

Back to Basics

Learning to Give God's Love 1 John 4:7-21

Introduction

Last week, we learned about receiving God's love in 4:7-21. John tells us that God wants us to be "perfected in love"—to mature and excel in loving others the same way Jesus loves us. John says this involves two parts:

- increasing our capacity to receive God's love (which we talked about last week in verses 16-17) and
- increasing our capacity and skill to give God's love to others (verses 11,12).

It's like breathing—we increase our spiritual lung capacity by breathing God's love into our souls and breathing his love out to the people he has put in our lives. In the natural, we seek love from the most visible people rather than from an invisible God. Or, we try to earn God's love through our performance or works rather than accept God's love offered to us freely.

Even though we are unworthy, we still need to allow God to indwell us with his love and then continually draw upon his love. Instinctively, we try to hoard God's love for ourselves rather than give it away. But that's like trying to hold your breath so you can hang on to the oxygen in your lungs. Breathing just doesn't work that way! Just like breathing, we must learn to take in God's love and then give God's love to others.

God wants us to become experts at giving His love to others. It is an action that requires skill, attention, and practice. But God doesn't just throw the instruction manual at us and say, "Here—you figure it out!" He delights in being your personal trainer. In 1 Thessalonians 4:9, Paul writes, "But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another;" ([1 Thessalonians 4:9](#))

As we learn to trust God's wisdom and good intentions, we choose to cooperate with his training. Through His Word and the work of the Holy Spirit, God develops us into the unique and expert love givers He designed us to be. Today, I would like to introduce you to some of the specific ways he trains us so we can recognize his work and cooperate with him.

I. Trained by Scripture

The Bible is God's letter of love to us. As you read it, ask God, "What are you teaching me about how you love me?" Then take note of what He reveals to you. Since we are to love others the same way God loves us, we should also ask, "What are you teaching me about how to love others?" The Holy Spirit will teach you the nature of real love and how it differs from worldly counterfeits.

God's love is a sacrificial choice, vs. worldly love, which is self-centered and feelings-based. God's love is functional and purposeful vs. worldly love, which is emotional and self-serving. God's love is forgiving vs. the world's love which writes you off "if I don't get what I want." God's love is honest and corrective vs. the world's view of soft sentiments that don't want to hurt anyone's feelings.

God teaches us about love through Scripture (like 1Cor.13) and the earthly example of Jesus.

- like in Gethsemane, His decision to go to the cross;
- weeping over Lazarus;
- Peter, after his denial in John 21;
- Jesus' rebuke to Peter in Matthew 16.

As you read the scriptures, God will draw your attention to those areas of love that He is currently developing in you. That's what it means to have the scriptures speak to you. The Bible provides the context and vocabulary for us to hear God's voice and promptings to become more like Him.

II. Trained by Holy Spirit Promptings

Secondly, God trains us through personal promptings from the Holy Spirit. This is one of my favorite forms of God's personalized training program. The Holy Spirit will lead you to take specific steps to show God's love because he knows it is just what the other person needs. Romans 8:14 says, "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God." ([Romans 8:14](#))

It's usually a little scary on the front end, but if you obey his prompting, you often see why he led you to it! Acts 8:26-31 describes one of these promptings. "Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, "Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is desert. So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go near and overtake this chariot." So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him. The place in the Scripture which he read was this: "HE WAS LED AS A SHEEP TO THE SLAUGHTER; AND AS A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARER IS SILENT, SO HE OPENED NOT HIS MOUTH. IN HIS HUMILIATION HIS JUSTICE WAS TAKEN AWAY, AND WHO WILL DECLARE HIS GENERATION? FOR HIS LIFE IS TAKEN FROM THE EARTH." So the eunuch answered Philip and said, "I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?" Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him. Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, *here is* water. What hinders me from being baptized?" Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the

eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing. But Philip was found at Azotus. And passing through, he preached in all the cities till he came to Caesarea." (Acts 8:26-40)

This is a fascinating experience. A person usually gets these promptings to *encourage* a brother or sister in Christ or to *share* God's love in some specific way with someone who doesn't yet know Christ. Even though it may seem strange at the time, it is consistent with God's Word, and these promptings obviously don't come from Satan! How do we know that? Because in the natural, we're just not that generous or eager to do it! And neither is the devil.

God's promptings usually come to us more often when we consistently pray and read his Word. The more often we obey God when he prompts us, the more promptings we get and recognize. It's one of the ways God shows us how fulfilling it is to give his love away to others. Are you open to allowing God to use you in this way? Do you spend quality time with God in prayer and biblical meditation so you will know his voice when he calls to you? Will you respond to Him when He calls out to you?

III. Trained by Seasoned Believers

God also uses those already trained to train us. God provides experienced human examples to illuminate, inspire, and train us to give His love to others. Paul tells us to take full advantage of these models in Philippians 3:17. "Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern." (Philippians 3:17)

God sends people into our lives whose example convicts and challenges us to be better Christians. These mentors will often uncover an area of love in which we are deficient or may even devalue. God speaks through them to show us the importance of this aspect of God's love and to inspire us to grow in that area. As we watch their self-giving, sacrificial way of life and see their authentic happiness, God motivates us to sell out to this same way of Christian living.

A model of sacrificial giving is one of the highest compliments anyone can pay you! Are you close enough to any models like these that you can benefit from God's training through them? That would be one of the most important reasons to get involved in a small study or fellowship group with them.

IV. Trained by Experience With "Difficult People"

God also trains us through "difficult people." "Difficult people" are people you probably don't want to be around but can't avoid. They can be coworkers, neighbors, in-laws, an obnoxious person, loved ones whose sins drive you up the wall, your teenager's issues, or your spouse's idiosyncrasies. I think you get the point.

Of course, sometimes we must set boundaries or take disciplinary or difficult action. But when this isn't possible or appropriate (which is most of the time), we need to realize that God can often be at work through these people to perfect us in His love. Romans 5:3 says, "but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us." (Romans 5:3-5)

You might think you would be better off if you could just get away from them or at least take control of their problems. But it's usually by persevering through them, even if it means practicing tough love, that God gives us special training in areas of love deficiency. It's easy to personalize another's problems or feel like they are obstructing God's plan for our lives when actually God is working sovereignly through their painful wounds to advance his love and redemptive plan in us!

In Genesis 50:20, Joseph says, "But as for you, you meant evil against me; *but* God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as *it is* this day, to save many people alive." (Genesis 50:20)

So what is your goal? Is it to be treated well and be unbothered with conflict, or to be at peace because you are perfected in love? Paul tells the Philippians, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6-7)

Who are the "difficult people in your life?" What love lessons is God teaching you through them? And how are you responding to that?

Conclusion

The New Testament truth is that God trains us how to love others and then rewards us with His joy. Good athletic trainers know that training is rigorous and demanding, so they learn how to make practice challenging, fun, fulfilling, and a gauge that points out progress.

God has his own special ways of rewarding us as we make progress in loving others. He calls it joy. In John 15:9, Jesus says, "**As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.**" (John 15:9-11)

Sometimes God lifts us up with experiences of awe and wonder when we follow his prompting to love someone and see how he miraculously works through us. The disciples experienced this in Acts 2:43 when a deep sense of awe came over all the people, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders.

Sometimes the Lord comforts and strengthens us in the midst of our pain and weariness to enable us to continue loving people. 2 Thessalonians 2:16 says, "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word." (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17)

Sometimes God gives us moments of deep satisfaction as we see how God's love has worked through us to transform someone in deep and profound ways. In John's third letter, he writes, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth." (3 John 1:4)

God knows exactly when we need to be rewarded, what kind of reward we need, and how to get it to us. This is a big part of the adventure and challenge of being perfected in love that makes it so rewarding. And yet, all of this is just a foretaste of the ultimate and eternal joy we will experience when we are eternally in his presence.

Have you recently experienced God's personalized training in loving others? And how is that going for you?