Under the Cross: Loving Those Who Won’t Love You Back

Love is a word tossed around and used for just about anything. In English we let context determine the meaning of the word. I could tell you, “I absolutely love my wife!” and “I absolutely love that dinner I had last night.” You, the listener of course, are supposed to gather that the love I have for my wife is far different and greater than the love I had for a particular meal. I have no issues loving the food I just ate, because I have no expectations that it will in some way love me back! But my wife on the other hand, I expect will reciprocate the love I have poured out. But, what if she didn’t? Does this free me from my obligation to love her?

The world has shown us that there are many ways to answer this. However, we’re Christians. So how do we answer them? It all begins with the word love, ἀγαπάω (ag-ap-ah'-o). This is a common word for love in the New Testament, but it doesn’t have the same common meaning that we ascribe to love most often in our language. This love seeks out the highest good for the one receiving it. It is used to describe God’s love toward us and our love toward our neighbor. In order to understand love to the highest good of another, we must see it as God sees it. “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” 1 John 4:10

What had God determined to be our highest good? Our salvation. Thus, God the Father sent forth His only begotten Son into the fallen and sinful world to redeem all the people from their sins and reconcile them back to Himself. It was necessary, therefore, that Jesus live a perfect life and be obedient to the will of the Father, even to death on the cross. Jesus loved us by bearing our sins and suffering hell in our place. By His wounds, we are healed; by His blood, our sins are atoned for now and forever. This He did not do because we loved Him. No, for it is written, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:8

You see, God demonstrates His perfect love toward us that we might not only have the word, but also the example in which to follow. In Matthew 5:43-44 Jesus says, “‘You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,’” Here Christ gives us the most extreme example of the extent of love- to love those who seek your harm and desire your death. The love that God calls His children to is not the measly love of fine dining which is here today and gone tomorrow, but it is the love that seeks the highest good. This love is exemplified in the Son of God, who speaks from the cross, “Father, forgive them.” God does not love His creation because it loves him back; He loves His creation because He is merciful and gracious not desiring the death of the wicked.

We know that It is far easier to love those who love us back. Jesus goes on to say in Matthew 5, “For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so?”  Jesus is teaching the first step in bearing the cross- deny yourself. The self seeks to be loved and even demands to be loved. And the self is easily offended when it is not loved. The self is more eager to look for reasons not to love than to love. The Apostle Saint Paul, inspired by the Spirit writes, “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;  it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Who possesses such love, but our God alone.

Yet, this is a call to us, the children of God, to deny ourselves and pick up the cross and follow Christ. One of the greatest hindrances to love being perfected in us, is that we keep a record of wrongdoings. It is our way of having excuses not to show forth love or to be selective in whom we love and when we show love. But such foolish sin needs to be crucified with Christ. There is no vocation/duty of the Chrsitian that first requires one to have mutual love and respect. Rather you will see each vocation begins in the fear and love of God. We love because God has first loved us and has given His Son up on the altar of the cross as a sacrifice for our sins.

Does this mean that love is pain free? Absolutely not. Was Christ’s love toward the world without pain and rejection? Absolutely not. Even 2000 years later His sacrifice is rejected. Love suffers all things, even the pain of wrongdoings, like those inflicted by our enemies, our family members, our friends, our brothers and sisters in Christ because this love desires the highest good, which is nothing else other than the peace in the forgiveness of sins and salvation.

Can children show love and honor to parents who have let them down and hurt them? The answer is yes. It may be that they must show this love from a distance for a time, but nonetheless those children can pray for their parents and still respect their authority in things which do not violate the Word of God. It is often hard to despise the person you pray for God to help. Christian children, especially adult ones, should also stand ready to act when the opportunity to be merciful presents itself. We don’t honor parents because they deserve it. They still need the forgiveness of sins. We honor them because God chose them for us and Christ died for them. Of course, if there were a reciprocal love, it would make keeping the Fourth Commandment a true joy, but such is not always the case in this life. But still Christ calls us to deny ourselves and pick up the cross and follow Him. Will the steps of the child serving their parents be pain free? Most likely not. Every child, from young to old, will find a moment(s) when the only way forward to love and honor means to deny the self and pick up the cross.

Can the spouse keep honoring his/her marriage vows to one who does not love or care for him/her? The answer is yes. Marriage is hard. The joy of the wedding day does not always last throughout all the years. The Christian spouse loves not because love is reciprocated, but because God has commanded that husband and wife love and honor one another. Such a commitment is not easy and will at times even prove painful, because the self demands to be loved. It is not a bad thing to want to be truly loved by your spouse, but this can’t be the reason why you either love or stop loving. For, again, our example is Christ and the Church. He did not stop loving the Church even when, in every generation, His people had gone their own way and despised Him. Love seeks the highest good of the one being loved. If the wrongs suffered in the past are what fuel our choices, then what becomes of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross? It may be that a believing spouse must suffer much under an unbelieving spouse. Yet, again, God provides comfort saying blessed are you when others revile you for my name’s sake.

Can the citizens still honor and love elected officials of the state and nation when they promote evil and fail in their protection? The answer is yes. The prayers of the Church each week are a testament to this. The Church does not always agree with the governments with which she lives. Even at times she must stand opposed to them because of the evil which they promote, but she never stops loving the people and praying for their conversion. She does not let the wrongs suffered pull her from this course of faith. She calls all her citizens to faith, love, and prayer because her hope is not in this world, but in the world that is to come. Her love is not rooted in worldly favors, peace, or prosperity; she rejoices with the truth in the Gospel of the living Lord. Her prayer goes up in seasonable times and unseasonable because she follows the God who makes “His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” (Matthew 5:45)

Under the cross these relationships in which love is not reciprocated teach us to trust in God, live in humility, and to bear all things patiently. It will be at times especially trying for us mentally, physically, spiritually, emotionally, but when we live in love holding fast to Christ, even in the most trying of times, we have the opportunities to share His love, as we exemplify His mercy. Thank God for the days when you have some reprieve under the cross; when the weight is still heavy, but the path feels like soft grass under your feet. Pray also for patience when the days come when the weight of the cross is heavy and every step feels like walking barefoot on gravel. Remember that the Lord took His cross on the way before us and He has promised us the Holy Spirit, the comforter, to console us on our journey.