

# LEARNING TO LOVE

*“ Remember, the Lord forgave you,  
so you must forgive others.  
Most of all, let love guide your life.”  
Colossians 3:11*

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## **LOVE IS A DECISION**

To be loved is a basic need for all of us. And in order to be loved, we must love others. Love begets love, and vice versa. It is also the greatest commandment of God—that we love God and love others as we love ourselves.

Therefore, love is not basically a feeling or emotion—because we cannot reasonably be commanded to have a feeling. We cannot always control our feelings. But we can have control over our decisions and over our behaviour. Love is a decision and a behaviour. We are to love, whether we feel like it or not. And when we do, the feelings of love inevitably follow later.

Jay Adams, the well-known American Christian counsellor tells of a case where a married couple were determined to get a divorce—their marriage, they said, had reached the end—they have no love left for one another.

The counsellor said, “I’m sorry to hear that there is no love left in your marriage. That’s serious. If you don’t love one another there’s only one thing to do.” The couple thought - Good! He is going to advise divorce, which is what we want! But No! The counsellor went on to say, “You will both have to learn how to love one another.”

The wife said, “How can you learn to love? You can’t produce feelings out of the air.”

“I wasn’t talking about feelings,” said the counsellor, “I was talking about love. Love is not first of all a feeling. Rather it is first manifested through giving. You have to learn to give of yourself, even when the other party is not very loving or lovable toward you—and this is hard at times, but it can be done. If you both learn to do this, you can have a wonderful marriage.”

Whether we agree with this statement or not, there is one thing that counsellors worldwide agree upon—that love is a decision. It is within our will to decide to love.

As Jay Adams says, “God would not command us to do something which is not possible for us.”

And there is ample evidence that we can change our attitude by the exercise of our will and by practice—it can be done.

In fact—and this is something that very few people understand—all our behaviour is a decision—except for aberrations in behaviour due to mental illness.

It follows—as a leading counsellor has stated—that all behaviour modification is a learning process. We learn firstly by a decision, and then by practice to behave in a different way.

So, to improve our loving skills we need to do these things:-

1. To decide for ourselves that loving is a most important skill to learn, if not the most important. Jesus said that to love is the greatest and first commandment. So everything worthwhile and good and lasting in our lives depends upon loving. Loving is the foundation of every aspect of life.
2. To decide that we personally want to be highly skilled in this most important aspect of living. And not only that we want to, but that we intend to.
3. In the same way as we might decide to become a better gardener by watching gardening shows , reading gardening books, and actually getting out into the garden and planting things—so we learn as much as we can about loving by studying the subject from books, etc., and by putting what we learn into practice.

This booklet is intended to help in this. In it I will also be referring to some books which are very readable and helpful.

We will see that there are steps we can follow, and choose ones done easily at first. Later we can take more difficult steps which may take us some time to master. But if we really want to be a more loving person, and to attract more love to ourselves, we will find the journey of improvement an interesting and enjoyable—even fascinating and exciting—adventure.

## **Step 1 -- TO STOP BEING UNLOVING**

Where do we start, in our pursuit of improved skills in loving?

One way to start is to see if there are any unloving things we need to stop doing. Most of us do or say unloving things from time to time, or at least think unloving thoughts.

We can ask ourselves –

1. Do I say, or do, or think unkind or unloving things about someone in particular or about lots of people in general?
2. If I do, am I prepared to decide right now to change and to stop doing these things:?

Actually stopping may take some time to implement depending upon the degree to which our attitude has become ingrained, and the depth of our feelings.

The way to improve any attitude or action over a period of time is as follows:-

1. To note carefully and monitor the occasions on which we manifest the problem behaviour. If we are really serious it helps to actually record the occasions in a notebook.
2. As we find ourselves thinking the unkind or unloving thoughts, for example, and are about to say or do something unkind or unloving as a

result—we cut ourselves short as soon as we can. We say to ourselves—stop! This is not what I want to think, say or do. I must abort it, and find another approach. As we do this, and each time recommit ourselves to be more loving, we will find that the frequency of occurrence of our unloving thoughts, words, and deeds will diminish.

They not only become less frequent, but also less intense until at last they disappear altogether.

## **WE CAN CONTROL OUR ATTITUDES AND OUR BEHAVIOUR**

The next thing for us to do is much more difficult, and that is to replace our unkind and unloving words, actions, and thoughts with kind and loving ones. We will be discussing this at length in our later sessions. What we are saying here is that our first step is to give away entirely all our pet hates against individuals or against groups—for example, any racial biases we may entertain.

I say ‘entertain’ advisedly, because we typically tend to keep our pet hates alive and well by feeding and encouraging them—in many cases, we actually enjoy them. All this must change if we are to become more loving—more loving to everyone—there are no exceptions. We are even to love our enemies, and we will discuss this most difficult subject later.

And we are also saying that we must learn to control our attitudes, rather than our attitudes controlling us.

We do have complete control over our will and our actions, although many people do not realise this, and many also do not want to accept it.

Once we accept this truth—namely, that we are fully responsible for, and in control of our will and our behaviour—we cannot lay the blame for what we do upon circumstances, our nature, or other people. As Christians we need to be very careful not to blame circumstances such as unemployment,

loss of loved ones, poverty, our family background, etc., for our attitude or behaviour.

We can behave in loving ways, have loving actions, use loving words—even when we don't feel particularly loving.

Some people say this is being hypocritical—that is, feeling one way and behaving in another way—it is insincere.

There is a perfect answer to this. Let's ask ourselves—do we always feel like getting up in the morning and going to work or school? No! but we do it, because we know it's our responsibility to do it, and because it is for our greater good and the good of others to do it. Is this being a hypocrite? -- doing something that we know is right but which we don't feel like doing? No! certainly not! In fact, it is very admirable, and worthy of praise and commendation. The world is a far better place because people everywhere and in every age, have done what they believe is right irrespective of how they feel at the time, or how difficult, distasteful, or even dangerous, it may be.

## **GOD IS THE SOURCE OF LOVE**

Let us now explore the place of God in the development of our capacity to love. Jesus said that God's commandments could be summed up as to love God, and to love other people.

We do this in response to God's great love for us in giving his only Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross, taking upon himself the death penalty for our sins, so that whoever believes in him, that he died for them, shall not perish but have eternal life.

In order for us to respond appropriately and achieve the very highest and best in loving, we really need God's help. And in order to gain the highest and best in God's help, we really need to accept God's great provision for our life—for now and for all eternity. That is, we need to accept Jesus

Christ as our Saviour and our Lord. If you have not already done this and would like to receive God's free gift of forgiveness and eternal life, all you need to do is to pray to God as follows: "I accept Jesus as my Saviour and my Lord, and trust in Him alone for my eternal salvation."

When we make a sincere declaration of our acceptance of God's great plan for our life, now and eternally, in Jesus his Son—God promises us that the Holy Spirit will dwell with us, and help us to become more like Jesus.

In regard to love, God says through Paul in the book of Romans 5:5—*"God pours his love into our hearts by his Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."* The Bible also tells us that God is love. In 1 John 4:15 we read, *"Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him. God is love, and he who abides in love, abides in God, and God abides in him."* 'God is love' means that God is the author of love, the source and provider of love, to the people of the world.

So, in order to achieve the very highest skills in loving, it is necessary to accept Jesus, to have the help of God's Holy Spirit, and to have God's love poured into us.

But even those who do not accept God's great offer of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life through Jesus, can make major strides in improving their love life by following the steps we will be discussing. It will be more difficult without the liberating power of God's total love in our lives through faith in Christ. But wonderfully, God helps all those who aim to follow his great commandment to love one another—for whatever reason. As Jesus said, "God makes his sun to shine on the good and the evil, his rain to fall on the just and unjust."

So, much of God's blessing—including his gift of loving—are available to all people whoever they are, and whatever they believe. If then, you have not yet come to a place in your spiritual life, where you have accepted Jesus as your Saviour and Lord—do not be discouraged, thinking that you may not be able to improve your loving skills—this is not necessarily so.

But it is my wish for you that you will continue to seek God through Jesus who promised that ‘if you seek, you will find’.

Whether we trust in God to help us or not to improve our loving skills, the steps to be taken will be very much the same. But there is one particular step that the Christian will take in all circumstances and especially in the process of becoming more loving—the Christian will always take the matter to the Lord in prayer.

**Step 2** - For the Christian, after deciding to become more loving, is to pray each day that the Lord will pour his love into our heart by his Holy Spirit, and daily to increase our capacity and ability to love

## **OUR LOVE IS A WITNESS**

There is an aspect relating to God and love which is not understood widely even among Christians.

It is this – we glorify God through our love of other people. Jesus said, *“Let your light so shine before men, that they see your good works, and glorify your father who is in heaven.”*

Paul writes that in everything we do, we should glorify God, and Jesus says our good works are for this purpose also. We can see a great Christian principle expressed here.

People everywhere are looking for the meaning and purpose in life—and here it is—stated clearly – to glorify God. And it is mainly in our love for others that we glorify God in our lives. This could be the most important reason of all, for us to love others.

When people see love flowing from us as Christians they can accept that we worship a God of love, and God is thus honoured by our behaviour.

This can best be illustrated by considering the opposite. What reaction do people have to a Christian who does not behave as a Christian should—one who is aggressive, angry, irritable, argumentative, self-centred, complaining or criticising? The reaction is usually twofold:

1. To call the Christian a hypocrite.
2. To react adversely towards Christianity and towards our God.

I often hear people attack Christianity because of the way Christians behave—often citing the antagonism between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, and similar. This is despite the fact that this antagonism is directly in contradiction to Biblical principles, and God’s law of love.

So we love others in obedience to God, and so that others, seeing God’s love in us, will honour our God as a result. In particular, so that those who have not come to Christ will be intrigued and interested in considering doing so. Paul says in the Bible that he carefully considered his behaviour towards others so that he might win them to Christ. There is a wonderful example of this in the life of Rev. Richard Wurmbrand. He was imprisoned and tortured for 14 years by the Romanian communists. He was later describing a particularly horrible form of torture to an enquirer. The person said: “What did you do or say when you were tortured so horribly?”

Richard Wurmbrand said, “We told our tormentors that we loved them, because God loved them.” One of the communist guards said, “I want to know more about this God who loves like that.”

This is an extreme case but it illustrates the point very graphically for us. Every act of love, no matter how small, done in the name of Jesus, has the potential to turn someone towards our God. It gives God an opening he wants for his Holy Spirit to speak to the heart of another person—and, who knows, he might bring that person to himself—another soul is saved eternally, and we are true to our faith in Jesus. As a result we touched another life in a very special way—and God did what only he can do, and

what he does magnificently—saving another lost sheep from eternal despair.

Also Jesus said, in the parable of the sheep and the goats—that when we help the poor,

the sick, the lonely, the imprisoned, we are showing our love not only to them but to him. This is the way we show our appreciation and love for Jesus for what he did for us on the Cross -- saved us

- from the worst possible fate—eternal separation from God.
- for the best possible future---eternal bliss with him.
- at the greatest possible cost and suffering to himself.

So loving others is one of the most wonderful, beautiful, rewarding, and meaningful things we can do in our life. We owe it to God – we owe it to others, and we owe it to ourselves, to make it one of the great aims of our life – to learn about it and to practice it.

## **LOVE BRINGS ITS OWN REWARDS**

The first, the most important, the most effective, basic principle of loving is, of course, what we know as the golden rule -- “do to others as you would have them do to you.” This is the most loving approach we can take, and people everywhere accept this teaching of Jesus as fundamental in life. We accept it as the basis of goodwill between individuals, groups, and nations, and peace on earth.

Yet we often find it hard to do. There is a constant battle between our desire to serve God by being as loving, kind and helpful to others as we can, and our natural desire to serve our own immediate self-directed interests.

How can we make more progress in this? It will help if we can really understand and accept how very important it is to us personally to be loving to all people and in all circumstances. Of course, to the Christian

there is no option but to love, because it is the very basis of Christian living.

But God gives us personal reasons why it is important to us to be loving, and it is very helpful and important to us that we explore and understand these reasons.

1. Firstly, when we love others we will receive love from them in return; not necessarily always, and in every circumstance, and from every person –BUT most of the time and with most of the people.
- 2 . Secondly, and more importantly, if we are obedient to God, and love others, God promises to reward us greatly.

Jesus said, *“Give and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”*

We learn from these promises that we can expect to get wonderful rewards for giving our love.

It is interesting to note that, in the Bible, God frequently tells us that when we do what he says we benefit greatly as a result.

God almost seems to be giving us a selfish or self-oriented way of looking at his commandments. He says, in effect, if you do what I say you will get good results for yourself.

And this applies to love. If we want to be loved we must first love others.

This principle was demonstrated by God himself, who first loved us, and gave himself for us in his Son.

So it all starts with me—with each individual. We must not wait to receive love before we give it—but we must be the first to give.

But we do not give in order to receive. We give in obedience to God and in the interests of the other person.

When we give someone a gift which they appreciate very much, we are pleased because of their pleasure. But we did not give the gift in order that we might receive pleasure, but that they might. Our pleasure is a result of giving, but not a reason for giving.

So when we give our love it is an unselfish giving—not for what we can get out of it—but given because of what we have already received from God. It's a response to God's love, therefore without any ulterior or self-centred motive—pure and undefiled.

Did you every stop to think that there is only one unselfish motivation for doing something which brings us rewards? That motive is in evidence when we feel so indebted to another person, and want to show it so much, that we give without any thought of ourselves. It is only when we realise fully what Jesus saved us from—the worst possible fate—and what he saved us for—the best possible future—and at what an enormous cost to himself he saved us—that we can really give that full measure of unselfish love to others—and to all others—not just a few.

## **TAKING AN INTEREST IN THE OTHER PERSON**

Let us look more closely at the importance of doing to others as we would have them do to us.

If we just take this literally we may make the mistake of thinking that if we like to be treated in a certain way, we should treat everyone else in that same way—but should we? Suppose the other person in a particular situation wished to be treated differently—and not in the same way we might like to be treated—is it loving to do so? I think not! Doing to others as we would have them do to

us, means treating them as they like to be treated—because that is what we like to have happen to us.

This leads us to a very important point—before we can be really loving towards another person in this way, we need to come to understand them. We need to get to know them and their likes and dislikes. This means that an essential part of learning to love is learning to take an interest in other people. We need to show that we care about them—what they think, and what they need.

A very practical place to start is to become a good listener. So the initial steps in learning to love more effectively are:-

1. To set the direction of our will towards being more loving—to decide to love.
2. To pray to God for help in loving—that his love will be poured into our heart.
3. To concentrate upon becoming a very good and active listener.

Listening to others has two very important aims.

1. To understand the other person so that we can respond to them lovingly.
2. To uplift the other person because of the interest in them which listening demonstrates. When we listen attentively and supportively to another person—that in itself is an act of love, which gives the other person a great sense of well-being.

Listening skills are not as widely evident in our community as they could be. Quite often those who are good talkers are not such good listeners. Anyone who occupies much more than 50% of a two-way conversation is probably not listening enough. The same applies to those who take more than one-third of a three-way conversation.

Good talkers often make the mistake of thinking that others enjoy hearing all about their experiences, their family doings, etc. —so they tend to go on

at length about these things, which interest them. This is fine up to a certain point—and so long as just as much, if not more, time is spent listening to, and exploring the other person's experiences, etc.—and if we want to be particularly loving, we will make sure that we spend more time listening than we spend talking.

A good listener is someone who empathises with the other person—and empathising needs to be learned and practised in order to develop skill.

What are empathising skills?

1. Firstly, we start with a decision to actually build others up by listening to, and hearing, what they are saying—a decision to empathise.
2. Secondly, we develop the practice of asking questions which keep the other person talking.

Two kinds of questions are important:-

1. questions about facts—that is, what happened, their experiences, etc.
2. questions about their thoughts, feelings, opinions.

The first kind of question is very important because it shows we are interested in what the other person is telling us about. But the second kind of question is even more important for two reasons.

1. When we ask someone what they think about something, we are finding out something about them as a person.
2. We are paying them a compliment by the inference that we consider their viewpoint to be important.

If you just reflect for a moment on how pleased you are when someone asks your opinion and really listens to it and values it—this gives a great lift.

So this is one of the most loving things we can do, and we all can learn to do it with practice.

## **LOVING OUR ENEMIES**

We now turn to a most difficult subject—perhaps the most difficult aspect of loving; that is—how do we love the unlovable? How do we love those who treat us badly? How do we love our enemies.

One of the best treatments of the subject I have come across is in the book “Mere Christianity” by C.S. Lewis, in the chapter on ‘Forgiveness’.

He points out that we are to love others as we love ourselves. He says—

*“Now we don’t always think of ourselves as particularly nice and lovable. Sometimes we see ourselves as not very nice, if we are honest with ourselves. But we always love ourselves and want the best for ourselves.*

*This leads us to a great truth. It is not necessary to think someone a nice person in order to love them. It’s not the case with ourselves, and it’s not the case with others.*

*This is an enormous relief. For many people think that loving your enemies means making out that they are really not so bad after all, when we know that this is not the case. So I am allowed to hate some of the things my enemy does, but I am not allowed to hate my enemy. We can hate the sin but not the sinner. And this is exactly what we do in our own case. Isn’t it true that we can look upon some of the things we have done with great distaste—even loathing—yet still love ourselves and want the best for ourselves? In fact, one of the reasons why we hate the things we have done is because we love the person who did them. We are sorry that that person, namely ourselves, got into the position of doing those things which we regret.*

*So we need to look at our enemies—at those who use us badly—in the same way. Just as we are sorry that we did things we shouldn't have done, we must be sorry that other people do the things that they shouldn't, towards us or towards others.”*

C.S. Lewis goes on to say, *“The real test is this. Suppose one reads a story of terrible atrocities in the newspaper. Then suppose that something turns up suggesting that the story might not be quite true, or not quite so bad as it was made out. Is our first feeling ‘ Thank God, they are not as bad as that’, or is it a feeling of disappointment, and even a determination to cling to the first story for the sheer pleasure of thinking your enemies as bad as possible? If it is the second then it is the first step in a process, which if followed to the end, will make us into devils. We are beginning to wish that black were a little blacker.”*

If on the other hand we are genuinely pleased that the person is not so bad, we are wishing the best for them—and this is another way of saying that we are being loving towards them. How can we change from wishing ill towards those whose actions we don't like—to wishing the best for them.

Firstly, in obedience to God we must decide that we want to be loving towards those who offend us. We must be prepared to give up that sinful pleasure we get at their misfortune.

We must accept that “There but for the grace of God go I.” I could be like that person if I had faced the same circumstances.

So we substitute the pleasure of serving God for the sinful pleasure of hating our enemies. The story is told of a girl whose mother was brutally murdered. The murderer was convicted and sent to prison. The girl decided, in obedience to God, to love the murderer by visiting him in gaol and forgiving him.

As a result, the murderer came to love the Lord and was saved.,

This is our model. This girl substituted the joy of leading another soul to salvation for the sinful pleasure of a lifetime of hatred and bitterness from an unforgiving spirit.

So we love our enemies by wishing the best for them, but not necessarily feeling fond of them, or saying that they are nice when they are not. Of course, the best we can wish for anyone is that they should come to know the Lord, and we can pray for this as we are commanded by Jesus when he, *“pray for those who despitefully use you..”*

## **HEALING BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS**

Another situation which creates a difficulty for us is when there is a breakdown in relationship between ourselves and another which leads to open conflict. It is not unknown for Christians as well as non-believers, to have seriously fractured relationships with other people, even with family members. And there is no guarantee that such breakdowns will always be fully healed, and loving relationships re-established. But it is our responsibility before God to do what we can to heal broken relationships. Usually in these situations there has been some anger, some harsh words, animosity—a chasm has opened up, and there are deep wounds which need to be healed or they will continue to fester and perhaps get worse with time. What are we to do in such situations?

It's our natural tendency, when we have a falling out with someone, to place the blame on the other person, and to absolve ourselves of any responsibility for causing the difference.

Occasionally it happens that one party is to blame for a breakdown in relationships, but it is more often the case that there is some responsibility on both sides.

If it happens that we are not responsible for causing a break in relationships we may well be responsible for allowing the break to continue without taking the necessary steps in love to heal the break. For each one of us is

held responsible by God to take the steps that he prescribes in his word to heal our differences.

If we are at fault we are to apologise and seek the forgiveness of those whom we have wronged. There is a simple and clear formula for doing this—simple to state, simple to understand, but not necessarily simple to do, because it means swallowing our pride and admitting that we were wrong. Although this can be difficult, it is one of the most loving things we can do, and one of the most rewarding.

1. We actually say the words “I am sorry and wish to apologise, what I did (or said) was wrong and I admit it.”
2. We actually go on to say the words,—and this is most important—“will you please forgive me?”

Now, quite often at this point the other person is embarrassed, and may change the subject or fail in some way to actually address the question we have asked-- “Will you forgive me?” If this happens we need to do the difficult thing again and come back to our question, “Will you forgive me?” When we have at last received the deeply desired forgiveness, the relationship is set for renewal, and rebuilding can commence.

If the other person is responsible for the break in relationships then our duty towards them is also clear—we are to forgive them. We are not hold a grudge against anyone. Not only is this the most loving thing to do and so honouring to God, and helpful to the other person—but, and this is a very, very, important BUT—it is the basis on which we will be forgiven. Jesus made it very clear when he said:

*‘Your heavenly Father will forgive you if you forgive those who sin against you; but if you refuse to forgive them, he will not forgive you.’* And we pray in the Lord’s prayer, “*forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*”

It is very, very clear and there is no way out of it—our very life with God in eternity is dependent upon it—if we do not forgive we will not be forgiven.

A little reflection will tell us that it must be like this. How could God forgive us on another basis than this. But you might reply, doesn't the Bible say two other things as well:

1. We are forgiven on the basis of Jesus death on the cross.
2. "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins."

Yes—to both of these propositions.

We are forgiven on the basis of Jesus death if we repent of our sins and believe in him. But if we are refusing to forgive others we are not being repentant—we are not yielding our lives to Jesus, and therefore we are only saying we belong to him, while our actions declare our true spiritual state.

Similarly with God's forgiveness when we confess our sins—as well as confess, we must repent—that is, turn away from our sins—and especially the sin of unforgiveness.

## **WRITING LETTERS OF LOVE**

The steps in forgiving and seeking forgiveness are:-

1. We take the matter to the Lord in prayer—a good way to start in any difficult situation.
2. At the same time we take a definite decision to be loving and to be forgiving—we remember that love is a decision and a behaviour, not a feeling. So we don't wait until we feel forgiving before we forgive, and behave accordingly. We confess our faults to the Lord in repentance and ask for his help to bridge the gap.
3. Under the guidance of God's word, we begin the work of healing the breach. How can we be forgiving if we don't feel forgiving? Firstly, we

can ask ourselves the question, how would I behave towards this person if I really felt loving towards them and wanted to act in love toward them? We then proceed to act as if we were loving and forgiving, whether we feel like it or not. The feeling will come later—the loving actions must come first. Sometimes it helps to have an intermediary—a go-between—in difficult situations where there has been a breakdown in a relationship—a mutual friend, or Christian counsellor, or minister. Another course which can be very effective, and which is not as widely used as it could be, is to write a letter. In a letter, we can carefully construct what we want to say, and make it as warm, friendly, and loving as we wish. We can write a draft, and edit it a number of times until we have it right. In some circumstances we can get a Christian counsellor, or other specialist, to look it over and offer suggestions for making the letter more effective. Very few people can resist a loving letter.

It is usually something they treasure deeply, and respond to positively. If our first letter does not bring immediate results, or even if it should produce no result, or a negative response—we need not take this as defeat. We can allow some time to pass and write again—and again—and again. If we continue in love and continue in prayer, we can trust God to melt the hardest heart. And while we are doing this we are being loving, we are being obedient to God—our conscience is clear, we are not harbouring a grudge, and God will forgive us and open the doors of his kingdom to us.

## **WHAT IT MEANS TO REALLY LOVE**

This is a good time to remind ourselves of what the Word of God says about love, through Paul. In 1 Corinthians 13: *“Love is very patient and kind, never jealous or envious, never boastful or proud, never haughty or selfish or rude. Love does not demand its own way. It is not irritable or touchy. It does not hold grudges, and will hardly even notice when others do it wrong. It is never glad about injustice, but rejoices whenever truth wins out. If you love someone you will be loyal to him no matter what the*

*cost. You will always believe in him, always expect the best of him, and always stand your ground in defending him.”*

Since we are to be loving towards everyone, whether we like what they do or not, then we need to be careful also that what we say about others is not unloving. As Paul writes in his letter to Titus—believers “*must not speak evil of anyone, nor quarrel, but be gentle and truly courteous to all*” . And in Colossians 3:11: “*Be gentle and ready to forgive, never hold grudges.*”

## **DOING LOVING THINGS**

One of the most loving things we can do for other people is to encourage them, and to build them up—to edify them as the Bible says. There are so many ways in which we can do this, such as—

1. We can actually look for opportunities to compliment people and to positively reinforce them. Every time we meet someone or talk to them we can make it a practice to say something which is complimentary, encouraging and edifying. If someone else expresses appreciation for someone we know, we can pass this on to them. And we can tell others how much we appreciate a person—thus spreading loving thoughts everywhere we go.
2. On the other hand, if we know things which are not really acceptable about other people—we can refrain from mentioning them and discussing them. We can refrain from criticising them and from gossiping about them—this is not loving, and is strictly forbidden in the Bible.

We can also discourage others from speaking evil about other people. How can we do this? Two ways—the best way is to try to change the subject or move the discussion away from criticism or gossip. Or we can defend the person if we wish to, thus combatting criticism. We have heard the expression, “If you can’t say anything good

about a person, don't say anything at all" . And no doubt we've heard it said of someone, perhaps at a memorial service after they have died, "they never had a bad word to say about anyone". The question each one of us must ask ourselves is this—

“Can these words be said about us?” If not, we have some work to do in improving our loving skills.

Another thing we can do is to keep confidences and not repeat to others what has been discussed—particularly things of a personal nature. There are those who think it quite normal and O.K. to repeat whatever is mentioned by others.

This can be a very dangerous practice, and may result in people being very careful about what they say to us, in case it is repeated. It may even become a reason for others to avoid us.

We mentioned earlier about the importance of being a good listener. But we can go further than this. We can take note of and remember what others tell us and make use of the information to show our caring and love. Some examples:-

1. When we next meet the person we can make sure we refer back to things they confided to us as being significant last time we met. We can ask such questions as “How did you get along with your visit to the doctor?” or whatever is appropriate.
2. We can look out for any information or resources which will help them cope with a situation that concerned them, when last we met. It might be an article in the paper or a magazine, or a sermon we hear in church, which has been taped.
3. We can take a note of other people's birthdays and remember them—put them in our diary or in our computer.

4. We can take note and remember the names of their children, and ask them how they are getting along—or details of their interests, hobbies, concerns, etc.

Loving means caring and giving—giving of our interest, our time—perhaps our money and our resources on occasions. Among members of our immediate family, our spouse, our children, our parents or siblings, there are specific things we can do to increase our demonstration of love. We can always be as courteous and considerate of our kindred as we are of strangers. This may sound a little odd at first hearing, but let's think about it for a moment.

How many times do we say things to our children or our spouse, which we would never dream of saying to a stranger—lest we should offend them?

Things such as “don't be ridiculous”, or “that's silly”, or “keep quiet”, not to mention even worse, like “shut up”, etc.

It is interesting that we often seem to think that familiarity with family gives us right to treat them and speak to them discourteously. We seem to feel we can relax with them and say just what we like. But with strangers we feel we must be very circumspect. But, you know, a case could be made that the very opposite is the truth. The more we love someone, namely our family, the more kind, gentle, considerate, and courteous we ought to be. So why don't we start right now, if we haven't already done so, and treat every member of our family at least as courteously, gently, and kindly as we would anyone else.

To conclude, then, there is nothing more important in life than to learn how to love—to love everyone—our friends and our enemies—those who treat us well and those who don't—those whose behaviour we approve of, and those whose behaviour we disapprove of. Our love must be unconditional as God's love is for us. For while we were yet sinners and his enemy, God met us in his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, and brought us home.