



Truth

On Tough Texts

WWW.THESCRPTUREALONE.COM

A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

ISSUE 56 (March 2010)

“We Band of Brothers”

1 John 4:20-21

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.¹

Among the many things I read on a daily basis, both joy and profit come from reading a little Shakespeare.² Among my favorites of his plays is *Henry V*. In one of the most dramatic scenes in the history of English literature, Henry is speaking to his troops before the Battle of Agincourt in France (1415). The heavily armed French knights were standing between the English troops and Calais, the port city that Henry’s band needed to reach for their return to England. War weary and suffering from dysentery, morale was low as the dwindling band gazed upon the overwhelming, four-to-one, force of the French knights. Rising to the occasion, however, King Henry stood before his men and spoke words of encouragement that rallied them together and carried them to victory. While the incident was true, Henry’s speech is fiction, but it still serves to underscore the critical nature of unity in a fighting force, whether in medieval or modern times. Dubbed the St. Crispin’s Day Speech, the core of it reads:

This story shall the good man teach his son;
And Crispin Crispian shall ne’er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be rememberèd;
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne’er so vile,

This day shall gentle his condition:
And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin’s day.³

Interestingly, there seems to be no doubt that Shakespeare was, in fact, the first to use the term *band of brothers* in classical literature. It has appeared several times since, such as in Friedrich Schiller’s play *Wilhelm Tell* in 1803. We find it often during the American Civil War. Stephen Douglas used it during the great Lincoln-Douglas debates. Frederick Douglass also used it in reference to his days in slavery. It even became a line in the second most popular war song of the South, “The Bonnie Blue Flag”: “We are a band of brothers, / And native to the soil, / Fighting for our liberty, / With treasure, blood, and toil.” The line also appears in the song “Hail Columbia,” which many have referred to as America’s first national anthem: “Firm, united, let us be, / Rallying round our Liberty; / As a band of brothers joined, / Peace and safety we shall find.” Finally, contemporary (though late) historian Stephen Ambrose titled one of his many books *Band of Brothers*, the true story of the 101st Airborne’s Easy Company, which fought with distinction at Normandy, the Battle of the Bulge, and on to the end of the war.

The theme in all this, of course, is a martial philosophy, where unity and unit cohesion is absolutely critical for victory. This should strike us all profoundly because Christians are, indeed, in a war, and unity among this *band of brothers* (and obviously *sisters*) is crucial. One of the most serious and devastating things that can occur in a

church body is a lack of love among believers for one another. Most of us have seen, to one extent or another, a lack of love among believers, and it is a heartbreaking thing to witness. I would, therefore, like to share my heart with you on this grave matter.

The story is told of an infant girl in a small Midwestern town who had been critically injured and was in desperate need of a blood transfusion, but no one could be found who had her rare blood type. Finally it was discovered that her 7-year-old brother had the same type of blood. The doctor took him into his office, held the youngster on his knee, and said, "Son, your sister is very, very sick. Unless we can help her, I'm afraid the angels are going to take her to heaven. Are you willing to give blood to your baby sister?" The young boy's face turned pale, and his eyes widened with fright and uncertainty. He appeared to be in great mental agony, but after a minute or so he half-whispered, "Yes, I will." The physician smiled reassuringly and said, "That's a fine, boy; I knew you would." The transfusion took place, but the 7-year-old, watching the tube carrying the life-giving fluid to his sister, seemed apprehensive. The doctor said, "Don't be nervous, son. It will all be over before long." At that moment big tears welled up in the little boy's eyes. "Will I die pretty soon?" he asked. It then became apparent that he thought he was giving up his own life to save his baby sister!⁴

THAT is love, the New Testament *agapē* (self-emptying self-sacrifice) love, the putting of someone else ahead of ourselves.

As the Apostle John recorded the words of our Lord Himself, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (Jn. 15:13). What does that say to us today, who are so concerned about our feelings, preferences, and sensitivities that such a thought would never occur to us? True love, however, lays down its life for another. Picking up on that truth and building on it, John wrote much about love for fellow believers in his first Epistle. In fact, he repeatedly mentions that *brotherly love is a major test of true Christianity*. It's tremendously significant that the word "commandment" (singular) appears seven times in John's first letter and the word "commandments" (plural) appears another seven, *and that each and every instance of the singular refers to the commandment to "love one another"* (2:7-8; 3:23; 4:21). In other words, this singular commandment is crucial to the Christian faith. Our feelings are irrelevant. What matters is that we truly love one another. As we will see, in fact, if we do not love each other, we do *not* love God and should therefore not even call ourselves Christians.

To put it another way, while John's *Gospel* was written that men might *believe* on Christ and have life (Jn. 20:31), his first *Epistle* was written that men might *know* they have that life (I Jn. 5:13). It is for that reason that John records many tests of true Christian life, *not the least of which is love for fellow believers*. Here is a major test of

true Christianity. Let us meditate on two thoughts: the *necessity* and *expression* of brotherly love.

I. The Necessity of Brotherly Love

John expressed the need for love among the brethren earlier in the epistle:

In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother (3:10).

We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death (3:14).

I have witnessed some professing Christians who simply can't stand certain individuals, who can't get along and love them. I've seen church fights and splits, and no word better describes this than *SIN*. This is not a minor issue, as we just read, rather a major problem. It reveals a heart of unrighteousness and even spiritual death.

John reiterates this truth in our main text with even more thundering force. He makes it crystal clear: if you say you love the *Lord*, but don't love your *brother*, it is a glaring contradiction. J. C. Metcalfe once wrote in *The Overcomer*:

There is much more that can be said about this link between the birth from above and the resultant entry into a completely new attitude, in which love is the predominant feature. The general life of the evangelical section of the church is a strange commentary on all this. The bitterness, strife, criticism, petty rivalry, and discourtesy which we so often meet raise the question as to the validity of our claims, and the value of those religious qualities and practices we consider to be so important. Do not Paul's pungent words in the first three verses of 1 Corinthians 13 need to be read again and again, and rigidly and honestly applied in our own lives? Experiences, gifts, soundness of knowledge, and ministry, faith, charity, and even supreme sacrifice are swept aside, and love is enthroned alone.⁵

Each of those listed practices are important, but without love none of them mean anything; they are vain, empty, and worthless. What practical effects this love has upon every relationship of the believer within the family of God! If we truly love *God* and keep His commandments, then we *will* love the *children* of God. That is an absolute. If we do not love other brothers, we do not love God, no matter how much we think or claim we do.

Paul's command to the Romans is equally unavoidable: "Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God" (Rom. 15:7). What a rebuke to, as Metcalfe just put it, our "bitterness, strife, criticism, petty rivalry, and discourtesy." How this exposes our excuses

for mistreating our brethren in Christ, either in deed or in word! To claim a love for God and at the same time to reject, despise, mistreat, and criticize those who are brethren in the same family is a staggering contradiction. It shows a heart of selfishness, self-centeredness, and sin.

A striking illustration of the operation of love for the brethren appears in the experience of the early church at Jerusalem (Acts 11). In one Spirit the believers there had been baptized into one body. Subsequently, Simon Peter was sent by God to a Gentile household in Caesarea. Accompanying him were some believing Jews from Jerusalem, and they were astonished that the Gentiles had also received the Holy Spirit. The apostles and brethren that were in Judea had heard what happened in the household of one who was not a Jew. Peter was summoned to Jerusalem to explain why he had gone into the home of a “Gentile dog” (as Gentiles were dubbed). These Jewish Christians were filled with prejudice, *but that was inexcusable*, for they all, Jew *and* Gentile, had experienced the love of God in Christ. Peter concluded his report to them with these words, “Forasmuch, then, as God gave them the same gift as He did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, what was I, that I could withstand God?” (v. 17). The love of God in those Christians at Jerusalem then manifested itself in brotherly love for the new members of God’s family who were Gentiles: “When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life” (v. 18).

What an indictment that is! If first century Jews and Gentiles could lay aside their differences, and even centuries of hatred, and get along with each other, is it not reasonable that we today can set aside our feelings and petty differences and love each other?

Now, we can partially understand why those Jewish believers were at first unwilling to accept as brethren the Gentiles in Caesarea—after all, they were new to the group, from different backgrounds, practiced different customs, possessed different gifts, and so forth. *But their reluctance was still inexcusable*. For believers to refuse to accept in Christian love others who know the same Savior, who have been regenerated by the same Holy Spirit, and who are members of the same body, is to disobey the direct command of our Lord and causes us to question seriously their love for the Lord.

As John mentions earlier in the letter, “We love Him, because He first loved us” (4:19). What else can we do? Romans 5:5 declares, “The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given unto us.” We also read, “The love of Christ constraineth us” (2 Cor. 5:14). Therefore, love for fellow believers is the evidence of a true love for God. Remember, *we are all in the same family*. This love is to be active toward all who are of the household of faith. They may be agreeable or disagreeable, but that is not the issue. The reason for loving them

is that they are born of God, saved by the same Savior, members of the same body. In the very next verse after our text (5:1), John adds, “Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him.” If we truly love our Lord, our “Elder Brother” (Rom. 8:29), we will also love every one of His “siblings.” Part of the “divine nature” that Peter refers to (2 Pet. 1:4) is that of love, and this love fellowships not only with God but with all who know Him. “For this is the love of God,” John writes in 5:3, “that we keep His commandments: and His commandments are not burdensome.” Brotherly love must of necessity be a reality in the Christian’s life. Anything less is incongruous, contradictory, and, as we’ll see, destructive.

II. The Expression of Brotherly Love

It’s one thing to *say*, “Okay, I love my brother in Christ,” but quite another to *show* it. Consider the love that Thomas Steward’s brother William had for him. Thomas injured one of his eyes with a knife. A specialist decided that it should be removed to save the other. When the operation was over and he recovered from the anesthesia, it was discovered that the surgeon had blundered by removing the *good* eye, so rendering the young man totally blind. Undaunted, Thomas pursued his studies in law at McGill University in Montreal. He was able to do this only by the aid of his brother William, who read to him and accompanied him through all the different phases of college life. The blind brother came out at the head of his class, while the other came second.

How many of us would be willing to do that for a fellow Christian? How many of us are even willing to do something far less dramatic for a fellow believer? In short, *how many of us are willing to be second?* Are we willing to set ourselves aside for another?

First John 3:17–18 provides a practical illustration of how to express our love for others:

But whoso hath this world’s good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.

In other words, “Okay, here is a Christian who sees a fellow believer who has a physical or spiritual need, but won’t do a single thing to help him, won’t pray for him, won’t encourage him, nothing. Just how in the world, then, does God’s love dwell in this Christian?” The answer is obvious—it doesn’t. Words are cheap, as the adage goes, and to say we love each other is empty unless we show it in our actions. *If we do not love our brother and treat him as God has treated us (Rom. 15:7), we do not love the Lord*. There are plenty of needs around—

needs of the body, of the mind, and of the soul—and we are to meet those as we are able.

John's point in our text is just such empty profession, professing that which actually is not true in one's life. **If a man say, I love God**—there's the *profession*—but **hateth his brother**—there's the *reality*—**he is a liar**. Strong words, indeed. John doesn't say the man is embellishing or just mistaken, rather knowingly lying. Our orthodoxy can be impeccable, our doctrine even precise—we've plumbed every prophecy, expounded every truth, exegeted every verse—but we can still hate our Lord because we hate one of His people. John continues, **for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?** In other words, if you can't love the one in front of you, you can't love the One above you. Finally John writes, **And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also**. It's automatic.

It's interesting that at least six verses begin in a similar way, three using the phrase, "If we say" (1:6, 8, 10), and three opening with the words, "He that saith" (2:4, 6, 9). Love and hatred are incompatible; they are opposites. Again, to say we love God while we hate another believer is to speak a lie (2:9; 3:15). *There is no middle ground here*. As a "son of thunder" (Mk. 3:17), John was not a soft spoken milquetoast, rather he thundered out the truth that if we say we love God and really believe that we love Him, but at the same time hate another, we are deceived. If we say we love the Lord, and we know that we do not love Him, we are a hypocrite and a liar. Likewise, if we say we love God, but don't love other believers, that too is hypocrisy. Why? Because those believers are part of Christ. *To mistreat a child of God is to mistreat the Lord Himself*.

We should interject here that this is one practical reason for observing the Lord's Table every Lord's Day (see TOTT #2). Our hearts should be right not only with God but with other believers before we come to that table (cf. Matt. 5:23–24 and I Cor. 11:27–29).

The beloved Bible teacher Lehman Strauss writes of his own struggle with our text:

Some years back I found it difficult to understand the words, "He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" It was easier for me to love God, because all I ever knew about Him was good. But I could see the flaws and faults and unattractiveness in some of my brethren, and I found it harder to love them. Then one day God made it clear to me, from this verse, that if I do not love my brother, whose failures and unattractiveness I see, it proves the love of God is not in me. Actually the verse assumes the two to be an impossibility.⁶

Could John have made the principle any clearer that the way you treat your brother is the test as to whether or not you really love the Lord? Anything less cannot be justified or defended. Neither can it be tolerated in a church and should be dealt with via church discipline, for it sows discord in the body (cf. Prov. 6:14, 19; Matt. 18:15–17; 1 Cor. 5:11, "railer"; Rom. 16:17–20).

Such behavior is nowhere exposed more dramatically than in our speech, which is why James takes such great pains in dealing with the tongue:

If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. (1:26)

Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell. (3:5, 6)

But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. (3:8)

How careful we must be in *what* we say and *how* we say it. One of the most tragic stories I have ever read was of the young sailor who called his parents after his release from the military. He said he was bringing his buddy home to stay with him. "You see, Mom," he said, "my friend is pretty badly broken up. He was severely wounded and has only one leg, one arm, and one eye." After a little reflection, the mother said grudgingly, "Of course, Son, I guess he can stay with us a *little while*. Her voice, however, carried the message that they would not like to be burdened very long with such a severely handicapped fellow. Two days later they received a telegram from the admiral's office, saying their son had plunged to his death from a hotel window. When his body arrived for burial, his parents saw that he had only one arm, one leg, and one eye! The memory of her last conversation with him lingered with that mother for the rest of her life. She often cried out, "Why didn't I speak more carefully, more lovingly? If only I could take back those thoughtless words 'he can stay with us a *little while*.' But it is too late now!"⁷

That woman's lack of love in her *heart* showed forth in her *voice*. And once she said it, the damage was irreparably done, just by the inflection of her voice. I have never forgotten one illustration of evil words I heard decades ago: Trying to take back something we said is like tearing open a feather pillow and then catching every feather before it hits the floor. We need to be reminded often that *we can say things that can never be fixed*.

As always, the beloved Harry Ironside forces us to meditate on God's Truth:

The way you treat your brother is the test as to whether or not you really love the Lord. "And this

commandment have we from Him, that he who loveth God love his brother also.” If you do not keep His commandments, you are not walking in obedience to His Word. “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another” (John 13:34). We need to remember the word, “Let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18). Think of this the next time you feel provoked with somebody. Say to yourself, “How often I have grieved the Holy Spirit, but He loves me still. How often I have provoked the Lord, but He loves me still. How often I have dishonored the Father, but He loves me still. Blessed God, by Thy Holy Spirit let that same divine all-conquering love be shed abroad in my heart, that I may never think of myself but of others for whom Christ has died, and be ready to let myself out in devoted, loving service for their blessing.” This is Christianity in practice.⁸

My greatest passion in ministry is orthodoxy and right doctrine. I am driven by the absolute Truth of God’s Word and desire accurate exegesis and correct Theology at all times. But as vital as that is, it is nothing without love for God’s people; it is empty and meaningless. Regardless of how many hours I might pour over a verse or even a single word to make sure I get it right, it is a waste if I don’t love the ones to whom I preach.

Oh, how often “self” raises its ugly head! We are more concerned with our feelings, our views, and our opinions, than that of others and ultimately the edification of the Body of Christ itself. In short, we are more concerned with *self* than the *Body* and totally unconcerned with how what we say or do might affect the Body. Without *unity*, the Body cannot function properly, and without *love* there can be no unity.

Mark it down: *Not loving a brother in Christ is a direct attack on the Body of Christ and therefore Christ Himself.* Would any of us look at our hand and say, “I just hate this hand?” Of course not, because it’s part of the Body. Likewise, we must love every member of the Body of Christ.

“But does this really mean *everybody*?” we might ask. “Aren’t some Christians less lovable than others?” If we may answer this way, name one single person on earth who is lovable, including you or me. Not one. “We love [God] because He first loved us” (1 Jn. 4:19), and we now love each other for the same reason. We love each other because He loves us all.

J. N. Darby offers a good illustration:

We cannot love a person without taking an interest in his children. But suppose the case of a father

having three sons; I love two of them, this does not testify that I love their father, for if I did, I should love the three sons.⁹

Try that if you dare! What would happen if you said to a father, “Well, I sure like those two boys of yours, but I just can’t stand that girl.” How well will that go over? But that is *exactly* what we do if we do not love all believers and treat them accordingly; we have attacked *one* member of the family and therefore the *whole* family.

Dear Christian Friend, we are, indeed, a *band of brothers* (and *sisters*). The question is: *Are we acting like it?* I’ll close with this encouragement and challenge from Theodore Epp, to which I could add nothing:

The love that we have for God is measured by the love that we have for other people. *The closer we walk with God, the sweeter will be our love for others.* Here is a good test: Select someone who is seemingly unlovable. Ask yourself, How can I get along with that person? How can I show my love to him?

We may disagree with the person over issues or principles, but that need not affect our love for him or her. It is not necessary that we agree on all points with another person before we can love him. In fact, it is a greater expression of the life of Christ within us to show kindness and consideration to those with whom we disagree on certain things. This can indeed be a real test of our love for God. Our love for other people will prove how much we love the Savior. Seek to love the unlovable; this is the acid test of our love for God.¹⁰

Dr. J. D. Watson
Pastor-Teacher
Grace Bible Church

NOTES

- ¹ This article based on a message by Pastor Watson.
- ² See Pastor Watson’s review of the book *Shakespeare for Everyone to Enjoy*, by David R. Brown, on our website.
- ³ *Henry V* (IV.3.58–69, emphasis added)
- ⁴ Recounted in *Windows on the Word: Illustrations from Our Daily Bread* (Radio Bible Class, 1984), pp. 91-92.
- ⁵ Cited in Paul R. Van Gorder, *In the Family: Studies in First John* (Radio Bible Class, 1978), pp. 140-41.
- ⁶ *The Epistles of John* (Loizeaux Bothers, 1962, 1971), p. 122.
- ⁷ *Windows on the Word*, p. 92.
- ⁸ *The Epistles of John and Jude* (Loizeaux Bothers, 1931, 1958), p. 181-82.
- ⁹ *The Collected Writings Of J. N. Darby*, Expository No. 7, Volume 28.
- ¹⁰ *Tests of Faith: Studies in the Epistles of John* (Back to the Bible, 1957), p. 88.

Like many ministries, TOTT is feeling the impact of these tough economic times. We would like to ask our readers for their prayer support in meeting these needs so that this ministry can continue.