

# The Love Toward God

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Grace, mercy, and peace be with you from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love. Amen.

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus.

When we ask someone in this world who still believes in a god whether he loves God, no one will say that he hates God. Rather everyone will quickly reply without further reflection, Why yes! Who would not love God! Would not this be the answer of most of us to this question?

But how many, what countless numbers deceive themselves, because they suppose they love God! To love God is something entirely different, much greater, higher, more exalted, nobler than most men think.

The way of love is to love the loved one more than oneself. If we love God, we will hate, deny, mortify, and crucify ourselves. The way of love is to be united with the beloved. If we love God we will also be *one* spirit and heart with God, "For he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit," says the apostle. (I Cor. 6:17).

The way of love is to renounce the friendship of all others and cling only to the beloved. If we love God, we will not commit adultery with the world, but with Paul regard everything, all its treasures, wealth and honor, as loss beside the overwhelming knowledge of Jesus Christ. For if anyone loves the world, the love of the *Father* is not in him.

The way of love is to reveal one's heart to the beloved and expect nothing but good from him. If we love God, we will have a joyful confidence in God. Praying to God will be our desire, and in all troubles we will cry to Him by the Spirit of adoption, "Abba, dear Father."

The way of love is to surrender completely to the beloved with all one is, had, and is able. If we love God we will offer ourselves to Him completely with body, soul and all our powers.

The way of love is to deny one's own will and to do the will of the beloved in all things. If we love God, we will rejoice if only God's gracious will, sweet or bitter, easy or difficult, is accomplished through or in us.

If the love of God really dwells within a man, it *cleans* the heart from all willful sins and insults toward God and from all worldly lusts, so that it seeks and loves nothing but what is heavenly. True love draws the mind with all its inclinations and thoughts up to God, so that the soul thinks nothing, desires and wishes for nothing but God. For what would he seek outside God who has everything in God? Why gather sweet drops here and there when one is immersed in an entire ocean of sweetness?

Love of God even awakens in the soul a desire to suffer for God's sake, calls itself happy if it has many burdens and crosses, rejoices with the disciples when counted worthy to suffer disgrace and blows for Christ's sake, and with Paul boasts of tribulations and the marks of Jesus Christ.

True living love grows from day to day like a green tree and always increases. At first it begins to forsake the world and to be displeased with everything with which God is displeased. Then it clings to God, considers Him its one and all. In all its works it respects God. It accepts whatever happens as from God. It is at peace in whatever God ordains. It is not concerned about friend or foe, trouble or happiness, and is satisfied with God's grace. Finally, it progresses so far that it hates its own life and yearns for death, so that nothing will hinder it in delighting itself in the Beloved. It does and suffers everything with such joy that even its work is not a burden and even suffering becomes joy. If love toward God has begun to burn in a heart, it cannot hide its inner flames but spreads them as the sun its rays. It wishes well to all men. When seeing the unfortunate and the unhappy, it wells up in distress, and tries everything it can so that all might be as blessed as it is.

David had this love and could exclaim, "I will love thee, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower." (Psalm 18:1.2). "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?" (Psalm 42:1.2).

This love Asaph also had so that he could say, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth; but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever." (Psalm 73:25.26).

St. Augustine had this love. He wished to be a light which would kindle God's love and be consumed in this love.

If they examined their supposed love toward God according to this, how many would have to confess that their love is nothing but a dead thought! Oh, to how many would our Savior therefore have to say, as He once said to certain Jews, "But I know you, that ye have not the love of God in you." (John 5:42). And he among us who had begun by God's grace to tear his soul free from sin and all visible things and sink it alone in God's love must nevertheless groan with St. Augustine, I have loved you too late, my beauty, alas, I have loved too late, my God! I long sought my rest in the creature till you, my love, called me to yourself.

Therefore let us now try to awaken ourselves to God by considering it in greater detail. But first we turn to this eternal, divine love itself in silent prayer.

*Scripture text: I John 4:15-21. Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God. And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. We love him, because he first loved us. If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.*

In the epistle just read, John seeks to lay the cords of divine love on the readers by showing them the source from which they can draw this love, namely God. He further shows how necessary love is, since without it we can have no joy in the day of judgment. Finally he shows how love to

God must reveal itself in the love toward one's brother. So today we also willingly wish to let our souls be bound by these bands of love, as we consider together

## **THE LOVE TOWARD GOD**

and in particular

1. How it Comes into our Hearts;
2. How Necessary it is; and
3. Whereby it Must Reveal Itself.

{PRAYER:} God, today we want to hear that we should love Thee. Oh, let Thy word not be in vain in us! Oh, let those of us who are still erring, seeking their rest vainly now in riches, now in the lust of the world, now in worldly honor, today find rest in Thy love. Do strengthen those of us who already know how deceitful the lusts of the world are, to whom everything but Thou alone tastes bitter, who rest in Thy love and are blessed, so they may remain in Thy love till their death, yea, forever. Amen.

### **[1. How the Love Toward God comes Into our Hearts]**

My friends, God did not create us for this perishable world, as He did the animals. He did not fill the earth with His blessings to satisfy our immortal spirit. No, in our creating God had an inexpressibly higher, more glorious purpose. He wanted to make us blessed, not through the enjoyment and love of the creature, but rather through the love and enjoyment of Himself. Poor insignificant man is born with the high destiny to embrace with his love the highest God, and to be eternally blessed in communion with Him.

But man fell into sin, and thus a great frightful change took place in his heart. Now no man knows his high destiny when he is born, and when it is preached to him, there is no drive in him to attain it.

All men still have in themselves the drive for rest, for peace, for salvation. But after we fell, we all by nature no longer seek our salvation in God but in the world. God's holy law stands like an enemy between God and the natural inclination of man. Therefore man either sins deliberately and maliciously against God, or he accommodates himself only outwardly to God's law and seeks to keep God's commands only outwardly because he fears God's vengeance and punishment. By nature no man now wants to enter into heaven because he loves God and finds his salvation in God, but because he does not want to be damned.

Certainly, many who today pass for the best of Christians on account of their zeal in the outward exercises of Christianity would, if they learned that there is no hell but only a heaven, quickly forsake the banner of Christ's cross. They would lose all their zeal, discontinue their praying and Bible reading, and find delight in the world with its lusts. By nature no man has a spirit willing to do God's will. By nature alone no man wants to be blessed only in God and His grace, and in his own union with Him. Therefore by nature no man loves God.

Oh, we miserable men! How deeply we have fallen! God does not want to satisfy us with visible, temporal, transient things. He wants to give us Himself, the eternal, highest God. But we would rather feed on the husks of this world!

Oh, how can love to God, for which we were created and in which alone we can be truly happy, return into our heart?

This the apostle tells us in our text. He shows us the origin, the source from which alone love to God proceeds and returns to our hearts. He says, "God is love."

Oh man, if you want love to God to return to your heart so you can willingly renounce sin and the world, so the will of God might be your joy, and God Himself your highest good and blessedness - then seek this love in God Himself alone!

No creature, no man, no angel can change your heart and give you love toward God in your heart. Wherever in all creation a drop of love is found, it has come from God, the source of love.

Therefore, do not weary yourself to produce God's love in yourself with your own powers, nor compel your dead cold heart to do it. It is in vain. God alone, who at the first creation poured out His love in man, can recreate it again in you. For God alone is love. He alone is the fountain of love. It springs from Him alone.

The apostle also shows us in what manner God wants to let His love again come into your heart, when he says, "We love him, because he first loved us." Here we read that we must first recognize that God *first* loved us, that, therefore, we did not first love God but rather hated him.

We recognize that by nature we are God's enemies, worthy only of His wrath and not His love, but that God nevertheless loved us from eternity, even before we were born, and so loved us that He gave us His only begotten Son. (John 3:16).

Frightened by our conscience, death, and hell, we are refreshed and cheered with the comfort that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came into the world to save sinners, and we heartily believe this through the working of the Holy Spirit.

If once we looked with fear and trembling into the abyss of our ruin brought by sin, but then were seized by merciful eternal love, in short, if in living awareness of our wickedness, feeling our sinfulness and accursedness we experience the love of God in Christ by faith in our hearts, then also love to God is again poured out in our hearts.

It is impossible to draw near to the great fire of God's love in Christ without being kindled by it to ardent return of love. So few men love God because they have not tasted in their hearts the love of God toward them, they have not yet believed and known how highly they are loved by God in Christ. Had they believed and known it, they would truly burn with love, and love God more than the greedy person loves his earthly wealth, the mother her child, the bride her bridegroom. Whoever knows what a great sinner he is, and that he is also accepted in Christ, to him the whole world with its love is as though gone. To him everything outside God is small, insignificant, yes, stale and bitter. He knows that God alone is worthy of his love. He finds in Him everything his heart could wish. Heaven with all its blessedness is already here on earth open to him in the reconciled God.

Why were the holy martyrs so firm in the love of God? Not by their own power, but because they had really known God's love in Christ. This the history of the Lutheran Church tells us. When in the 16th century a confessor of salvation alone by grace through faith was to be burned and was asked how he could endure this, he answered, "I will gladly let myself be burned if I could only

obtain that from my ashes a flower would grow up to the honor of Him who loved me in Christ from eternity."

Thus Queen Catherine, when at the command of a Persian king her flesh was torn from her entire body with white-hot tongs, cried out amidst these inexpressible tortures, "Oh my God, my Jesus, this is still too little for your sake. I can never repay Your merit, because out of love for me You died in Your love."

Oh my dear hearer, don't also all of you wish to be filled by such love to God? Then taste and see first of all how friendly the Lord is. Come to know God's love in Christ to you, and you also will soon discover your love for Him. "We love Him, because He first loved us."

## **[2. How Necessary the Love Toward God is]**

In order to be awakened the more powerfully to love God, let us now secondly consider how necessary this love is.

Should love be so necessary, since faith alone saves us?

Can one who believes be harmed if he has no love? Luther answers this question in the exposition of our epistle as follows: "The world always wants to go the wrong way. It can't hew to the line, letting go either of faith or of love. If one preaches faith and grace, no one wants to do works. If one emphasizes works no one wants to cling to faith. They who keep to the true middle road are very rare."

It is indeed true, my dear hearers, that when we ask, "What must I do to be saved?" God's Word gives us no other answer but, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house." (Acts 16:31).

No work can erase our sins, no love can reconcile God, but faith in Christ alone makes us righteous before God and saves us.

But just what is this salvation to which faith is to lead us?

Above all, the blessed communion with the Triune God.

Can we be in communion with Him when we do not love Him?

Never! Our text says, "God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him." Therefore in vain does a person boast of faith if love to God is not in his heart.

Faith is not a dead thought. It is not a human resolution to appropriate all the comfort of the gospel. It is a heavenly light, a divine power, a gift of God which God Himself must bring into the heart with His grace and love.

A faith without love to God is an empty conceit of our reason, a hull without grain, a shell without the kernel, a painted image without life. Where there is true faith, love also radiates from it, as the light from the sun. Where love is not in the heart, there also is no God, no eternal love. (Cp. I Corinthians 13 -Ed.) But where God is not, there is also no faith, either. As darkness cannot be in light, so a loveless person cannot be in God.

Therefore, you who want to come to God and be saved, cast yourself down before God with all your sins, complain to Him of your misery and distress, cry to Him for mercy. Then His Holy Spirit will comfort you and work true faith in your heart. Then He will also live in you through faith and pour out in you His love which you will taste and experience. But know that if then you do not remain in love, you also do not remain in the faith, you do not let faith take root in you so the heavenly plant of love with its fruits can grow up in you. If love ceases to be in you, then God also again departs from you, for "God is love." If you forsake love, you forsake God, and are forsaken by God. For "God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him."

Yes, the apostle says still more to witness to the necessity of love. He adds: "Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear; because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love."

It is indeed true, my friends: Nothing but the word of forgiveness can heal our wounded conscience. Nothing but faith in Him who makes the godless righteous can strengthen us in the temptations of sin and despair. Nothing, nothing but the believing upward glance to the Crucified who bore our sins will give us rest and comfort in the hour of death. No work, no love will stand on the day of judgment. But we should also know this that if our faith has not worked love in us, then in temptation, death, or finally on the day of judgment we will see in terror that our faith was nothing but a dream and froth.

Ah, many a one now continues to live in sin against his conscience. But he is calm because he comforts himself in his faith. But when death comes, he will no longer be able to be so calm, since his conscience, yes, heaven and earth and all creatures which he misused for sin till that hour, will rise up against him as witnesses and accuse him of not having had true faith in his heart. It is impossible to have a joyful confidence toward God through faith while being conscious of not being honest and sincere toward God. It is impossible to rest in one's faith while living in sins against conscience. A good conscience is inseparable from faith.

Therefore you who pretend to believe in Christ, but live in dishonesty, pander in secret to your lusts, now and then gratify the lusts of your flesh, are irreconcilable, proud, arrogant, frivolous, dishonorable and unfaithful, greedy, slanderous, and untruthful, know that with all these sins you destroy in yourself the comfort of your faith and rob yourself of confidence in your heavenly Father. God will at His chosen time put you to the test. You will then see that your faith has no roots, and in eternity you will hear, "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven. I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity." (Matthew 7:21.23).

Oh man, if you want to die in peace, then take care that you have the conviction that you have intended to be honest, and did not let sin rule over you, and that with Moses, Samuel, Hezekiah and St. Paul you can call your conscience to witness and say, Lord, I loved you. I confessed you before the world. You have been my all. I have not served you hypocritically, but in true earnest. My life witnesses that I stood in the truth.

Of course I will in no wise deny salvation to those who do not turn to God till their last hour, and who die sighing for grace. But how difficult it is then, when there is absolutely no testimony of faith! What struggles, what wrestlings with despair!

Oh, may no one, trifling with grace, wantonly rely on the malefactor, the only Scriptural example of a conversion in the hour of death! Many, many also pass away of whom we have this good hope, yet who merit eternal ruin. For St. John writes, "Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world."

Just as the Lord received hatred as thanks for His love and yet did not let the fire of His love be extinguished, so also His own who have experienced the same thing in this world must remain faithful in love until death for the Lord to recognize them as His own, despite all thanklessness.

### **[3. Whereby Love Toward God Must Reveal Itself]**

However the apostle also tells us whereby our love to God must reveal itself, when he adds, "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment we have from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also."

Hence, my friends, love to one's brother is the fruit whereby love to God must reveal itself. According to our text this is true for two reasons. First, because he who does not love his brother certainly does not love God.

The apostle, writing first in our text, "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" argues from the greater to the lesser, or from the more difficult to the easier, as the Lord does when He says, "He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much." (Luke 16:10).

The apostle wishes to say with these words that it is easier and less difficult to love that which one sees than to love that which one does not see. Seeing an object with eyes is an important way of being moved to love the object seen. This means does not exist when the object of one's love cannot be seen. Man indeed loves many things which he considers worthy of love, though he may never have seen but merely have heard of them. But how much more will he be moved to love a thing when he sees it!

On the other hand, if a man does not love something worthy of love, though he sees it, how much less will he love it when he has not seen it! A person can see his brother or his neighbor while he cannot see God! If he loves God, how much more will he love his brother or his neighbor! On the other hand, if he does not love his brother whom he sees, how much less will he love God whom he cannot see!

Bear in mind, my friends, that with your eyes you see the good things your brother has and which he does for you. If you still do not love him, how much less will you then love God, He who it is who does so much good to you, and whose glory you do not see but can only believe! Moreover, with your eyes you see the misery of your brother, his sickness, his poverty, his nakedness, his tears, his need, his destitution. Now if you do not love your brother, but like the rich man in the Gospel close your heart and hands to his need which you see - how much less will you love God, in whom you see no need whatever of your love!

Doubtless he who does not wish to do the easier and the lesser thing will much less want to do the more difficult and the greater. For "if any man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar; for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?"

In our text John adds, "And this commandment have we from him, that he who loveth God love his brother also." Here the holy apostle gives a second reason why love to God must necessarily reveal itself in love to one's brother. It is because God *commanded* love of our brother just as much as love of God. The conclusion of the apostle is that one cannot possibly love him whose will one does not wish to fulfill. This conclusion is also completely irrefutable. Tell me yourself, would you believe that he who continually does the opposite of what you want and thereby insults and offends you, loves you? Certainly not! You would rather conclude from his attitude that he *hates* you.

God had written the command of love toward our brother just as love toward God in the hearts of all men. He also repeatedly impressed both commands in His revealed Word in every possible way. Yes, in His Word God declares that because He Himself does not need our service of love, He wishes to be served in our brethren. Christ says that His sentence on Judgment Day will be: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my *brethren*, ye have done it unto *me*." (Matthew 25:40). And James testifies, "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction." (James 1:27).

But still more. God wants to have nothing to do with our worship as long as we do not give the necessary service of love to our brethren. Christ says, "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and *go thy way*; first be reconciled to thy brother, and *then* come and offer thy gift." (Matt. 5:23,24). If love toward one's neighbor demands it, we should leave even the outward service of God and serve our neighbor instead, and know that right then we serve God.

What shall we think of him who in his deeds denies love of neighbor while pretending to have love of God in his heart? John answers this in our text, "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar. For," the same apostle remarks soon after in our text, "this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments." (I John 4:20a, 5:3a).

God has commanded, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Therefore, whoever does not love his neighbor does not keep God's commandments but despises them, and hence does not love God but is still God's enemy.

Love of God and one's brother are completely inseparable one from the other, as the stream is from the spring. For love of neighbor flows from love of God. Where one is, there is also the other; and where one is not, there the other is not.

Oh may God let His love to *us* in Christ be known to us all! Then the fire of our love of Him will not only take fire in our hearts, but also *brotherly love* will break forth in desires, words and deeds, as a flame of the Lord. May God then also preserve us all in this love here through faith till our end. Then we will enjoy God's love in eternity. For "God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him." Amen

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