

**Series:** Parent Like God, Part 2  
**Title:** Love — The Basic Ingredient  
**Text:** 1 Corinthians 13:13  
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At best, parenting is hard. There are many reasons this is true. One of them is the nature of sin and our fallen world. Another reason involves our finite estate. None is perfect and none knows all things. When it comes to parenting, all need training and instruction. Sadly, many struggle because of a lack of knowledge. One Christian counselor has remarked on this sad state of affairs, saying, “Most people receive more instruction for driving a car than for becoming a parent...No wonder even the most loving parents flounder and fail from time to time.”<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately, the Heavenly Father metaphor provides some light and insight. If we ever want to know how to parent, we only need to look at the way God relates to us. Remember, the Lord has invited us to address Him as “Our Father in heaven” (Matthew 6:9). But what exactly does the Heavenly Father metaphor teach us? I would propose that the Lord’s love for humankind is perhaps most paramount within the metaphor. Because God reveals Himself as our “Father,” we can have confidence that He cares about us. We know that our good is one of His chief concerns. He has an unfaltering disposition of affectionate regard toward His children.

In most all other world religions, God is depicted as being hard, cruel, and demanding. Man is expected to jump through religious hoops in order to gain approval from the divine. Christianity gives a more accurate and helpful picture of God. It depicts Him as being kind and gracious. In Scripture, the Lord isn’t envisioned as being overbearing; He is revealed as being forbearing. He isn’t aloof and cantankerous; He is affectionate and caring.

When we think of God, we should think of love. Along with holiness (Isaiah 6:3), it can be regarded as the foremost of his attributes. This truth should have a major impact on how we live. Indeed, the reason the Christian message is so compelling is because of God’s defining virtue. It is said that Napoleon, the French emperor who subdued nations, once said, “I founded a kingdom upon force, and it will pass away. Christ founded a kingdom upon love, and it will last for ever and ever.”<sup>2</sup>

Scripture speaks of the primacy of love in the Christian religion by saying, “Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love—but the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13). God’s love is a game changer. It has power to bring transformation to every domain of our lives. Our parenting is no exception. The Heavenly Father metaphor teaches us that our attempts at raising our kids should be grounded in a healthy and holy love for them. Let’s consider this topic by examining four biblical truths about love in relation to parenting.

## **GOD IS LOVE.**

Have you ever struggled with impatience toward your children? Do you wrestle with competing priorities? Are you guilty of giving your kids leftovers of your time and attention? Do you sometimes find yourself more consumed with the cares of the world than the needs of your children? Perhaps you need a revival of love in your soul.

## **Starts with God**

If you see your need to grow in love, you must first realize that love starts with God. This is true because all real love flows from Him. Love is a fundamental part of His character and He

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson, Sandra D. *Hurt People Hurt People: Hope and Healing for Yourself and Your Relationships*. ?.

<sup>2</sup> Spurgeon, C.H. *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, 1881: 27* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1984), 303.

chooses to share that love with His creation. In 1 John 4:8, the Bible says, “The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love.” John’s reason for extolling the virtue was rather simple. A new false teaching was spreading like wildfire amongst first-century churches. Its proponents boasted of possessing a special knowledge. They are now known as “Gnostics.” The title for the group was taken from the Greek word for “knowledge.”

While the Gnostics bragged about super-spiritual insight, they failed to live loving lives. In fact, there was some rather hateful behavior being displayed amongst John’s readers. Earlier in his letter, he felt compelled to say, “But the one who hates his brother or sister is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and doesn’t know where he’s going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes” (1 John 2:11). The apostle wanted his readers to know that shows of religion were suspect if one didn’t embody the greatest of all Christian virtues.

Though many boasted of special spiritual insight, their loveless behavior revealed they were deficient in godliness. Many needed to go back to ground-zero of the Christian life. They needed to sit at the feet of Jesus and learn to love.

Some parents need a reminder similar to the one John’s readers received. Love is critical to the Christian experience. It is also foundational to parenting. In a world in which so many boast of special knowledge when it comes to the raising of children, many need to return to the foundational Christian virtue.

Be careful you don’t drown in the minutia of instruction that’s out there. Don’t be overwhelmed by the endless tips, techniques, and tactics of self-professed gurus. Parenting isn’t as complicated as some make it sound. Don’t spend an inordinate amount of time reading books, listening to podcasts, and attending seminars. There is certainly some good in the knowledge available in such platforms, but don’t rush past the most important virtue in your pursuit of such things. Know that love is the basis of faithful and effective parenting.

### **Defining Love**

Let’s go back to 1 John 4:8. John said, “God is love.” It is important to note that the apostle did not say “love is God.” There are some who have perverted the virtue in today’s culture. Slogans like “love is love” and “love wins” are often used in a twisted way. Those who wish to rid the world of all moral absolutes have championed the virtue to an unhealthy and ungodly extreme.

It is important to note that the love of God does not diminish the holiness of God. The Lord is a God of righteousness, truth, and justice. He will not alter His character for the sake of humanity’s wishes or whims. His love never compromises His holy law, nor does it erase the fact that He will get justice on sin one day.

God possesses the virtues of love and justice in perfect balance. Though the two character traits may seem to be polar opposites, the Lord perfectly possesses each in full measure. Throughout life, we can have complete confidence that He will one day judge all evil and wrong doing. At the same time, we can heartily trust His love toward us.

Keeping these things in balance is crucial to our current conversation. There are some who pervert love when it comes to parenting. Love for children is all about giving children what they want. Some parents act as if it is their sole obligation in life is to make their kids happy. All in the name of love, such parents sometimes remove all boundaries, all rules, all instruction, and all correction. In the name of love, they raise children who become rebels because of a lack of restraint and guidance from a young age. In the end, such children know nothing of real love.

The “love” that comes from God isn’t centered on the whims and ways of mere humanity. It comes from God; thus, it reflects God’s own character. The Greek word for love in 1 John 4:8 was one that was used of a love based on a conscientious choice. It was a volitional act in which one put the good of another before his own good. One has commented

on its nature, saying, “It is best defined as ‘no matter what someone may do to you by insult or injury, you seek for them only their highest good.’”<sup>3</sup>

Isn't this the way God loves us? He doesn't merely give us what we want in life. Instead, He gives us what we need. Though we were sinners, He sent His Son to live and die for our sins (Romans 5:8). Even though we were naturally wayward, He gave His Word and His Law to guide us. He gladly made provision for us, conscientiously looking out for our good. We can always have confidence that He cares for us. Yes, He is holy and just, but He is concerned about our estate. We never need to doubt His affectionate regard for us. Ultimately, it is such love that compels us to reciprocate and love our Lord in return. John later told his readers, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

Apply these things to your attempts at parenting. The Heavenly Father metaphor teaches you that love is an integral part of the parent/child relationship. If you want to parent like God, you must first aim to love your kids. Such love is characterized by a willful choice to look out for the true good of your children. — God's good for their lives. When you love your children as God loved you, such love can win their hearts. In being moved by love, they will be more likely to follow in the paths of the Lord.

### **LOVE IS MOST IMPORTANT.**

As parents consider the subject of love, they should be mindful that it is of utmost importance. Jesus taught that it is the chiefest of all virtues. In a passage known as “the Great Commandment,” He said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39). Our Lord's words were directed toward a religious leader who asked Him to define the most important commandment of God's Law. Jesus' response was rooted in a famous passage of Hebrew Scripture known as the Shema. First-century Jews regularly recited the words of the passage — “Listen, Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

Contemporary Christians do well to remember Christ's law of love. It is the sole law New Testament believers are to live by. In observing it, believers naturally fulfill all of God's Moral Law, the law that is binding for all of humankind (Romans 2:14-15). By loving God (Matthew 22:37), one fulfills the first four of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-11). In loving others (Matthew 22:39), one fulfills the second half of those commandments (Exodus 20:12-17). When one truly loves God and others, one will not commit sins that hurt God and others.

Interestingly, Jesus' Great Commandment had its root in teaching related to parenting. If you go back to Deuteronomy 6 and read the verses surrounding the vaunted Shema, you will find instruction for parents. In fact, Deuteronomy 6:6-7, the verses that immediately followed the Shema, said, “These words that I am giving you today are to be in your heart. Repeat them to your children. Talk about them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.”

What do these things tell us? There is a unique relationship between the Great Commandment and our role as parents. Both the Heavenly Father metaphor and Christ's command to love have bearing on how we parent. If we want to parent well, we must learn to love well.

Why is love so important in parenting? Jesus' final words in the Great Commandment tell us. In Matthew 22:40, He said, “All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.” As mentioned above, pursuing love is the key to fulfilling God's law. If one wants to live a life that pleases God, one should direct his or her heart toward Christianity charity. Whenever one doesn't know what to do in a given situation, one should simply ask, “What would Christian love require?” Scripture teaches that “...since love covers a multitude of sins”

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<sup>3</sup> Hawkins, O.S. *The Art of Connecting*. (Dallas, Tx: GuideStone, 2004), 92

(1 Peter 4:8). By setting our hearts on love, we set ourselves on a path to avoid the sins that mark much of humanity.

What does this mean for our role as parents? Plain and simple, the Great Commandment gives us a simple focus for raising our children. By making love our main priority, we can cut through much of the minutia that often clouds our vision. When our eyes are on the opinions of gurus and the philosophies of this age, we can sometimes be confused. We can seem unable to discern what to do in difficult situations. A clear conception of love gives us the groundwork we need for godly parenting. When we have our hearts in the right place, we will normally make decisions that please God. We will also have a posture toward our children that aims to edify and encourage them in the Lord.

The Great Commandment teaches us that love is the key to everything in our Christian experience. Parenting is no exception. If you want to parent like God, direct your heart to love God and others first of all. Failure in this area will taint your parenting with the worldly values and attitudes of this age. One theologian was correct when he said, “What we love and enjoy is foundationally important. It is far more significant than our outward behavior, for it is our desires that drive our behavior. We do what we want.”<sup>4</sup>

### **LOVE IS AT THE HEART OF PARENTING.**

What we’ve discussed above brings us to the conclusion that love has a peculiar place in parenting. To parent well, one must love well. Scripture implies these things through the Heavenly Father metaphor, but it also states them explicitly through multiple passages of Scripture. For starters, consider Paul’s words in 2 Timothy 3:1-3 — “But know this: Hard times will come in the last days. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, proud, demeaning, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving....” Perhaps you don’t see a reference to parenting in the aforementioned words, but one is present in the original language of the New Testament.

### **Stork-Like Love**

The Greek word for “unloving” was one that referred to a specific type of love. It was the word “storgē.” In the first-century world, there were special words to differentiate between different types of love. “Agapē” love involved a conscientious regard for others. “Philia” love spoke of brotherly love. Romantic love was conveyed through the term “eros.”

“Storgē” love was a family type of love. The term was the one from which we get our word “stork,” the name of a mythical bird who supposedly delivered babies in ancient European folklore. In 2 Timothy 3:13, Paul used the word for family type of love, but he negated it. In the Greek language of the New Testament, one could make a word negative by affixing the first letter of the Greek alphabet (alpha) to the front of it. Paul did such in 2 Timothy 3:13 to convey the idea of unloving behavior.

Writing by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul intentionally spoke of the way in which a lack of family love will mark the last days of humanity. His words were intended as an indictment. In any generation, it should be thought strange when parents don’t show appropriate affection toward their children. Such is true because love is at the heart of parenting.

### **The Golden Rule and the Great Commandment**

Jesus matter of factly spoke of how parents should be marked by a holy regard for their kids. He said, “Who among you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him” (Matthew 7:9-11). The answers to Jesus’ rhetorical questions were obvious. Parents naturally care for and love their children.

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<sup>4</sup> Reeves, Michael. *Delighting In The Trinity*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 99.

Interestingly, Jesus' words in Matthew 7 were followed by a teaching that is famously known as "the Golden Rule." Right after uttering His words concerning parenting, He said, "Therefore, whatever you want others to do for you, do also the same for them, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12). The Golden Rule is nearly synonymous with the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40). Both extol the place of an others-oriented love in the Christian life, and both guide Christians in fulfilling God's Law. If believers will live with a focus on loving others, they will naturally do what "the Law and the Prophets" require.

For the purposes of our study, it is important to highlight the fact that Jesus stressed the role of love in parenting. If parents want to parent well, they should seek to love well. All teaching and training will be more effective when it is done from a posture of love. The most helpful advice and the most needful correction will fall on deaf ears if love is suspect. Concerning love in the Christian life, J.C. Ryle once said, "People will do almost anything without talking offense, if they are convinced you love them."<sup>5</sup> The preacher's words could be applied to parenting. If your children know you really care about them, they will be more inclined to follow your leadership. Both the Great Commandment and Golden Rule have a prominent place in Christian parenting!

### **The Prodigal's Loving Father**

A well-known story in Scripture highlights all of these realities. Do you know the story of the Prodigal Son? It is told in Luke 15:11-32. In it, a rebellion-seeking son demanded his inheritance from his father. Once he had it in hand, he quickly fled the rules of his father's household. He enjoyed the pleasures of sin for a season, wasting his inheritance in riotous living.

The youngster soon came to a proverbial dead end. Depleted of funds, he was reduced to working as a hired hand on a farm. He hit rock bottom when he was forced to eat pig food to get his necessary sustenance. Though his condition was dire, it brought him to his senses. Destitute and broken, he said to himself, "How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food, and here I am dying of hunger! I'll get up, go to my father, and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight" (Luke 15:17-18).

What made the prodigal son return running to his father? It was his awareness of his father's love. Commenting on Jesus' famous parable, one has said, "Our children need our love the most when they deserve the least."<sup>6</sup> There is an unhealthy type of parental "love" that is actually detrimental to children. It results in enablement of sin and rebellion. The prodigal's father knew nothing of such unhealthy love, but he did have a healthy and holy type of love.

The prodigal son was well aware that his dad loved him. Ultimately, it was such love that drove him back to the homestead. Application is found for modern parents in Jesus' story. One has said, "Parents must beware of this with children. There must be an atmosphere of love and kindness and rejoicing in the Lord if children or adults are to want to keep God's law. And if children depart far from God, memories of the happiness of his house will do much to bring them back."<sup>7</sup>

If you want to be successful in God's eyes, there must be a firm foundation of love in your parenting. When your kids know that you have a healthy and holy affection for them, they will be more prone to follow your leadership. Your instruction will be less likely to fall on deaf ears. Attempts at correction and instruction will be more effectual. Love is indeed at the heart of Christian parenting.

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<sup>5</sup> Murray, Iain H. *J.C.: Ryle Prepared to Stand Alone*. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust), 208.

<sup>6</sup> Hawkins, O.S. *The Art of Connecting*. (Dallas, TX: GuideStone, 2004), 50.

<sup>7</sup> Chantry, Walter J. *Call the Sabbath a Delight*. (The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, UK 2017), 80 .

## **LOVE IS PRODUCED BY GOD'S POWER.**

All that we have said about love brings us to the all important question of “how?” Namely, how can parents embody and exude Christian love? If you are like me, you realize you do not have the capacity or ability to manufacture godly love. While most parenting books promote principles and patterns of parenting that can be accomplished in the flesh, Christian love requires a supernatural work of God.

Fortunately, Scripture teaches that God's Spirit can make love grow in our hearts. In Romans 5:5, Paul taught that God's love actually comes to live within the believer's soul at salvation. He said, “God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.” When one is born again, one receives a portion of God's Spirit within his or her soul. With that Spirit, one receives supernatural capacities to love like God. These things are also highlighted in Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit. According to the apostle, “love” is the first result of the Spirit's work in our lives (Galatians 5:22).

When it comes to parenting, these things teach us that we need God's Spirit for love to grow in our lives. Mere behavior-modification techniques will fail us. Feigned expressions of love will not get the desired result. We need a spiritual work within our souls so that we might love our children in a transformational way. Considering these realities, let me propose three tips.

### **Pray for love.**

In our quest to be more loving, prayer is the first place to start. Without prayer, we get what we can do. With it, we get what God can do. Seeing my need for a greater care and concern for my children, I often pray, “Lord, please renew my heart and teach me to love my kids as you want me to.” I pray such a prayer on a near daily basis. I know I need a pure and holy love for my children, and I know that such a love can only come from God.

### **Remove competing distractions.**

Many parents are too busy and distracted. Demands and desires associated with work, entertainment, social media, and hobbies keep them from embodying the parental love God desires. If you realize you don't cherish your kids like you ought, take inventory of your life. Do you need to close some social media accounts? Are there certain hobbies that need to be put on hold until your children are raised? Could it be that some other relationships are stealing time from your kids? Love is often a matter of priorities. If you want to love your children as you ought, make sure there are no competing desires or distractions in your life.

### **Lead your heart to love through practical action.**

I would lastly recommend that you lead yourself to love through practical action. It has often been said that action is a key to love. For love to grow, you sometimes have to act yourself into feeling. That is, you must intentionally put another before yourself. When it comes to parenting, make sure you are carving out time for your kids. Do things with them. Play board games together. Take individual kids on daddy/daughter dates or mother/son outings. Plan times for meaningful conversation. As you are intentional to put your focus on your kids, love will grow.