

EQUIPPED TO LOVE

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Building Idolatry-Free
Relationships

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Bulverde, Texas

Equipped to Love:
Building Idolatry-Free Relationships

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*To Alma, my faithful and beloved
wife—my friend, encourager,
and soul-mate*

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Preface

It could well be argued that the one character quality that the church should demonstrate most is love. A pastor often deals with people who want to love but don't know how or understand why they seem powerless to love. That need inspired me to write this book.

I know there are many books available telling Christians that we ought to love, but I've found few if any that get into the nuts and bolts of why we can't love or how we can love. Although loving can't be reduced to the mere application of knowledge and the observance of a set of guidelines, I am encouraged by the responses to the message of this book. I believe that God will use the insights from the Scriptures to equip you to love.

I'm sure there are many resources I could have recommended to you in this endeavor, but I've purposely limited them to a few (I'm almost embarrassed by the brevity of the endnotes page in the back). Specifically, I've trusted in the wisdom and insight from the Scriptures and have relied upon them as the curriculum for equipping you to love.

I've also written *Equipped to Love* because I needed it! I've heard someone say that preachers preach about what they need to apply in their own lives. Such is the case with me! I so appreciate my wife, Alma, and my children: Abby, Alyssa, Micah, and Amanda, who are having to endure my learning time. I wish I had been equipped to love before I became a husband and father, but I wasn't. And perhaps you weren't, either.

I've written this book for husbands who want to know how to love their wives, for wives who desire to love their husbands, for parents who long to love their children with Jesus' love, for children and teens who struggle to love their brothers, sisters, and parents, and for the people of

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God who want to love Him more.

The assault on marriage and family from our humanistic and hedonistic society also has inspired me to write. Marriages suffer tremendously because many pre-marriage and marriage relationships were built on a foundation of idolatry. Consequently, those marriages are in shambles today. The divorce rate in the church is almost as high as in secular society. If you're one whose marriage is in jeopardy, and you feel that love has disappeared in your relationship, then I'm grateful to God that He's brought this book your way. You're one of the reasons this book exists! It's never too late to become equipped to love.

In the last ten years, two of my daughters have married. What a blessing it is to see their marriages begin with a foundation on the love of Jesus Christ. I'm sure you see the value of preparing your children to enter into marriage equipped to love. I hope one of the main uses of this book will be in the establishment of firm foundations for new marriages.

Regardless of your age, gender, or marriage condition, I don't think you'll be disappointed over the time you spend reading *Equipped to Love*. These truths and insights have been used by God to save marriages, transform relationships, and inspire a greater love for God. I am grateful to God for what He has given through His Word, His Son, Jesus Christ, and by His Spirit. Also I would like to take this opportunity to mention several people who have contributed directly or indirectly to this book.

First, I want to express my deep gratitude to the members of Coast Community Church in Fountain Valley, California, for their tremendous sacrificial support and encouragement. Their willingness to provide the time, the financial support for my family, and the inspiration for this book can only be attributed to God's gracious work in their hearts and is a demonstration of His love to me.

Second, I appreciate Jerry White, Jr., for his invaluable Christ-centered critique and insights. Not only has he influenced the book with his comments, but his example of love through the years has made an indelible impression on my life.

Finally, God has made my family such an encouragement to me. Next to Jesus, it has primarily been through them and with them that God is teaching and equipping me to love.

Introduction

LOVE—a word usually stripped of its power. We love our cars, houses, jobs, sports, hobbies, and a million other things. But what do most people mean when they say they love their cars? Do they love cars like they love people? All too often, the answer is, “Yes.” When we confuse the way we love things with the way we love God and people, we find ourselves frustrated and failing.

Do you struggle to love God? If you’ve grown up attending church, you know that you’re supposed to love God. The apostle Paul wrote, “If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed” (1 Corinthians 16:22). That verse has a sobering effect on me. The fear of not loving God enough has haunted me more times than I can count. I know I don’t love God as I ought. His mercies, His Word, His forgiveness, His watchful care over me, His gifts, His intercession on my behalf, His death and resurrection ought to evoke a deep and consistent love, but sometimes my love is cold. In fact, frequently I detect within myself attitudes toward God that I know are wrong.

For instance, just after my spiritual new birth at age 29, I discovered a bitterness toward God that was affecting my relationship with Him. It was a bitterness springing from my frustration with God’s timing in revealing Himself to me. I didn’t like it that God let me struggle through seventeen years of tiresome, fruitless striving to make myself acceptable to God and my own conscience. I didn’t understand God’s love or know how to love. Although now I’m at peace with God’s timing, I can’t help

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but wish a book such as this had come into my hands then.

Are there some people who tax you to the limit of your ability to love? Quite often, the people we want to love the most are the ones with whom we have the most difficulty. Perhaps you can relate to the couple I counseled who were struggling to persevere in a marriage characterized by a love/hate relationship. They said they loved each other, yet they often couldn't stand each other. They pushed each other's buttons at the drop of a hat. Wouldn't you like to know why you have difficulty loving your wife, husband, child, brother, sister, or work associate? Even more, don't you want to glorify God by loving them with His love?

If you think that you can't love, that you suffer from a severe, incurable case of self-centeredness, that you need to be motivated to try harder to love, you'll be pleased to discover the answer doesn't lie in more effort on your part. If you desire to grow in your love for God and others, you'll be encouraged by learning God's purposes for relationships. Gaining insight into what God is doing in you as He brings difficult people and circumstances into your life will produce wisdom and hope. You'll also discover how God works through people and circumstances to lead you to Himself and to a deeper experience of His love flowing through you.

The purpose of this book is to equip you to recognize deceptive, unloving attitudes and actions, then direct you to the Source of love. You'll learn to:

- ◆ Distinguish between God's kind of love and the world's kind of love.
- ◆ Remove a destructive attitude of idolatry with regard to God, others, and circumstances.
- ◆ Recognize the characteristics of the spirit of idolatry.
- ◆ Love as God loves.

The kind of love of which I will be writing is represented by the Greek word, *agape*. This kind of love transcends all kinds of love and provides the basis for both brotherly (*phileo*) love and physical (*eros*) love. We want to mature to the point that love becomes the motivation in all our relationships. We read in the Scriptures that God's Word searches and exposes the hidden, destructive motives of our hearts.

Introduction

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do (Hebrews 4:12-13).

This probing into our motives is necessary if our love is to be refined and matured. I believe the insights from God's Word will be powerful and life-changing.

The desire and the burden of my heart is to see God produce, through Christian families, children who not only are educated, skilled, and trained, but children who love. I also wish to implant a wonderful vision in parents' minds. Think of the impact of a generation of young adults who have been influenced by the power of the love in their homes to the point of being able to influence the next generation.

Parenting children and successfully rearing them to love the Lord, to be responsible and skilled, and to contribute to the kingdom of God involves many factors. We're concerned about the education factor, the health factor, the practical skills factor, the spiritual factor, the social factor, and the factor of character.

Of all these factors in the parenting equation, the most important factor according to God's Word is the love factor. The apostle Paul put it succinctly when he placed a low value on education without love. He wrote to the Corinthians, "And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing" (I Corinthians 13:2).

What is the love factor in your life? In your home? Would you like to increase this aspect of your home life and relationships? I hope so. What wonderful freedom lies before you. May God equip you to love.

"Heavenly Father, Source of Love, enable me to simply and clearly share the hindrances to love which You've revealed in Your Word. May Your Spirit rest upon this one who writes and those who read. Anoint us with the power to love. Grant us grace to understand the truths presented and apply them to our relationships. And we'll thank You and give You all the glory. Amen."

PART ONE

Lessons About Love

Chapter 1

Which Kind of Love?

Distinguish between God's kind of love and the world's kind of love.

Since the word “love” is used so frequently, I’ve found it helpful to make a clear distinction between the world’s kind of love and God’s kind of love. They are poles apart.

The World’s Kind of Love

The world’s kind of love focuses on getting and using. The apostle John described it in his first letter.

Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world (1 John 2:15-16).

When John spoke of the world, he alluded to those who do not belong to Jesus. In speaking to His disciples about the gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus distinguished His own from those of the world.

And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom

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the world cannot receive because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides in you, and will be in you (John 14:16-17).

Since the *world cannot receive the Holy Spirit*, there's no way the world's kind of love is like God's kind of love. Further in the same discourse, Jesus cited a difference between the world's mindset and the mindset of those who were His. *We see that the world loves itself and hates Jesus and His people.*

If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you (John 15:18-19).

Perhaps the world's kind of love may best be described by what the apostle John wrote in his first epistle. He wrote that the love of the world may be summarized as “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life” (1 John 2:16).

The world values things and people based upon their usability. Perhaps you've noticed when they use the word “love” as a verb, they mean that the object of their love gives them something they want. For instance, when someone of the world states, “I love my car,” he probably has in mind the benefit the car brings to his life, either through its ability to enhance his image or through its problem-free service. If someone in the world had an old clunker like mine, he probably wouldn't speak so affectionately. It doesn't give anything but an opportunity to trust God!

When a worldling says he loves his wife, he probably means that she does for him what he wants her to do most of the time and when he wants her to do it. As long as she makes him happy and comfortable, she has value to him which he expresses with the term “love.”

On the flip side of the coin, someone might use the opposite term of hate for those objects which don't make his life easier. A wife may say she hates her husband or her children because they don't do things her way in her time. Usually this hatred develops over a period of time, but the concept is clear: *The world's kind of love centers on getting and using.*

Which Kind of Love?

God's Kind of Love

In stark contrast, *God's kind of love focuses on giving and serving*. My wife and I are being taught this lesson by God through Amanda, our daughter with Down's Syndrome. We were totally surprised by Amanda's condition when she arrived. It was life-changing immediately for many reasons, but the first was the exposure of the world's kind of love in our thinking towards her and the rest of our children. We had specific prayer requests entered in our prayer notebooks, and Amanda was not the answer to *those* prayers!

Upon her arrival, our selfish motives behind our prayers were hung out naked on the cross. Faced with our disappointment and inability to find any use or selfish benefit from her existence, we were shaken to the core. We wanted a child from whom we could get something—a little girl we could use to get glory for ourselves and who wouldn't be a bother. Of course, we desired that she be the sort of person others would “love” also—someone to whom they would be attracted because of what she could offer them.

I'm ashamed to admit it, but before Amanda was born, we expected her value to consist of her capacity to be used and to contribute to our lives. Now I see that God loved us enough to reveal how warped our ideas were of His love, and I'm glad He did! It opened up to us a new appreciation and understanding of the love of God. This came as He revealed how I was in a similar condition to Amanda in my relationship to Him—useless, but in need of love.

Our Value to God

As a sinner, I was of no use to Jesus Christ except as an object who drew out of Him the love of His Father. The verses in Romans 3:10-12 took on new meaning. “There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, *together they have become useless*; there is none who does good, there is not even one.” That's us, humans. We're drastically deformed and worse than spiritually retarded!

My sinfulness offers the occasion for God, the Father, to demonstrate His kind of love—a pure, giving love. When Jesus says, “I love you,” He

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means that I am of value because of what I draw out of Him—the love of His Father. In the same way, I saw that to love Amanda, I was going to have to make a distinction between the world’s kind of love and God’s kind of love. From the world’s viewpoint, I had no reason to love Amanda. But by the grace of God revealed in the gospel, love took on a new meaning. Have you ever thought that the great value of the ones whom you have trouble loving is that they cause you to go to your heavenly Father? Amanda’s and everyone’s value comes from their ability to draw out what God puts in—His kind of love—thus bringing glory to God.

God gives great freedom when we realize that *people and situations offer opportunities for God to demonstrate the reality of our relationship to Him*. He gives them for the purpose of testing and revealing who His children are. As He loves through us, we realize that we are loved by God. People and situations are God-given for the purpose of testing and revealing the children of God, the objects of God’s love. The Amandas in life, therefore, cause us to realize the power of sin and the power of love. If we only have the world’s kind of love within us, sin’s powerful, selfish grip on our hearts will be evident in our inability to love. But if Jesus dwells within us, we may experience His powerful love flowing through us. In both cases, they’re God’s instruments, drawing out what fills our hearts.

I’ll never forget what my good friend and mentor, Jerry White, said: “Every relationship is an opportunity to love, and every situation is an opportunity to trust.” Oswald Chambers wrote, “A man’s disposition on the inside, i.e., what he possesses in his personality, determines what he is tempted by on the outside. The temptation fits the nature of the one tempted, and reveals the possibilities of the nature. Every man has the setting of his own temptation, and the temptation will come along the line of the ruling disposition.”¹ God knows just what we need in order to expose the disposition of worldly love and lead us into repentance and the infilling and outpouring of His love.

The chart below contrasts the two kinds of love. If we only know of the world’s love, we will only be happy with the “user-friendlies” in life. Our relationships will show it. We’ll find ourselves jealously seeking to control everything and everyone we deem useful. We may often deal with anger and jealousy, and we may be offended easily.

Which Kind of Love?

But if we know the love of Christ, a giving kind of love flows out of us as we live out of Christ's fullness. It's a kind of love which provides a basis for unity. Wanting the best for everyone and deferring self for others, we are able to serve others without jealousy or offense. Since it flows out of a vital union with Jesus Christ, all the glory goes to God. As John wrote,

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love (1 John 4:7-8).

Ponder these distinctives:

<u>World's Kind of Love</u>	vs	<u>God's Kind of Love</u>
Source: Self-love		Source: God in Jesus Christ
Motivation: To get		Motivation: To give
Purpose: To use		Purpose: To be used
Exalts man		Exalts God
Requires no faith; natural		Requires faith; spiritual
Value determined by usability of the object/person		Value determined by the opportunity provided to show Jesus' love
Selfish in nature		Focuses on others
Controlling; manipulating		Yielding; serving
Jealous		Not jealous
Fails		Doesn't fail
Hates suffering		Endures suffering
Based on temporal values		Based on eternal values
No power to unify		Perfect bond of unity
Based on feelings		Based on fact
Can be angered and offended		Cannot be angered or offended
Driven by emptiness		Driven by fullness

Perhaps here's a new thought. The greater one's uselessness, inability, or stubbornness, the greater potential there is for you to experience God's love. Is there anyone you know you ought to love, but have found it difficult to do so? Could it be that the world's philosophy of love has

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found a home in your thinking? If you notice it, you perhaps are standing at the threshold of experiencing God's love in a powerful way.

When God revealed this thought to me, I asked the Lord to show the relationships that kind of thinking had destroyed or damaged so that I could ask Him for a thorough repentance and demonstrate His love for His glory. I enjoyed more freedom than ever before and saw my ability to love grow as I had a change of mind and heart about those relationships.

Many others have given the same testimony. One woman informed me that the realization of her worldly love for her husband saved her marriage. Moms, frustrated with their children because they were not user-friendly, have expressed the joy of renewed and healed relationships. Husbands have gained a new vision for loving their wives as they see the difference between the world's kind of love and God's kind of love.

Can you think of a relationship with which you are presently struggling? Are you frustrated over something that you are not *getting* from that person that you feel you deserve? Do they inconvenience *you*? If they were to do things your way in your time, would you feel like you *love* them more?

Please take some time to let God examine your heart through this first insight about love. He may bring numerous relationships to mind which have been based entirely on the use you could make of them. If so, there's no need to feel overwhelmed or discouraged with what you see about yourself. Instead, be encouraged: God works in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform! Your sinfulness and lack of love have been the occasion for Jesus Christ to demonstrate the love of His Father toward you.

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

I encourage you to receive His love and forgiveness as you confess to God each relationship which has been damaged by the world's kind of love. You are experiencing the benefits of understanding God's way to loving relationships. Ask Him to reveal more as we look further into Jesus' love.

Chapter 2

Idolatry-Free Relationships

**Learn the Love Principle:
You can't love anyone you idolize.**

According to the Scriptures, the spirit of idolatry lies at the heart of every sin. God's first commandment in the Ten Commandments dealt with the iniquity of idolatry. The prophet Samuel informed King Saul that insubordination and rebellion are as idolatry (1 Samuel 15:23). The apostle Paul encouraged the Colossians to consider themselves dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amount to idolatry (Colossians 3:5). We could say that idolatry embodies everything that is antichrist.

Whenever someone looks to anything or anyone other than God as the source of all things, he commits the sin of idolatry. This may sound strange, but it's true. Here is a good definition of idolatry: looking to any person, object, or idea to supply what only God can supply. For instance, when a husband looks to his wife to make him happy, he idolizes her. If a child looks to himself for the ability to please his parents, he idolizes himself. A wife might idolize her children by expecting them to make her significant. This may be contrasted with the idea of "looking to" God as the supplier of our needs. It might be helpful to realize that when we look to God for all things, we are worshipping God.

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We can easily see how the sins mentioned in Colossians 3 constitute idolatry, but when the spirit of idolatry masquerades as light or kindness, it displays its most devilish characteristic. Just as Satan often portrays himself as an angel or messenger of light, this diabolical spirit often pawns itself off as love, in the worldly sense. So if someone doesn't distinguish between the world's kind of love and God's kind of love, he can be duped into the opinion that he is loving when in fact he is using someone for selfish interest.

That's why it's so important to learn to recognize the spirit of idolatry. It slithers its way into relationships from the very seed of our human nature. At the heart of Satan's temptation of Adam and Eve lies idolatry and self-will. He tempts us to ignore God's Word and will, to listen to him, and to enthrone our own wills. With such bait, he lured the parents of the human race away from looking to God alone as the source of power, wisdom, and happiness. From the time Satan's seed was planted and bore fruit in Adam and Eve, idolatry has hindered relationships.

Typically when we hear the word "idolatry," our minds conjure up a prehistoric man chiseling a block of stone. Many think of it as an Old Testament sin that modern man has outgrown. But have we really outgrown it, or have we merely sophisticated it?

While meditating on Galatians 5:14, I was struck with the fact that the whole Law is fulfilled in one word: love. It reads, "For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" That prompted me to meditate on the Ten Commandments to see how each one relates to love. What I discovered in the first commandment is vital to being equipped to love—insight into the characteristics of the spirit of idolatry.

Love can only take place where a relationship is free from idolatry and a person recognizes God as the source of everything. The moment we look to someone to be the source of supplying our happiness or comfort, we put them in the place of God. At that point, loving that person with the love of God becomes an impossibility.

Your theological foundation is crucial to your growth in love. What you believe about God dictates your perspective and attitudes toward people and circumstances in life. If you have misinformation about God, your view

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of people and situations in life will be skewed. For instance, if you have been taught that God is good, and your definition of good is *that which makes you happy and comfortable*, then your perception of troublesome people and tragic events will be wrong. Consequently, you'll react negatively.

For many years of my life I struggled in my relationship with God as well as with others because of the man-centered view of God which formed my frame of reference for life. I had accepted a view of a god who had man-like qualities, who had similar thoughts and ways, and had the same value system as most twentieth century, middle-class Americans.

I had a wrong concept of God's goodness: *that which makes me happy and comfortable*. If good things happened, then I felt that God was good. But there are severe problems with such a concept of God's goodness. What is God when tragedies occur? When bad people do bad things, what are we to think about God? We'll discuss this more in later chapters, but for now let's consider your basic beliefs about God.

Basic Beliefs

Your theological foundation, therefore, is crucial to your being equipped to love. How do you answer the following questions? How many gods do you believe exist? Who is God? What does it mean to be God? What is the significance of our being God's creatures in His creation?

In answer to the above, you probably believe there's one God. Most churchgoers are familiar with the Scripture declarations, "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!" (Deuteronomy 6:4) and, "I am the Lord your God...You shall have no other gods before Me" (Deuteronomy 5:6-7) and, "For I am God, and there is no other" (Isaiah 46:9).

When asked about who God is, you might respond by declaring that Jesus Christ was God in the flesh and is God enthroned. Most believe that Jesus Christ is God and might cite these popular verses: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1, 14), "And Jesus said, 'I and the Father are one'" (John 10:30), "And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation

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of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high..." (Hebrews 1:3).

You may assert along with most orthodox Christians that the primary quality or characteristic of being God lies in the fact that all things come from Him and are completely within His jurisdiction and control. We read in I Corinthians 8:4-6, "...we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one...yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him." And in Colossians 1:16-17, "For by Him [Jesus] all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created by Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together."

God's purpose is to glorify Himself and make Himself known through the revelation of His Son, Jesus Christ. Thus, as His creatures, we are in the humble position of existing completely for His benefit and glory. All creatures wait upon God for their physical and spiritual life. *There are no other sources of supply.* That is clear in the verses above, but also Psalm 104:24, 27-30 affirms our dependence upon God for all things. "O Lord, how many are Thy works!...*They all wait for Thee*, to give them their food in due season. Thou dost give to them, they gather it up; Thou dost open Thy hand, they are satisfied with good. Thou dost hide Thy face, they are dismayed; Thou dost take away their spirit, they expire, and return to their dust. Thou dost send forth Thy Spirit, they are created; and Thou dost renew the face of the ground."

Although the following list is not an exhaustive description of all our beliefs about God, it expresses some that are primary and applicable to our lives on a daily basis.

Basic Beliefs About God

- God is sovereign: He is the first cause of all actions and never reacts to His creation.
- God is holy, good, light, and love.

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- God does everything in accordance with His purpose
 - ⇒ for His glory.
 - ⇒ for His good.
 - ⇒ to reveal Christ, His Son.
 - ⇒ to make His children more like Jesus: humble and obedient.
- God gives His children everything they need to fulfill His purpose.
- God wastes nothing.
- God's actions are done in perfect wisdom.

Since these are so crucial to our lives we might expect Satan to continually test us at these very basic points. Sometimes a gulf lies between what professing believers say and what their lives reveal about what they really believe. I remember a phrase which circulated around a church I attended which puts it quite bluntly. "You practice what you believe; all the rest is just religious talk." I'm not sure who coined it, but it drives home an important observation.

When it comes to loving, people's actions or responses to others' actions reveal their true doctrinal foundation and motivations. I've noticed that more often than not, when people have a difficult time loving, it is because an idolatrous spirit hinders them. Although they would say they believe in God, they are looking to others to supply something to them in their own way and/or timing. They don't believe that what they receive in other people or in circumstances has come to them from the hand of God for a good purpose. Consequently, they begin to try to *use* the other person or *get* the other person to change or supply things in *their* own way and time. Frustration and bitterness ultimately result in such relationships. This confirms that idolatry and love are hostile to each other and are mutually exclusive.

In Psalm 33:13-15 we read these mind-blowing, man-humbling words: "The Lord looks from heaven; he sees all the sons of men; from His dwelling place He looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth, *He who fashions the hearts of them all*, He who understands all their works." It's so tempting to criticize and complain about people as if *they* were the ultimate determiners of *their* condition and *our* happiness. Let's remember: should

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God decide to remove His restraining hand of grace on us and thereby unleash the evil inside of us which we so quickly abhor in others, we could be worse than they.

These verses assure us that God has fashioned the hearts of everyone to whom we relate. We know that at any given moment He could change them—if it pleased Him and fit His purposes. Although we may not understand all His purposes, we may confidently thank God for the attitudes and actions of those around us because we *believe* God is in control and working all things according to a great and wonderful purpose—to glorify Himself through His Son. If we're believers in Jesus Christ, we know that God is working to glorify His Son in *us*.

In *The Philadelphia Confession of Faith*, which is a book of basic Christian beliefs adopted by the Baptist Association of Philadelphia in 1742, God's ordination of the affairs of His creation is defined.

God hath decreed in himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably, all things whatsoever come to pass; yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin, nor hath fellowship with any therein, nor is violence offered to the will of the creature, nor yet is liberty, or second causes taken away, but rather established...¹

For His people, He works all things (circumstances and relationships) for the purpose of making His people more like His Son, Jesus Christ. In Romans 8:28-29, the apostle Paul wrote, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren." Believers in the Lord Jesus Christ have the confidence that their God, the only God, controls all things in their lives, and they have no need to idolize or look to anyone else in life to supply what they need. *Whatever they have at any particular moment is exactly what they need!* It may not be what *they want*, but it is exactly what *they need* to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.

Let's get practical for a moment with a hypothetical situation. Johnny's having a hard time understanding his math lesson. Mom tries

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numerous ways to “get it to him,” and each attempt falls short of her goal. How is Mom to love Johnny?

If this mom by the prompting of the Holy Spirit applies the above foundational beliefs about God, she might think this: “Johnny’s inability to understand has come to *us* from God and is what *we* need to demonstrate the love of Christ. Johnny’s need has made *us* needy for Christ. Thank You, Father, for Johnny’s blindness right now. Lord Jesus, fill me with Your patience and love in order that I might glorify You in this situation. What wisdom can You give me that I might discipline or encourage Johnny toward You?”

This same response may be applied to every relationship or circumstance. Whether it’s a tired (or energetic) wife, an unreasonable (or understanding) husband, a rebellious (or obedient) teen, or a stingy (or generous) employer; all things come from God in order to lead us to Christlikeness. The moment we begin to look to a person to make us happy or comfortable, at that moment we give him the power to make us miserable. The only way someone can make us miserable, frustrated, or angry is for us to look to him to supply something we want (which is idolatry). Consequently, we can’t love him.

Beware of Unbelief

How easily we may fall into the snare of idolatry through unbelief! The writer of Hebrews cited unbelief in God’s sovereign administration of all things through Jesus Christ as the sin which so easily entangles us (Hebrews 1:3; 3:12; 8:1; 12:1). It trips us up as we run the course set before us. Only when one fixes his eyes on Jesus does he find the grace to “strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble.” Have you been entangled in the web of unbelief in God’s wise, loving administration of your life—from the tiniest things in your day, to the people with whom you come in contact, to national governments and policies which affect the entire world?

No one knows better than God what situations and people best expose your selfishness, lust, and pride. There have been numerous times when a husband and wife have taken turns informing me of the condition

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of their relationship. Very seldom do they agree as to who is to blame for the problems. After voicing their complaints, they wait to see with whom I'm going to align. Usually, to their surprise, I suggest that they are perfect for each other and are fulfilling God's purposes in each other's lives. Her selfishness worked perfectly to expose his selfishness and the effects of the spirit of idolatry, and his selfishness worked perfectly in the same way in her life. God knew they were best for each other! Though we are not accustomed to thinking this way, they needed each other. When two people realize their idolatry, get in touch with their manipulative motives, and crucify the old relationship, God gives birth to a new relationship. As they see God as the wise supplier of all things and give Him thanks, they find a fresh new love flowing between them.

The same is true for the parent-child relationship. What a glorious day it was when Alma and I confessed our idolatry to our children! They could discern that the rod and reproof were nothing more than carving tools employed to make them please us. (The rod should not be used to carve, but to obey God's Word. Parents should discipline their children with the rod, not to get them to obey or to break their stubborn wills, but because God says to do it. We're to trust God to change their hearts. God may supply us with a stubborn child to see if we will obey His Word and trust Him. Will we love the child and obey God's Word, or will we seek our own way?)

As we released them from the demands of our self-significance and pride, we could see the barriers between us disappear before our eyes. Hardness gave way to softness. The distance between us vanished. For the first time, they could tell we accepted them as valuable gifts from God—without performance. How quick most children are to forgive!

I've heard many testimonies from parents who repented of idolatry and accepted their children as perfect gifts from God for leading them to Christlikeness. As God turned the hearts of the parents toward their children in love, so He turned the hearts of the children to their parents just as He promised in Malachi 4:6. "And he will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse."

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Are You Idolizing Anyone?

You can't love someone you idolize. Understanding and applying this principle to relationships brings great freedom to love. I hope you can also see why so many relationships suffer. How are we to remember to consider this? I've found that I need the Holy Spirit's prompting and filling. If we could love without the Spirit of Christ, what proud people we would be, and Jesus would receive no glory. God perfects His love in us as His Spirit examines the motives of our hearts, leads us to distinguish between His kind of love and the world's kind of love, and exposes the deceptive, often hidden spirit of idolatry influencing our words and actions.

Has God revealed the motives of your heart to you as you've read this chapter? God has graciously provided forgiveness for the sin of idolatry through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. In and through His death, you may receive forgiveness for your sins. Also, in Jesus' resurrection life, you may have fellowship with Him on a daily basis. Furthermore, God promises to give His Holy Spirit to those who ask. If God is revealing Himself to you and you see your need of Him, then God may be calling you to Himself! God may use this book to lead you into a deeper relationship to Him. As truths or ideas strike your conscience and enlighten your soul about your relationship with God, I encourage you to express your heart to Him. Anywhere in this book the Lord Jesus could beckon to you, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light" (Matthew 11:28-30). When and if He does—*go to Him!* Your relationship with Jesus is foundational to your being equipped to love.

Because Jesus lives, He gives His Spirit to His children in order that His love may be perfected in them. The Holy Spirit knows that all things come from God. He reveals God's purposes behind relationships and circumstances. Jesus, who was/and is the antithesis to idolatry, equips us to love. *He'll remind you: You can't love anyone you idolize.*

Understanding these first two lessons about loving relationships will free you to grow in your love for God. *Continually pray for grace to receive all things and all people as expressions of God's love for you because*

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God purposely brings them to you to provide opportunities for you to reject the spirit of idolatry and turn to Him for the power to love. When we doubt God's love for us as He ordains the affairs of our lives, we separate ourselves from the grace of God to love and from the ability to respond to life in a God-honoring way. To grumble about circumstances or refuse to give thanks to God for people and their weaknesses, regardless of how inconvenient or hurtful, declares our unbelief in Jesus' lordship and sets us in opposition to His sovereign Word.

If we're to keep our relationships free from a spirit of idolatry, it certainly would be helpful to know more about how to recognize that destructive, deceptive spirit. What are the characteristics of the spirit of idolatry? As the Holy Spirit inspired the writing of the Scriptures, one particular passage offers helpful insight into the devilish characteristics of idolatry—the Ten Commandments.

If we study Deuteronomy 5:6-9 and consider what characteristics are diametrically opposed to what is commanded, we have a description of the spirit of idolatry. In part two, we will examine these verses and learn to recognize the seven characteristics of this spirit in our relationships with God and others.

PART TWO

The Seven Characteristics of Idolatry

Chapter 3

More Than One God

Characteristic #1

The spirit of idolatry proposes that there is more than one god or source of supply for our needs.

Deuteronomy 5:6 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me.

The Lie

If there is only one God, one Source of supply of all things, then Satan's chief lie persuades men to look to any source of supply other than God as a dishonor to God and His truth. The father of lies has used the same strategy since the beginning of time. In the garden of Eden there were two trees which represented life and death. The tree of life, representing Jesus Christ, produced fruit which would have given eternal life.

Then the Lord God said, 'Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever...'
(Genesis 3:22).

The second tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, offered a death-producing fruit. God graciously warned Adam, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of

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good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17). God didn’t say He would kill Adam if he ate of it, but that the eating of it would kill him. Why? I believe one reason is because it would alienate him from the tree of life.

Who knows better than Lucifer that looking to something other than God, regardless of how good it is, leads to death? He successfully marketed the earthly product with the same delusion of today’s advertising.

And the serpent said to the woman, “You surely shall not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:4-5).

The spirit of idolatry is a deluding influence. It promotes that which is false. It promises fulfillment and happiness from that which is not God (regardless of how good it appears or how wonderful the experience). We read in 2 Thessalonians that God sends such a deluding influence in order to reveal those who are His and those who are not His.

And then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming; that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. And for this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness (2 Thessalonians 2:8-12).

The spirit of idolatry does not recognize that all things come from one God, but instead suggests that there is more than one source of supply.

Our problem is made worse by our inability to detect selfish motives. Proverbs 16:2 states, “All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, but the Lord weighs the motives.” We humans tend to be concerned about achieving a life of personal happiness, comfort, and affluence. Consequently, we don’t know how to pray, or worse yet, we don’t care to learn. James, the apostle, wrote that some don’t receive because they don’t ask, and when they do, they ask with wrong motives (James 4:2-3). Some don’t pray much at all, which exposes the underlying belief that God isn’t

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much needed. Others pray quite a bit, but not often that God will be revealed, exalted, and glorified in a situation, or that they will be vessels of His love and mercy. The spirit of idolatry appeals to the selfish motives of the heart.

Our desires to be happy, to look good, and to have wonderful experiences are reinforced by a wrong idea about God and His purposes. An important aspect of Satan's delusion involves false thoughts about God. If it worked on Eve in her unfallen state, imagine how susceptible we are to the idea of a god who has the same vision in life for us as we do—that of making us happy and comfortable. *The inborn spirit of idolatry skews our thinking regarding our purpose in life and God's purposes in creation.* This has caused us to look to things other than to the God revealed in the Bible when we're in need or suffering. Our motives surface when God's purposes call for hardship, suffering, and neediness.

The Truth

With these things in mind, let's contrast how it glorifies God in Jesus Christ for His people to look to Him as their Source of life on a daily basis, event by event, relationship by relationship. He alone has the wisdom to know what we need to become like Christ and for His purposes to be fulfilled in our lives. He sees clearly our sinful motives and therefore can expose them through trials and uncooperative people, which effectively lure our unseen selfishness out of hiding. We may apply what we're told by the Lord Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, that God knows what we need before we ask Him (Matthew 6:8). But what we need isn't what *we think* we need.

The apostle Paul commented on the believer's response to suffering when he wrote, "And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should..." (Romans 8:26). What is our weakness? Our self-centeredness and inborn idolatrous spirit leads us to ask God to get us out of the suffering or change those who are causing us discomfort or inconvenience. Unless we know God's purpose for us and can recognize the spirit of idolatry, we will not realize that those people or circumstances *are* God's provision for us.

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It's a comfort to know that God doesn't condemn us for our weakness, but instead sends us His Helper. Paul continued in Romans 8:26, "...but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words..." Praise God for the ministry of His Spirit! He prays for us when we pray ignorantly or under the influence of the spirit of idolatry. Although we don't know how to pray, the Holy Spirit knows exactly what to pray so that we might become like Christ.

But the Holy Spirit isn't alone in His intercession. Verse 27 continues, "...and He who searches the hearts [Jesus Christ] knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." Jesus Christ's ministry of intercession also functions effectively even when we pray errantly. When we pray, the Holy Spirit prays, and Jesus understands His requests and enters into intercession before the Father. He always prays according to the will of God, which is that we might be conformed to His image through the situation or relationship which is causing us inconvenience or suffering.

Everything Comes From God

Have you ever considered that everything that happens to you as a child of God comes to you from God? Let's be thorough in our theology and apply it to our lives. *There's only one God from whom all things flow.*

According to Hebrews 7:25, Jesus "always lives to make intercession for us." That's His job twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks out of the year for your lifetime. He never takes a break! We also know that when He prays, all of His prayers are answered one hundred percent of the time because He always "intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (Romans 8:27). Therefore, we may joyfully and confidently know that whatever occurs in our lives is a direct answer to Jesus' intercession, for Paul continued, "And we know that God causes *all things* to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28).

What was Paul saying in Romans 8:26-29? In summary, he said that we don't know how to pray, but the Holy Spirit prays when we pray. And Jesus prays according to the intercession of the Holy Spirit and

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according to God's will. Then God works all things in accordance with their intercession for the purpose of conforming us into the image of His Son. *The spirit of idolatry does not believe that truth and suggests that more than one god exists.*

Just knowing and recognizing this first characteristic of idolatry helps us to see how only Jesus Christ can equip us to love. He never was fooled by Satan's marketing pitches. With confidence and peace He daily walked in the truth that His Father was God and the Source of all things. Whether a miraculous healing or the excruciating pain of the crucifixion, the Lord Jesus Christ maintained His upward look.

The apostle Paul longed for the Colossians to come to the true knowledge of God's mystery, that love and understanding come from Christ, *Himself*, "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:2-3). If you're to love, it will flow out of the life of Jesus in you as fruit of the tree of life from Whom you eat. In Jesus' last message to His disciples recorded in the gospel of John, chapters 14-16, Jesus spoke hopeful words to their troubled hearts. In summary, He said,

- ◆ Believe in God.
- ◆ Believe in Me.
- ◆ Abide in Me by eating My word.
- ◆ Abide in Me by praying about all things.
- ◆ Abide in Me by obeying Me—love one another.
- ◆ I'll not leave you alone to do it; I'll love through the Holy Spirit in you.

In contrast, the spirit of idolatry won't lead you to believe in God or that Jesus Christ is God. It doesn't encourage you to feed on God's Word, pray about all things, or love. But it will catalog *the knowledge* of this first characteristic in your memory banks and lead you to believe that in having the knowledge, you have eaten the best fruit. There's a big difference in having the knowledge about God and living *in Him*. The spirit of idolatry will lead you to believe that in the acquisition of knowledge you are eating of the tree of life. In reality, though, you will have eaten only of the good side of the tree of knowledge.

The tree of life or the tree of knowledge—from which do you eat? How susceptible are you to Satan's marketing scheme? Do you recognize

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the influence of this spirit in your life? If so, why not bow in the presence of God and confess this characteristic of idolatry?

Believing that there is only one God who is working all things together for good is the basis for a life of thanksgiving. Giving thanks to God for *all* the events and the people in your life expresses your faith in Him and is the equivalent of eating from the tree of life. Also, ask the Lord Jesus to love His Father through you and to convict you when there is evidence of the influence of the spirit of idolatry which looks to anything but God as the Source of life. Remember:

- ◆ **He alone is the Source of supply for all that you need in every situation and relationship.**
- ◆ **Look to Him as your Source of supply when in need.**
- ◆ **Realize that what you are supplied by God is exactly what you need to fulfill His purposes and glorify Him.**