

Transformed by Grace, We Abide 2021  
 John 15:9-17 1 John 4:7-12, 15-16, 19, 21

### John 15:9-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

### 1 John 4:7-12, 15-16, 19, 21 (New Revised Standard Version)

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. We love because he first loved us. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

One time after several interviews & having accepted the job offer,  
 my new boss called  
 and asked me to meet her downtown for a drink together.

I felt some concern that she might rescind the job offer,  
 so to be cautious and prudent,  
 I arrived early and ordered water instead of wine or beer.  
 I stayed focused on making a favorable impression.

Years later, after we'd become good friends & trusted colleagues,  
 she told me that she'd known me mostly by reputation and resume,  
 and had just wanted to get to know me better,  
 over a few drinks and some easy conversation...

... and was somewhat disappointed that I seemed to be still trying  
 to get the job **that was already mine**, reserved and cautious,  
 when she'd hoped to make me feel that I was part of the team.

**It was supposed to be fun & easy, but I made it into an arduous task.**

Consider the Scribes and Pharisees  
 who opposed Jesus during his life, mission and ministry.

They believed and taught that through their very strict and rigid adherence to the rules, traditions and rituals of their religion, that they were making themselves **more acceptable & worthy**, than those others who didn't try as hard to please God.

They assumed that their religious fervency, rituals and good works were what was required to receive God's favor and acceptance.  
**But that misses the point of God's goodness and mercy.**

You recall that when Moses came down from the mountain at Sinai, they were given the stone tablets of the 10 Commandments, **only after** God had rescued them from slavery in Egypt, and **only after** God had already demonstrated his goodness and steadfast faithfulness.

Notice the order of the events as described in Exodus 20:2-3

First: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; and then the response, you shall have no other gods before me.

I freed you. I rescued you. I brought you out from slavery, **so in response**, you are to live in obedience to my Commandments. The point is, the Law comes **only after** the rescue and redemption, as a consequence of **God's prior love, mercy and rescue** ...  
... and that same pattern of grace runs all through Scripture.

First God loves us and shows us grace, then God calls and equips us to live out the effects of that grace out into the world as salt and light pointing toward God's love & compassion, or as Jesus directs in John, *abide in my love* (vs. 9), **and we abide in Christ' love by obeying his commandment to love.**

It is all initiated by the Lord's prior love, grace and mercy, and then, **only then** we are called, equipped and commanded, and given the possibility and opportunity to live in faithful & meaningful response.

**That is the central message of the life and teaching of Jesus.**

Unfortunately sometimes we get that confused, we suppose & assume that our relationship with God depends on our human performance, as if God might reject us if we do not live up to his Law, or as if our good works will somehow bring on God's favor.

The result can be a perfectionist and critical perspective, a harsh and negative, dread-based and guilt-driven attitude, that puts the focus on us or on human imperfection and failings, **rather than focusing on the goodness and graciousness of God.**

Then, rather than a joyful & grateful relationship through Christ, we are driven to perform, to get every detail just right, which is just a step away from **destructive self-righteousness...**

... which is just a step away from us **judging the worthiness of others** according to our own standard of misguided perfectionism, **which is to miss the mark of God's love, grace and healing-purpose.**

It's the difference between living our lives as his beloved ones and experiencing the peace and joy that God intends for us, **or being driven by fear, anger, guilt, obligation & frustration.**

The theological term for that, "**the priority of grace**" has 2 parts.

- 1<sup>st</sup> - God's grace always comes first, and only then we respond.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> - God's grace is the most important and most critical because that's the engine that drives everything else.

That **priority of grace** is explained in the letter we read, 1<sup>st</sup> John.

Listen carefully as it's described in this passage, vs. 4:9-11,19

God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. **We love because he first loved us.** (2x)

One of the windows through which that nature and character of God is revealed is through **the experience & ideal of maternal love.**

Throughout God's creation and certainly for most people, motherhood, maternal love, is one of the most fundamental, and one the most compelling forces in all of nature.

Now that's not to detract from, "Our Father who art in heaven", but the Bible uses several **specifically maternal images** to describe & help us understand the depth of God's compassion, **for God's love is far above and beyond any definition by gender.**

And since today is **Mother's Day**, isn't this an appropriate time for us to focus on and consider some of the **specifically maternal** examples, images and metaphors that we find in God's Word...  
... for the Bible is rich with a wide variety word pictures that **use finite imagery to help explain the infinite**, and to describe God's love and care for all humankind.

For instance, **the prophet Hosea** (vs. 13:8) describes and compares the power and intensity of God's love, as similar to **a mother bear fiercely guarding her cubs, to help illustrate the ferocious love our God has for us.**

Through the prophet Isaiah (49:15), we're given another image & promise of God's abiding love for us,  
**Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.**

One time when I was hiking in the woods, I came across a fawn, hidden, lying perfectly still and tucked back against a log.

I stopped to take a picture, and while getting my camera out, a doe, the fawn's mother charged at me, and was relentless in trying to distract me.

Ordinarily an *oidecoilous virginianus* or whitetail deer would never come that close, for they are far too skittish  
**--- except for a mother doe protecting her young.**

Just as it's unlikely that a nursing mother could forget her baby, or have no concern or compassion for her little child in need,  
**- so too God would never forget or abandon us.**

Continuing to speak through the prophet in the next verse, vs. 16

See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.  
In the Greek, the word “inscribed” is way more than just written,  
but is literally to carve or cut into the palm of someone’s hands.

If you have ever had  
a cactus-spike, a sliver or a cut on the palm of your hand,  
then you remember how painful it was every time you moved it,  
a constant reminder of where that wound was.

The Lord’s love is described as having carved or inscribed us  
into the palm of God’s own hand, which keeps us constantly in mind,  
- **and yes, God really loves us each one that much.**

**When Jesus was crucified, that image was literally fulfilled,  
as the sign of God’s love was inscribed into his hands  
when the cruel nails were driven in, piercing his flesh.**

Remember that when Thomas doubted and Jesus showed him his wounds,  
“look, see, there, there are the marks of God’s love,  
yes, right there, still inscribed, carved into my hands,  
as the prophet wrote: See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.  
**And yes, God really does love and value us, each one that much.**

Our world is filled with voices that devalue & deny our human worth,  
and a culture always demanding more effort and greater results.  
And sometimes Christians fall into that same flawed perspective,  
rather than joy-filled lives blessed and defined by God’s grace.

Because God’s grace through Jesus comes without any restrictions,  
we are set free to respond joyfully and faithfully with hope,  
and to reveal to the world the grace and Spirit of God in us.

But it’s very easy to slip into a guilt and shame-driven attitude,  
and **the destructive treadmill of righteousness by good works,**  
as if we need to perform flawlessly for God to still love us,  
which is really trying to **earn a gift that’s already been freely given,**  
like me still in interview-mode for a job that was already mine.

As Jesus explained in vs. 15

I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends...

Jesus is making a critical distinction here.

A servant is valued mostly for what they successfully accomplish  
The one who does more work is worth more to the master.

But not so for a friend.

For a friend is valued for the relationship that they share,  
by how open, how caring and loyal, by how close they are...  
... and Jesus wants us to serve joyfully motivated **as his friends,**  
and not driven by a harsh sense of duty, shame, fear or guilt.

The life Jesus intends for us **is a relationship through** grace & faith,  
**a living faith derived from God’s Spirit and presence within us.**

When Jesus chooses and calls us, it’s because of his gracious love  
and not for the gifts and skills that we can offer or tasks we do.

It's all about love, what Jesus **has, and is and will** accomplish,  
including **healing our wounds and brokenness, if we will allow it.**

And if we can get past our sense of our own accomplishment & pride  
and if we can simply abide, trust & faithfully serve **from love**,  
we can enjoy the rich pleasure of authentic friendship...

... as Jesus said, vs. 13-14

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.

Now, not many of us are called to lay down our lives as martyrs,  
so instead of responding to grace with a single huge payment,  
daily we are called to respond, a nickel or a dime at a time,  
loving our neighbors in countless small ways, **just as**  
**Jesus loves and care for us in the tiniest details of life...**

... as Jesus said: vs. 9 & 12

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. This is my commandment, that you **love one another as I have loved you.**

Jesus loves us by accepting us and loving us even as we are.

Jesus, himself, ate with the wounded and outcasts of his society,  
demonstrating that God's love extends & includes everyone,  
even those judged unacceptable-rejects by polite society.

Jesus came to create space for life lived in response to God's love,  
to receive the blessing of a "divinely-given do-over"  
no matter how badly we've strayed, failed or messed-up.

That is the Good News we're called to live and proclaim to the world,  
i.e. to love as Jesus loves and **to see others as Jesus sees them.**

So we are called

to reach out to all people with the love of God in our hearts,  
which means putting their interest and good ahead of ours.

It is dropping our defenses, our pretensions, our attitudes,  
**and resolving to love others, the way that Jesus loves us.**

**Surely it is a great compliment**

**and honor to mothers and to motherhood that one of the ways**  
**God chose to reveal and illustrate his own gracious love**  
**was through the example of an ideal mother's love and nurture,**  
**and for a mother's love, to serve as a snapshot of God's love -**

**--- and the joyful assurance** that nothing in all creation, will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8)

And today we give God thanks, and honor all the people in our lives  
who have demonstrated maternal love and sacrifice to us,  
reflecting the nature & power of God's gracious love for us.

Can a mother's love, nurture and comfort ever fail?

Can a mother ever forget, ignore or fail to fulfill motherhood?

Sadly yes. Tragically, yes sometimes it happens.

**But the good news is that God's love will never fail.**

For thanks be to God, who will surely find some way to love us,

some pathway of compassion to nurture, protect and sustain us,  
**and absolutely and abundantly provides for all our needs.**

I earnestly hope that this will be a happy Mother's Day for you,  
and, if the commercialized sentimentality of the day  
seems to trivialize disappointments or wounds you feel,

that you will find fresh comfort and renewed hope in the truth  
**that Jesus Christ knows and cares about us and our hurts,  
because our God is wise, compassionate & always loving.**

As the Lord promises in Isaiah 66:13-14

As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted ... You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice.