

Church of God, The Eternal

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The Love of God—Part II

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Dear Brethren:

Time marches on! Conditions—domestically, nationally, internationally and religiously—seem to be less stable and present a more mysterious, troubling image than ever before. Surely, we must be in the time about which God spoke when He said, "Watch."

Interpretation of Prophecy

The knowledgeable have knowledge of the fundamental concepts laid bare in the Bible (not strange interpretations of men), and they are alert in observing events of our time. They fulfill two imperative responsibilities: a) KNOWING what is prophetically indicated for the last days and b) settling themselves to patiently watch for prophetic fulfillment.

One word of caution: Do not place interpretations on the prophecies. Read them and accept them at face value. Any personal interpretations will distort meaning and thereby render it difficult, if not impossible, for you to recognize their fulfillment. In such cases, the actual occurrences can transpire while the "watcher" is waiting for the fulfillment of his concepts. When reality hits, what a rude awakening!

Our assurance: God says the righteous will understand. They will KNOW.

We must study, avoiding all personal interpretations, having confidence and patience. If we know the unvarnished truth—accepting at face value the Word which we read—we cannot be deceived. But impatience, which leads us to strange interpretations, will obscure the real truth and render us prey to deception. Beware, brethren. There is a host of such rationale proliferated today. Let us all learn to accept the whole of God's Word as obligatory for us today. Divisions, interpretations, reinterpretations and wresting of Scripture are not acceptable to God. The Bible is just that—the Bible: *the sacred Word of God*. It speaks to us with authority. Human beings do not rise as superior to God's written Word. But amazingly, too many of those who handle the Word have presumed to do with it as they please. Imagine how God must view this condition!

Last month, we began writing about the various aspects of love—man's love to God. We were able to cover about a third of the subject. For this month, the subject of "Our Love to God" will be continued.

Having completed the subtopic, "Physical Obedience Is Insufficient," let us commence with the next concept. In it we will learn just how difficult it is to fulfill the requirements of real, genuine love to God.

Why It Is Really Difficult to Love God

Man is a created subject. But, he was created with a nature which is against his own best interests (Jer. 17:9; Rom. 8:7; Rom. 8:20 and Eph. 2:1–3). Character cannot be created by fiat. It is produced in the crucible of trial and adversity.

An all-wise God created man subject to self-destructive ways and thoughts. Then He gave that subject (man) a way of *life*. Under these circumstances, man could give vent to his natural impulses and, as a result, reap the natural consequences. Or he could, when supernaturally called, be cognizant of his innate weaknesses and abhorrent of those carnal tendencies.

By becoming a recipient of providential help—the Holy Spirit—man can master himself and finally achieve a level of character (the nature of God) which will set him apart from the masses of humanity. This latter achievement must not be a mere concept of mind—a form of self-righteousness. For, such superiority is not a part of that character. Obtaining that level of character is manifested in self-effacement and true humility—complete self-deprecation in relation to God. And by complete self-deprecation, I do not infer a form of "negativism." On the contrary: A truly self-effacing human being is at one and the same time warm, compassionate, tolerant, outgoing and concerned for others. As the "Thou shalt nots" of God's Law are the ultimate of "positiveness," so is self-deprecation the ultimate of personal "positiveness." It is the manifestation of the powerful and influential fruits of God's Holy Spirit: The lasting fulfillment of love, joy, peace, gentleness and understanding—rather than the temporary gratifications of lust, the natural way of man.

Now, considering the fleshly pulls with which we were created—remembering that character is not produced by fiat or a short-range effort—let us begin to understand just how difficult it is to truly and honestly love God. To comprehend, we will need to evaluate a number of Biblical situations, as well as specific instructions relevant to this concept.

God called out the Israelites to become a special people to Himself—"a peculiar people." He gave them a way of life—His laws, statutes, judgments and words. He taught them that being faithful and loyal to that way was LOVE for Him. It was honor and respect for one who was not only God, but also a husband (for, the covenant agreement between God and Israel was a marriage agreement).

Having been given the ways of the Eternal God, Israel was in a position to know both sides of the matter. They had lived the way of flesh and reaped the consequences; NOW they were called to receive a way of life, with all of its attendant blessings. The contrast was obvious. But, there was the humanly inescapable nature of flesh. Therefore Joshua wrote, when giving his final instructions after Israel had inherited the Promised Land: "Take good heed therefore unto yourselves, that ye love the Lord your God. Else if ye do in any wise *go back*, and cleave unto the remnant of these nations, even these that remain among you, and shall make marriages with them, and go in unto them, and they to you: Know for a certainty that the Lord your God will no more drive out any of these nations from before you; but they shall be snares and traps unto you, and scourges in your sides, and thorns in your eyes, until ye perish from off this good land which the Lord your God hath given you" (Josh. 23:11–13).

The history of ancient Israel is written for you and me (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:6, 11). Why? That we might learn from the terrible lessons of human misery.

What are the object lessons of Joshua 23:11–13?

First: We must guard the minds and hearts—"Take good heed unto yourselves . . ." The obvious implication is: As human beings, we can easily become swayed or motivated by carnality. We can safeguard our spiritual future by constant vigil, only. Such spiritual objectives are not spontaneous. They are MOST elusive. Only by daily practice and observation are we made strong and purposeful. Therefore, "Take heed"!

Second: Love of God is not natural and spontaneous. It can never be taken for granted. The object of our awareness—"Take heed"—is the love of God. And, that love is significantly defined as obedience to the instructions—laws, statutes and judgments—which God gave. Understanding this, it becomes obvious that love is not truly manifested by word only. For, how can one truly love God when rebelling against His instruction? We, as God's chosen, must love in deed and truth—living the Word.

Third: Though we have been separated, by special call, from the masses of the world, we are not yet devoid of a nature which beckons for a return to the natural. The pulls of a carnal nature and of society—the fabric devised and created by that human nature—are ever present. A departure from truth is a consistent possibility until the complete change comes.

Joshua wrote: "Else if ye do in any wise go back, and cleave unto the remnant of these nations" Those nations were the epitome of human carnality—the type for us today. The desire was to return to their ways, practices and habits—to become an integral part of ("cleave to") them.

Fourth: All areas of close human relationships— as in marriage—can be a snare to us unless we guard against compromise. Above all, to enter into such close relationships after a separation effected by God will most assuredly become a snare. The underlying principle is this: The pulls of carnality are much stronger than the will to be consistently obedient. Therefore, the sensible flee any such compromising situations. They do not "play" with fire. Any who become so involved can, at best, hope to be badly burned. Only by will, determination and spiritual fervency can we avoid the natural pitfalls which result from looking back. If our perspective is one of total faith and belief, why should we be plagued with "choices," negative pulls, lustful desires and feelings of physical sacrifice? These can occur only if appropriate spiritual determinations have not been made. In other words, you will not—indeed, cannot—give up all for the hope of everlasting life, unless you believe in the reality of that hope and the way by which it can be obtained.

Fifth: We are admonished to "know" that the results of compromise—in deference to self, society and its ways—will be "snares." True and genuine spirituality cannot coexist with carnality. Without the help of God (through the gift of the Holy Spirit), we will always give in to the temptations of the flesh. We will resort to self-justification. Compromise will be the order of the day. We will convince ourselves that what we allow and practice is acceptable in the sight of God. And in this process, the conscience will become warped. You cannot any longer rely on it for guidance. For remember, the conscience is of value as a guide only if it is correctly educated or instructed. This will happen to you once, by the miracle of conversion. It then becomes your responsibility to keep it sharp, alert and useful. A seared conscience is of little value to anyone.

Therefore, as God instructed Israel to avoid any desire to return to the nations and their practices, so we must avoid any return to the fleshly appetites which we have destroyed in the journey out of our past lives. To look back and lust for the past and its ways will become a snare to us. Keep looking to the future—to Christ and the day of His coming. Keep faith. A perfect end is assured to any and all who are called of God and manifest such faith and conviction.

To Receive the Word of God's Servants Is to Love God

Ezekiel was inspired to speak of another area where it becomes very difficult to really LOVE God. He wrote: "Also, thou son of man, the children of thy people still are talking

against [about] thee by the walls and in the doors of the houses, and speak one to another, every one to his brother, saying, Come, I pray you, and hear what is the word that cometh forth from the Lord. And they come unto thee as the people cometh, and they sit before thee as my people, and they hear thy words, but they will not do them: for with their mouth they shew much *LOVE*, but their heart goeth after their covetousness. And, lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument: for they hear thy words, but they do them not" (Ezek. 33:30–32).

In general, here is an example of ultimate individualism and self-esteem. These people were a part of Israel, the Church of God of old (Acts 7:37–39). When they came before God's prophet, Ezekiel, he spoke to them the very words which God had given to him. These were not words which he had conjured up. They were the absolute, unalterable, unchangeable words of God. Yet, the people deigned to question and ridicule.

Today, when we read such examples—rejection of God's prophets, rejection of the priests of God, the refusal to accept Christ, and the questioning attitude manifested toward Christ's apostles—the tendency is to personally recoil and categorically condemn such rebels. Yet, the Bible prophetically informs of the existence of the Church of God in our day—further indicating a rejection of the truth and a manifestation of contempt toward the servants through whom that truth came. In spite of what has transpired, there is never justification to reject God's Truth.

Remember, God's words are just as much His words, today, as they were in the days of Israel or in the time of Christ. The test for us is not how we may view the historical situations, but how we react to the conditions of *our* day. Ostensibly, the Jews of Christ's day accepted Moses in heart, but they rejected that very Word personified in the life of Christ. Their test was in how they viewed Christ—not how they viewed Moses, historically. Success in such tests requires faith.

Ezekiel's example informs the spiritually oriented of how easy it is to deceive the self. Faith is not a tangible substance. It is the evidence of things not seen. It takes faith to accept the present. In historical relationships, we can deceive ourselves. It is easy to delude ourselves about what we would have done in the days of our forefathers, in the time of Jesus Christ or in the days of the apostles. Yet, the fact is, if we cannot accept the revelation of the Word of God in our day—always given through His chosen ministry—we would not have accepted it in historical times. Jesus put it in a nutshell when He said, if they have received (accepted) me they (future called servants) will also receive (accept) you (future ministry). Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. He is exactly the same in His ministry today as He was in His own body (unless that ministry departs from the truth which He revealed through them).

Somewhere, the true servants of God exist. Even though the ones through whom He revealed His Truth apostatized, the Bible makes it clear He has reserved a faithful ministry—to exist until the Second Coming of Christ.

Why, then, is it difficult to really love God? That love calls for maximum faith—faith in the revelation of God, the call of His ministry and the selection of His own chosen children. Anyone can individualize—do that which is right in his own sight. But it takes faith to KNOW the call of God, the truth and the true ministry.

One help, for all of us, is to thoroughly grasp the fact that God does not deal with us individually. We are to be a part of the Body of Christ—the Church of God. That body is *one*, though it has many members. And God promised a faithful continuity of the body. It is our responsibility to take times, circumstances and conditions seriously. Therefore, do not delude yourself into believing you can make your way alone, or that God will accept you in such an attitude. Real love for God is proven by our love and convivial relationship with the other members of the body—the Church. Yes, these requirements apply even in the time of turmoil and rejection of truth. We must not forsake the gathering together, on Holy Days and the Sabbath, if possible—and even more so, not less, as the time of Christ's Second Coming draws near. The responsibility upon us all is to *know* the truth and to know who God's people are. When we KNOW these things and live up to the spiritual standard God requires, we cannot fall into the same category as those mentioned in Ezekiel 33.

Further, let us never forget that the people mentioned in Ezekiel 33 are those called of God, but whose love for the truth and His people grew weak. Rather than receiving instruction, whereby they could grow, they were skeptical and dishonest. They rejected the very words of God and adhered to their own covetous concepts.

What is the fateful result of such conduct? Ezekiel makes the truth plain: "And when this cometh to pass, (lo, it will come,) then shall they know that a prophet hath been among them" (Ezek. 33:33). On a very fateful day, some will learn that they have rejected a true servant of God. What a tragedy! Can't we intelligently and honestly evaluate conditions and circumstances and thereby determine what God requires, before it is too late?

We cannot really love God until we reject the self and bring the natural mind into captivity to Christ (2 Cor. 10:3–5). We must admit the truth is revealed. And that such a revelation does not come to us *individually* from God, but that God has always used human instruments to teach and preach that way of life. We must KNOW that we are the chosen of God, that we had the truth *given* to us, and that there is a true ministry—just as God and Christ said there would be. All these require FAITH. And that faith is essential for life everlasting.

Surely we can see just how difficult it is to love God with all our heart, mind and strength. It would not be difficult at all if we could make God and Christ, and the way of life, conform to our concepts. But there would be many gods—all differing from one another, just as our human concepts do.

Emotional Rejection of Truth

There are yet other reasons why it is difficult to love God as we should. Matthew was inspired to write about one of those reasons. He wrote: "And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved" (Matt. 24:12–13).

No one likes to admit he reacts emotionally to the problems of others. As a front, he will excuse his behavior with many strange and foundationless concepts. All too frequently, the emotionally affected individual will construct new doctrines, beliefs, customs or practices, to justify his reaction. The natural mind and heart are deceptive—who can know them? And if we cannot know them, how can we trust them to guide us intelligently in times of duress and turmoil?

Clearly, the truth is involved here (verse 12). But because iniquity shall abound, many chosen servants will lose confidence and their love will wax cold. Against what? The truth! Some within the body will give vent to their base natures—turn to the practice of iniquity. And because of this very fact, all too many—those who recoil against the practice of immorality, etc.—will turn against the truth, using all manner of human rationale to justify their actions.

"But," we are told, "he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved" (verse 13). The conditions of iniquity are going to test our faith. Only if we keep faith, having confidence in the original revelation, are we going to make it to the end. Brethren, this test is upon us NOW. In no way are we going to be able to excuse ourselves—for any reason—in the future. Our eyes were opened. We saw what happened. God has given us the opportunity to be an example of faith and confidence.

In John 10:17, we see that complete sacrifice of self is required for obedience and love to God. We read: "Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again."

It is not easy to give up the self totally. We were created subject to our own natures. Our minds are self-seeking. They are not going to submit to the will of God easily. Total subjugation, to God and His will, requires a daily endeavor. To manifest any degree of love

for God requires daily sacrifice of self. Christ was a perfect example. In totally outgoing concern, He laid down His life for you and me.

Love of Brethren Is Love of God

It is by our love for the *brethren* that we prove our love for God. If we have ought against any one of God's chosen, we do not love God. These human relationships are the means by which we can determine the scope of our love for God. The whole spiritual concept is fulfilled in a change of nature—from self-love and hate of others to self-hate and love of others. This can be summed up as a change from wrath (war-like tendencies) to peace, which is the undergirding characteristic of God's Kingdom. Indeed, how difficult it is to truly love God! In no way can we be self-seeking—love the self—and at the same time truly love God. John wrote: "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men *know* that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:34–35). To love others in this manner is not natural. Although commanded by God, it is made possible only by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. And remember, the proof of our love for God is the genuine manifestation of love for the brethren.

In Ephesians 4:11–32, we clearly see the manifestation of God's love to His people. He gave them His servants to teach and instruct them.

Conversely, our love for God is manifested in our respect for that ministry. We must understand the reasons for the establishment of such a ministry. They have been commissioned to perfect the saints and the Body of Christ. For how long? Till all come to the complete unity of the faith (the doctrine). Until we have the complete knowledge of the Son of God, having become perfect and achieved the complete stature of Jesus Christ. Such status will not be fully achieved until the Second Coming of Christ. Meanwhile, the ministry is to bring about stability and oneness—that we should never be subject to deception (by ourselves or by others who may attempt to influence us).

Continuity of Belief Is Proof of Our Love

What is the basis of our confidence and belief? It is that which we have been taught—if, indeed, we really learned about Christ and were truly convicted (verses 21–22). And the proof of our conviction is found in our attitude toward self. The truly converted are putting off the old man—the carnal self—and endeavoring to develop the character and nature of God and Christ.

Once again, the proof of our love for God is manifested in our attitude toward the operation of God—an operation which involves the true ministry.

But, how can you know the true ministry? By one means only. By observing those who continue, in their love for the brethren, to teach the truth which they initially learned. And your respect for them is a proof of your love for God.

Beware! Our hearts and minds will play tricks on us. We can deceive ourselves. There is a dire warning about this, in Colossians 2:1–8.

The proof of real love for God (the heart and core of this month's letter) is continuity of belief. Paul said to the Colossians: "As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught . . ." (verses 6–7). This instruction, as part of God's Word, is for you and me—TODAY.

Each of us is required, not only to be faithful to that which we received, but also to "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ" (verse 8). The yardstick by which to evaluate every concept is: Is it the original truth which was taught and for which you were baptized? Patience is the watchword of the day. Continue patiently and steadfastly in the truth which you received. Consider 1 Thessalonians 5:5–8. To whomever this is addressed, in the last days, they are the children of light. That is, they are called and do possess the truth. They must watch and be vigilant. In this is found the depth of love to God. He loved us and gave us His Truth. We love Him by continuity of belief.

In conclusion, for this present concept of love to God, let us understand that the love of this world has no part in the love of God (1 John 2:15–17). The love of this world is a manifestation of self-love; whereas, the love of God is manifested in self-deprecation. And, in the final analysis, this love is not substantiated by word. John was inspired to write: "My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:18). Yes, the proof of our love to God is not by word but by complete response to the truth.

Brethren, we must not judge one another. But we had better evaluate (examine) ourselves. Are we wholehearted in our love for God—absolutely obedient to that which was revealed? The truth taught by God's ministry is that for which we were baptized. It's our life! What we do with it is an individual responsibility.

Now for the closing. All our love to you, wherever you are. Our prayers and thoughts are constantly with you. Until next month, we pray and hope all will go well with you—that you may be greatly blessed.

With Much Love and Respect,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Raymond C. Cole". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a large initial 'R' and 'C'.

Raymond C. Cole