

In the name of ✠ Jesus. Amen.

How difficult is it to love? I'm not talking about a romantic love of a man and a woman. I'm not talking about a self-indulgent, self-satisfying physical love that can end up with an encounter in bed and far too often by people who are not married. It's not difficult to love in that way, although there can be consequences, and those are borne more heavily by the woman: regret, self-loathing, perhaps a child as a fruit of the sexual encounter, more regret, perhaps an abortion, even more regret and more self-loathing.

Within a marriage, it is hoped that romantic love becomes something more than self-indulgence, although St. Paul reminds us that marriage is there to sate the burning desire that can lead to sexual immorality. Nevertheless, within marriage it is hoped that the desire for each spouse is to satisfy this passion in the other. Even if this isn't done perfectly, it's not difficult to love in this way.

How difficult is it to love? I'm not talking about a filial love of a parent for a child. This kind of love is not difficult either, especially for mothers who "remain physically bonded [with their children] for life" (See "4 Ways Moms And Their Children Remain Physically Bonded For Life," Jonathan Lange, *The Federalist*, Feb. 6, 2018). Marital bonds are easily broken in our "no fault divorce" culture, sadly even by Christians who know that "*from the beginning it was not so*" (Matt. 19:8), and that Jesus taught, "*What ... God has joined together, let not man separate*" (Matt. 19:6). But the bonds between parent and child survive many disappointments. It's not difficult for a parent to love his child. And one might extend that generally to family — the love of siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins — although the looser the connections the weaker the bond of love.

How difficult is it to love? Someone you have no close bond with? Someone who looks different than you? Dresses differently? Sounds different? How difficult is it to love your neighbor, love a stranger, love your enemy? How difficult is it to love someone who stole something from you? How difficult is it to love someone who has said or done all kinds of evil against you? How difficult is it to love someone who has lied to you, been unfaithful to you? How often have you heard, not just someone in the world, but a fellow Christian say, "What that person did is unforgivable"? Is that love?

The kind of love that Christians are called to is not easy; it's difficult! It's difficult for children and adults; it's difficult for the powerless and the powerful, it's difficult for the ordinary layman and the extraordinary theologian. Love for others is difficult. It does not come naturally. It has to be commanded: Moses says, "*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD*" (Lev. 19:18).

Jesus repeats it: Love God and love your neighbor ... as yourself. That's the whole law, and that's more important than all your hypocritical religiosity (Mark 12:33).

Jesus even goes further. *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ... For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”* (Matt. 5:43-44, 46-47).

How difficult is it to love? Are you becoming uncomfortable with the question? Love is difficult, friends, and Jesus makes it even more so. *“A new commandment I give to you,”* Jesus says, *“that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”* (John 13:34-35). Love like Me, Jesus says. And we know what that means, for Jesus *“loved his own who were in the world, [and] he loved them to the end”* (John 13:1), that is, He loved His own unto death.

How difficult is it to love? Difficult! We are not only commanded to love, but the apostles also exhort us as Christians to love. *“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God”* (1 John 4:7). And St. Paul describes love this way: *“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things* (1 Cor. 13:4-7).

How difficult is it to love? Do you give up? Don't just yet, but rejoice that our *“God is love,”* and that in Jesus this love became incarnate. *“In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world.”*

Love is difficult, but don't despair, for our God *“is gracious and merciful, ... abounding in steadfast love,”* and *“this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”* *“Extol [your] God and King, and bless [His] name forever,”* for in this way, God expressed His love for you, in His Son, *“that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”* (John 3:16).

Moreover, shout for joy, for it is by His grace that we have this faith, baptized into the one body of Christ by the one Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13), made a part of Him who became one with us, that *“we might live through him.”* We were united by baptism with the Christ who died but rose victorious o'er the grave, so that we will not only be united with Him in a resurrection like His, but also that we now will

present “[our] members to God as instruments for righteousness” (Rom. 6:13), that is, as instruments for love. And remember that this is the Spirit’s work in us, and He produces “*the fruit of the Spirit [which] is love, joy, peace, ...*” (Gal. 5:20) — but what is the first named fruit? Love.

How difficult is it to love? It’s difficult — impossible by your own striving — for “*apart from [Jesus] you can do nothing.*” But take heart! God has got your back! Take heart that love doesn’t begin with you. It begins with God. “*We love because he first loved us,*” in Christ. Then He loved you more by sending His Spirit to give you His grace, to graft you onto Himself, the true Vine. Jesus is the Vine and you are the branches. Thus attached, God supplies His love to you. That’s what flows through Christ the Vine and into you the branches — love. You’re not the source; you don’t have to produce it; that’s too difficult. But attached to Jesus, God’s love flows through you that you might bear love’s fruit, loving as Christ loved you, forgiving as you have been forgiven (Col. 3:13), comforting with the comfort you have received (2 Cor. 1:4).

You see how that works. The only way of messing it up is by cutting yourself off from this natural flow of love from the Vine through the branches. Cutting yourself off makes for withered, fruitless branches, worthy only to be taken away and cast into the fire. But abiding in the Vine, branches bear fruit.

And, to be sure, you can expect some unpleasant pruning along the way, but don’t lose heart! You’re not cut off. You’re being pruned — disciplined — and that, too, is an act of love from the Father, the Vinedresser, though “*painful.*” He does it to bring forth “*the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it*” (Heb. 12:11), that is, He does it that you might bear even more fruit.

So abide in the Vine, that you might live, and that the difficult work of love might be manifest in you. Abide your baptisms through daily contrition and repentance; let Jesus’ words abide in you as His disciples; feed on Jesus’ flesh and drink His blood, and you will abide in Jesus and He in you (John 6:56). You will bear much fruit — the difficult fruit of love. To God alone be the glory.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.