
PASSING THE LOVE TEST

Cynthia C. Datu

I. Introduction: Broken Relationships

I once knew a church that suffered from schizophrenia. It was nominally headed by a dear old Pastor who loved tradition and very much wanted to pass it on to the baby Christians in the congregation. His Associate Pastor, a young, dynamic preacher who actually led the Church, didn't agree. He felt that the young believers were bored by the Church's heavy liturgical style and wanted something fresh and exciting to get them going.

The two heads crowded on the body, and the people suffered the tension (though they hardly understood it). The split, when it came, was painful, as all splits are. The Church was divided 60-40, with the majority joining the young "Captain of their Fate" in a new fellowship at some other venue, while the remnant rallied around their Old Leader, licking their wounds, heads bloody but unbowed. Months after the incident, both sides remained unbudgeable.

I entered the church at that point, oblivious to everything but the lingering tension. Soon, the story was relayed to me in hushed tones, ending with the unspoken question, "Are you on our side?" I didn't know what to say. I felt I was being recruited, but I didn't know what for. Best not to take any side, I thought. Best not to form any bonds here. It might be dangerous.

As it turned out, I stayed a year in that church without making any real friendships. The first impression of broken relationships had cut into me, and cut deep. I was afraid to get involved because I was afraid of getting hit in the crossfire. Both sides thought they *knew* what was

best—but that knowledge, it seemed to me, was underdone because it hadn't been warmed with love. A young Christian myself, I believed this new life was *all about love*. It was a shock to witness such goings-on in the church I had turned to for refuge.

II. The Knowledge That Counts

This is not a new story. The apostle John faced a similar situation in the Ephesian church during the latter decades of the first century. He was up against members who claimed to know all there was to know about God (but didn't, of course). Now, they were very impressive and did quite a job of intimidating the others with a lot of big words and disdainful gestures. As a result, the church was near division. In the midst of this confusion, John—the very one who had laid his head upon Jesus's breast and known His tenderness—enjoined them to "Love one another" (v. 7). It was the only way he knew how to solve the problem.

Let's take a closer look at this. I ask you, is it really possible to know all there is to know about God? Of course not, because God always exceeds our intellect. Still, there are certain things that we, who are members of His Body, already know about Him.

A. We know about His grace (vv. 8-12).

John declares that God is love (v. 8). What a profound statement! It sounds like one of those slogans from the '70s, doesn't it? Only it's more than pseudo-intellectual talk; it's fact. God's very nature is love, His very essence is love. How do I know this? Well, mainly because Yahweh, the Almighty, my great, pure and holy Lord, magnificent Sovereign of Creation, took the time to bother Himself with puny, tainted, sinful me.¹ From His pinnacle He saw me stuck in the mud of sin and reached way down to pull me out. And His grace was sufficient to cleanse me and make me what I am now, a new person in Him.

This is something He did not have to do. We are all, every one of us, here now because of His grace. And when we speak of grace, we

¹David Jackman, *The Message of John's Letters* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 117.

inevitably speak of Jesus, because He was that “hand” reaching down to us, pulling us out of the muck. Jesus is the means by which God initiated our rehabilitation. Jesus is the perfect expression of God’s love.

Jesus enabled us to have a relationship with God (vv. 9-10).

Jesus, the Son of God, knows everything there is to know about love. He showed us perfectly how to love, first, by making Himself “nothing”—that is, by coming to earth as a man . . . and not just as a man, but as a servant (Phil 2:6-7); second, by offering His very life on the cross as an atonement for our sins so that we might have eternal life in the presence of the Father in heaven (John 3:16; vv. 9-10).

Before Jesus came into my life, I had no relationship with the Father. Sin had broken it. But when I met Jesus, He healed that broken relationship with the balm of His shed blood. If that isn’t love, I don’t know what is; He himself said that there is no greater love than this (John 15:13). Now, out of gratitude for what Jesus has done, I love Him back—with all my heart, my mind, my soul, and my strength. I don’t do it because I have to; I do it because I want to. It’s not enough for me just to be saved, I want to be totally His. I’m like those old Israelite slaves who joyfully declared, “I love my master!” and had their ears pierced to symbolize lifelong slavery and loyalty to their owner *even if they could go free* (Exod 21:5-6). I don’t want to be free *from* Jesus because I am free *in* Jesus! (Gal 5:1). He has bought me with His love, and I thankfully reciprocate with my own love. How can I not?

This relationship makes God visible to the world (vv. 11-12).

However, I am not just Jesus’s slave, I am His friend. I have a relationship with Him, one of intimacy and joy. But Jesus set a condition for our friendship—obedience. He said, “You are my friends if you do what I command” (John 15:14), and He declared, “My command is this: Love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:13). Here is the sticking point: how often and how much do I obey Him in this? How often do you?

In verse 12, John remarks that no one has ever seen God. This is true, because God is Spirit. I want to suggest, though, that God becomes visible to others through our love.

I have a friend who is a cell leader and who is now a junior in Faith Bible College. We were classmates for one year, and I saw how hard she applied herself to the work. But every other day, after the schoolwork, she would visit her cell members to see how they were, without fail. Every single one. It isn't surprising that she had one of the fastest growing groups in her district, and that she is now handling two cells and two sub-groups. Her love for her fellow-Christians taught *them* how to love, and it became a means for them to attract non-believers into the group. It is quite true that love among Christians is one of the Church's most powerful magnets.² As we become (or incarnate) Jesus to others, we spread His love and build His Kingdom.³ We also experience life in Him more fully as He perfects His love in us and makes us more Christ-like (v. 12, *cf.* v. 17 Phil. 3:10-11).

B. We know that we live in Him (vv. 13-15).

We can “afford” to be Christ to others because we are assured of our “riches” in Him. We know this because the Spirit Himself testifies to it (v. 13; Rom 5:5). God has created a way to make His presence known to His children, to help us discern between the true and the false spirits (*cf.* vv. 1-2),⁴ and between real knowledge and pseudo-knowledge. We don't need to speculate, because what John saw in the flesh (v. 14) we now experience in Spirit. There is no “generation loss” (in today's computer language). There is no distortion of the image over time. We have Him in much the same way John saw Him—and yes, even better than John did before Pentecost—because He lives in our very hearts. And so we can confess with certainty that Jesus is indeed Christ and Lord (v. 15; Rom 10:9-10) and become trustworthy messengers of His love to others.

²Jackman, *Message*, 122.

³Ralph Neighbour, Jr., *The Arrival Kit: A Guide for Your Journey in the Kingdom of God* (Houston: Touch Ministries, 1993), 102-103.

⁴*Hebrews to Revelation*, The Wesleyan Bible Commentary, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966), 353.

C. We know that God loves us and that we can rely on His love (vv. 16-19).

Having seen all that God has done for us and in us through Jesus, we really have no reason to doubt His love, do we? If my father raised me from infancy to adulthood, fed me, clothed me, schooled me, and told me he loved me every day of my life, wouldn't it be mean of me to believe otherwise? The same is true for our heavenly Father. In fact, we don't only *not doubt* but we can go to the other side of the scale and *rely* (depend, stand) on the power of His love. That means we have the confidence to claim all the promises He has given to us and their fulfillment in Christ. We don't need special esoteric knowledge to be assured of that. We just know and believe.

That is the beauty of relationship. If I walk with God, I know when I am near Him, enjoying the promises, or when I am far from Him, missing out. No one tells me this; I can see it for myself. I *know* because I am the one doing the walking. But to help me out, the Holy Spirit nudges me when I'm in danger of going too far, and I *believe* Him because His word is true. This is His love at work again, and He grants me this favor because we abide in each other (v. 16). We are in fellowship, and I cannot make a right move without Him, thank God!

Now understand this: if you and I are walking *with* Him, we are not walking *away* from Him. This is why we don't have to be afraid on judgment day . . . our relationship with Him has driven this fear from us (vv. 17-18). We are not talking about the normal, everyday fears here, of course, like the fear of danger, or the fear of injury. These exist to warn and protect us. The fear that is in view here is the fear of punishment that has to do with guilt;⁵ and this we have none of because [1] He is faithful and just to forgive our sins when we confess (1:9), and [2] significantly, He also makes us like Him in this world (v. 17). And so we not only enjoy freedom from the penalty of sin and look forward to eternal life, but we also continue to experience His cleansing that makes us more and more like Him *in this present life*. As we continue to

⁵W. E. Vine, et al., *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 230.

surrender more of ourselves to Him, He brings His love to completion in us and frees us from the power of sin.

III. Conclusion: Keeping and Forming Relationships

John ends this passage by concluding that “We love because He first loved us” (v. 19). We have been talking for some time about the truth of that—about how God’s love expressed through Jesus motivates us to manifest that love to others. At this point, it would be good to go through a brief period of *examen*. Do we pass the love test (vv. 20-21)?

In our zeal to love the Father, we sometimes succumb to legalism—observing strict ethical rules to keep us from falling into unholiness. However, we should be careful how to understand holiness. It can never mean judgment and ungracious criticism of “sub-standard” morality. It does and always means love in the context of our relationships with God and others.

Allow me to usher you now into quiet reflection on your relationship with the Father. How is your walk with Him? Are you managing to find time daily to spend in conversation with His word and communion with Him in prayer? Are you in touch with His Spirit? Do you receive regular promptings that guide you on the way?

How are your relationships with the brethren? Are you on good terms with your cell leader and groupmates? Is there anyone you need to forgive, or who needs to forgive you? Is your cell alive with love, and is that love a magnet that attracts unbelievers to your group?

Finally, are there attitudes you need to change, biases that need to be discarded? Ask the Holy Spirit now to teach you to love as Jesus loves. The key word is acceptance.

May the Spirit guide you into His truth and perfect His love in you.