



Love In the Home (Galatians 5:22, 23)

How can a family have a successful Christian home? If all the good advice ever given about making a home happy were condensed into one word, that word would surely be "love." If we want our homes to succeed, they must be characterized by love!

Paul acknowledged the importance of love in the Christian life—and, therefore, in the Christian home—when he began the list of the characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit with "love." He wrote, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22, 23).

We should not be surprised that Paul began with love. Love plays a prominent role in the Christian religion. In the description of God, love is prevalent because "God is love" (1 John 4:8). God's relationship with man is, above all, characterized by love (John 3:16; 1 John 4:10; Romans 5:8, 9). The two great commandments given to us by God are to "love . . . God" and "love your neighbor" (Matthew 22:37–39). As Christ's disciples, the foremost commandment we are to keep is to "love one another" as Christ has loved us (see John 13:34, 35). According to 1 Corinthians 13, love is greater than any other attribute or gift we possess. Paul concluded that chapter by saying, "But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13).¹

The word "love" is used in so many ways

¹In other passages, as well as in 1 Corinthians 13, when love is listed along with other desirable spiritual graces, love occupies a preeminent position, either at the beginning of the list (as in Galatians 5:22, 23) or at the end (2 Peter 1:5–7; Colossians 3:12–14).

today! We say, with equal fervor, that we love God, love our mates, love our children and our parents, love our country, love our neighbors, love bananas, love shopping, love football, and love watching television. How is the love that can make our homes succeed related to these other loves? In this lesson, we will answer two questions about the love spoken of in Galatians 5:22, 23.

WHAT IS THE LOVE THAT IS PART OF THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT?

The word for "love" found in our text is *ἀγάπη* (*agape*). This is the type of love God has for us (John 3:16), and we are to have this kind of love for God and for others (Matthew 22:37–39). The same word is used for "love" in 1 Corinthians 13 and for the kind of love that a husband is to have for his wife (Ephesians 5:25).

What is this love? *Agape* is not primarily an emotion, since it can be commanded and emotions cannot be commanded. Rather, it is primarily an act of the will—a determination to do what is best for another person, for the one loved. Such determination results in certain behaviors. In other words, *agape* love is a commitment to do what is best for the loved one. This is the kind of love which will help to produce a God-pleasing home.

Agape love is not based on external circumstances—on the beauty, desirability, goodness, or worthiness of the one loved. After we grow old, after our hair turns gray or falls out, after we lose whatever beautiful figure we once had, after wrinkles come and pains beset us, and after romance recedes, this love remains.

Love continues even when the one loved—whether a mate, a child, or a parent—is unlovable, when he or she has failed to live up to expectations or has done something wrong. Even then, when love is not deserved, *agape* love remains.

How is it possible to love one who is undeserving of our love? When a wife is loving, when a husband has just brought his wife a gift, or when the children have obediently cleaned their rooms and are all dressed up and looking their best for worship services, it is easy to love the people in the family. However, when the baby has cried all night, or when a six-year-old breaks his mother's favorite dish, or when a teenager is rebellious—again—loving our family members seems more difficult. When a spouse is complaining or is neglecting duties at home to be a more devoted employee, or when an aging parent is stubborn and cantankerous—how are we to love our family members then? Someone may say, "That kind of love is humanly impossible!"—and that is true! However, what is humanly impossible is divinely possible! Because we have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, and because we have the example of God's love for undeserving mankind, we can love as God loves! We can love even those who do not deserve to be loved.

When we love like that, demonstrating *agape* love toward our family members, our homes will be pleasing to us and to God.

HOW CAN SUCH LOVE HELP TO PRODUCE A SUCCESSFUL HOME?

First, agape love can lead to a successful home because it must first be directed toward God. The foremost commandment, according to Jesus (Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27), is to "love" (the verb form of *agape*) God. Whatever the size or makeup of our home, we can obey that command. We are to love God by putting Him first in everything we do: We can do this by striving always to do His will at home, in business, at work or play, and in our personal relationships; by worshiping and praising Him, praying to Him, and reading and studying His Word; by being His faithful children. Then we can almost be certain of having a strong and happy home—because the home in which God is honored above all else is a successful home, no matter what else

can be said about it.

Second, agape love can lead to a successful home because it will produce people who are easy to live with. We read in 1 Corinthians 13:4–8a,

Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.

Would it not be easy to live with someone with these characteristics?

Third, agape love can lead to a successful home because it will cause the people in the home to treat one another right. While it is commendable for the people in the home to say "I love you" to one another frequently, what is more important in the home environment is for us to exhibit love in our actions. In our homes we need to do as John exhorted Christians to do: "Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue [only], but in deed and truth" (1 John 3:18). The characteristics of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4–8a suggest that we can know those who love because they behave lovingly!

In practical terms, what does it mean to behave lovingly? It means that each grandparent, parent, or child will treat the others in the home as he or she would like to be treated (Matthew 7:12).

We need to understand that marriage and family relationships are human relationships, and the rules that govern all human relationships apply in the home. I once spent some time trying to come up with a list of "do's" and "don'ts" regarding the relationship of husband and wife. I was trying to think of some "rules" that applied especially to that relationship and not to any other. I was unable to do so. Everything I could think of that was needed to have a good relationship between husband and wife was also needed to have a good relationship with anyone else. There are no special rules for personal relations in marriage and the family. If we want to have good relationships with our spouses, our parents, or our children, then we need to treat them as kindly and considerately as we treat anyone else with whom we want to get along.

Let us think about it this way: If we want to

make friends with someone, how do we do it? If we want to remain friends with someone, how do we do it? How do we treat our good friends? If we do the same for our parents, our mates, and our children, we will be acting lovingly toward them.

In contrast, the absence of love is obvious in a home in which each person pursues his own interests selfishly, not considering the needs of anyone else in the family. A lack of love is evident when people speak sharply and unlovingly to one another, without regard for how their words may wound their hearers. Children show they do not love as they should when they talk disrespectfully to or disobey their parents. Parents are not showing *agape* love when they unnecessarily criticize their children or neglect their children's needs. Grown children show that they do not love their parents as they should when they are unconcerned for their welfare, and parents show that they do not have *agape* love when they selfishly try to impose their will on their grown children or their grandchildren.

However, if everyone in the family does his or her best to act lovingly in all situations, to treat everyone else right, then the home is likely to flourish. It will be happy, it will continue without divorce, it will please God, and it will display Christ's love to others.

Fourth, agape love can lead to a successful home because such love is basically a commitment. God loves us, so He is committed to doing what is best for us. Since we are to love God, we should be committed to Him and to doing His will. We are also to love one another; therefore, we must be committed to one another. The husband is to love his wife, which includes being committed to her. Parents should love their children, and children should love their parents; in other words, they should be committed to each other. Every home—no matter how large or small—should be filled with this kind of love, a love characterized by determined goodwill and the commitment to do right by God and man. Such homes can be called "successful."

These lessons are applicable to single people as well as to those who are married. However, *agape* love is a commitment that should be especially emphasized with regard to the love that husband and wife have for one another.

When a man and a woman marry, they commit themselves to one another. "I love you" in the context of marriage means, or ought to mean, "I commit myself to you; I pledge myself to you." This commitment, more than anything else, will hold the marriage together! It is the lack of such commitment which has produced so much divorce.

My wife Charlotte attended a sociology class on the family at a state university. Her professor

discussed the dissolution of the home in modern society, and, to Charlotte's surprise, said that what is needed to make the home work is greater commitment on the part of both marriage partners to one another and to the marriage. He said that marriages that

fail do not necessarily have any more problems than marriages that stay together; rather, in marriages that fail, at least one of the partners lacks the kind of commitment that both partners have in marriages that last.

We can agree with this evaluation wholeheartedly. Difficult times will come; feelings will sometimes betray us. Romance is a tender flower. We should try to keep it alive; but in trying times, in spite of our best efforts, it can wither. At such times, what will hold the marriage together? Only commitment—based on *agape* love. We must let God lead us to respect His Word. Each husband must be committed to his wife, and each wife must be committed to her husband. Each mate must be committed to the marriage. This commitment will cause husband and wife to remain faithful and to remain together.

CONCLUSION

In these lessons, the basic premise is that the home composed of Christians will bear the fruit of the Spirit spoken of in Galatians 5:22, 23. That is what makes a successful home.

Agape love is a commitment to do what is best for the loved one. This is the kind of love which will help to produce a successful home.

Paul's placing "love" first when he listed the attributes of the fruit of the Spirit was probably not accidental. No doubt, as he indicated in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul thought of love as the most important virtue. However, he may have had another reason for listing it first. He saw love as a comprehensive virtue (1 Corinthians 13:4-8a); perhaps he put love first in the list of virtues in Galatians 5:22, 23 because he thought of love as summarizing the following attributes. For instance, one who loves is patient and kind and good and faithful and gentle and self-controlled. Perhaps "love" can be seen as a theme or a topic sentence for what follows. Perhaps Paul was saying something like this: "The fruit of the Spirit is love—manifested in joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control."

No one can successfully lead a Christian life without loving. Neither is it possible to imagine a successful Christian home without love.

Your home needs to be characterized by love. Make sure that, in your home, you love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Both in the home and outside it, be sure to love others as you love yourself. To build a home characterized by love requires you to commit yourself to your spouse—so that through prosperity and adversity, you are always doing what is best for him or her. Then you can have a happy, satisfying home that pleases God and blesses mankind.

Before you can truly love as you should, you need to commit yourself to Christ. Those who are in Him have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them and, therefore, can bear the fruit of the Spirit.
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