (Rm 12:9); avoid sin (**Romans 13:10** “Love does no wrong to a neighbor.”); be patient (1 Cor 13:4); be kind with your words (1 Cor 13:4); do not envy (1 Cor 13:4); be humble (**1 Corinthians 13:4** “Love... is not boastful, is not arrogant.” Henry Drummond said, “Humility-- to put a seal upon your lips and forget what you have done. After you have been kind, after Love has stolen forth into the world and done its beautiful work, go back into the shade again and say nothing about it. Love hides even from itself. Love waives even self-satisfaction.”); be polite and good-mannered (**1 Corinthians 13:4-5** “Love... is not rude.” The AMP says love is not “unmannerly.” The GNT says “love is not ill-mannered.”

Phillips says “Love has good manners.”); don’t be selfish – doing what is best for you regardless of the negative impact it has on others (1 Cor 13:4-5); have a good temper (**1 Corinthians 13:4-5** “Love... is not irritable.”); speak words of affirmation and affection – tell people how much they mean to you (**1 Corinthians 16:24** “My love be with all of you in Christ Jesus.”); serve others (Gal 5:13); tell the truth (Eph 4:14); give physical affection (**1 Peter 5:14** “Greet one another with a kiss of love.”); don’t just love with words but with actions (1 John 3:18); love God and obey His commands (**1 John 5:2** “This is how we know that we love God’s children: when we love God and obey his commands.”).

## **HOW TO GROW IN LOVE**

The Bible says that your love can grow cold, and it can increase (Mt 24:12; 1 Thess 1:3). How can we ensure that our love increases and doesn’t grow cold?

### **1. Salvation.**

**1 John 4:7** “Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.” When God saves you, He gives you the desire and power to please Him; to live a life of love. We don’t love to get saved; we must be saved in order to love.

### **2. Learn how to love by studying God’s word.**

**1 John 4:8** “God is love.” Study God’s character and commands. How does God act? How does God display love? Henry Drummond suggests reading 1 Corinthians 13 (known as The Love Chapter) every day for a month.

### **3. Participate in church.**

**Hebrews 10:24-25** “24 And let us watch out for one another to provoke love and good works, 25 not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching.” In church you will be around people who are striving to grow in love. And you will be around people who are encouraging you to live a life of love. This is one of the purposes of the church. To provoke love and good works.

### **4. Pray for the strength to love.**

**1 Thessalonians 3:12** “And may the Lord cause you to increase and overflow with love for one another and for everyone, just as we do for you.” A life of love is impossible without God’s power. So pray. Daily. All day long. “Lord, please help me to love.”

### **5. Reflect on God’s love for you.**

**Luke 7:47** “Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; that’s why she loved much. But the one who is forgiven little, loves little.” This is the story of a very sinful who experienced the love of Jesus. When Jesus was dining at the home of a Pharisee, she entered and stood behind Jesus at his feet, weeping. She washed His feet with her tears and her hair, and kissed His feet, and then she poured some very expensive perfume on his feet. The other people at the table couldn’t understand her behavior. And Jesus explained that her great display of love was in response to receiving God’s great love. The more you understand God’s love for you, the more you will be empowered and inspired and compelled to love others.

You have probably read the book *Les Miserables*, by Victor Hugo. It’s the story of Jean Val Jean, a man who had spent 19 years in an awful, torturous prison. When he is released, he can’t find work, and he can’t find anything to eat, and then he ends up in the care of a priest for one night. The priest is kind to him and gives him food. Later the night, Jean Val Jean decides to steal the silverware and run off, only to be caught by the police. When the police brought him back to the priest so that he could confirm that the man had stolen his property, the priest said, “He didn’t steal the silverware, I gave it to them. But your forgot something.” And he also gave him the silver candlesticks. Jean Val Jean was so impacted by the priest’s love that it transformed him. He deserved punishment, but he was lavished with kindness and generosity. He spent the rest of his life trying to show that same kind of love to everyone he met.

God has loved you with a remarkable love. You deserve punishment, but God has saved you, and given you everything. Let God’s love transform you into a person of love.