

LEARNING TO LOVE

Marshall Stiver, January 18, 2025

Have you ever felt stressed for time? Many of us write down lists. We might have of list for things we want to get done today. Maybe the things for tomorrow, for the week. Some people even have lists or objectives, goals, for two to five years out in advance.

We try to manage our time. We want to redeem it. We want to make use of it on a spiritual level for sure. But we also must balance the physical demands that we've taken on. We have family, jobs, and bills to pay. So, everything requires time from us. And since we have a finite amount of time to get everything done, we have to do what we do quickly. At least it seems that way in our minds from time to time. We can feel stressed for time.

Solomon wrote, "To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven. He spoke of having time for many things.

Ecclesiastes 3:9 What profit has the worker from that in which he labors?

10 I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied.

What benefit is there from our effort that God fully intends for us to be occupied with? What is the benefit?

12 I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives,

13 and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God.

God definitely intends for us to enjoy the good and godly things that we do and that we enjoy the benefits of our labor, the benefits of our work and our efforts. This doesn't mean that everything we experience is going to be pleasant in life, but we know that whatever might be unpleasant in the short term will become pleasant in the long term down the road. But the question there remains. Are we enjoying the good benefits of our labors? Not just in the good times but also in the tougher times? Are we enjoying them?

What I'd like to do this morning is to give you an example of enjoying the benefits of our labors;

Joyce and I both enjoy laboring at gardening and we really enjoy it's benefits because there are a lot of benefits to it. For instance, we grow our own organic food, the vast majority of it. You may say to yourself, that really is great. That's nice. It is nice. And it's a good example but it's totally incomplete. It's like a nothing burger. It doesn't give you the picture at all. There is so much more to it that the food aspect is just on the surface.

There is the smell of the soil. Soil has a smell to it when you are accustomed to it, especially as it's tilled or hoed or perhaps spaded depending on how you go about it. It smells alive, at least it has that capacity to smell alive. That can be like a mental tonic to you when you're working in the soil. It really can calm you down.

There is also great satisfaction in helping it come to life. Learning how to feed that soil that's full of trillions of microbes that are just anxious to go to work and feed the plants that you have in the ground. How can we come to amend the soil? That's one of the things we think about and it's a lot of fun to think on in our spare minutes.

We also are blessed to have composted cow manure on our property. I'm giving you an example of what lies beneath the surface here. Cow manure, composted has a lot of nitrogen in it which is one of the major elements in growing a plant. And it also is very high in humus. Adding the fluff to the soil to make it fluffy.

We also have composted chicken manure which is much higher in nitrogen than cow manure but it has a lot less humus. You have to be careful how much you put on. What it really boils down to is you really have to know your poop. That was a joke.

Then there's this aspect of the moisture. Some plants need more moisture and some need less. Some do actually quite poorly on too much water. Some plants are good companions to other plants, and some are not. You have to have all these considerations in your mind as you're thinking about planting your garden.

Weeding is a super important aspect to it. A person must be very timely. It's amazing how easy it is to weed a garden if you're hitting it at the right stage before it gets ahead of you and it becomes a burden in your mind. When it's small you can do it.

And it's so enjoyable when you look back at the end of a weeded row and you see all those plants that are supposed to be there and in the days ahead you see them growing and really developing. That's a wonderful thing and it's beautiful. The garden will become a beautiful thing.

Another aspect is teaching others to garden. That is a lot of fun. It's a generational thing. We can teach our children and our grandchildren how to garden. And there's the aspect of sharing produce with others, your neighbors, friends, family. That's mentally rewarding as well.

Gardening becomes even more rewarding with the more facts that we learn from year to year. It's like a never-ending process. We're always learning more. We always wonder what new facts we're going to learn this year that will cause our joy to increase in the benefits of our labor. It's always going to get better if we keep working at it. Part of the beauty of gardening is that there is always something new to learn. It's not stagnant, it's not stale. So, to enjoy God's gift of gardening more fully, we need learn the facts about it. That's what we have come to understand. This is just an example. You don't even have to like gardening. This is just to carry the thought that we're going to go over in this message.

Learning the facts is something that holds true in anything that God gifts us with. Anything He gives us. We have to learn the facts or truths from the Designer. If we tried to come up with our own facts or truth concerning the garden it probably wouldn't work. But we look to our Designer.

Just to hold an organically grown vegetable in our hands could make us look, on a temporary scale and at a glance, make us look like a master gardener. Look what they grew. But to become a developing master gardener, means we must continually learn the facts about gardening so as to apply them continually. It's a never ending process. And we'll stay in this agricultural vein of thought as we continue on. Verse 1:

John 15:1 "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.

Christ is the fruit producing vine and our Father is the Master vinedresser. He's the one who knows how to make it work.

2 Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

Those of us who've received the Holy Spirit after baptism and are begotten in Christ are likened to the branches. We're attached to the vine, Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit might be likened, very logically, to the sap that flows through the vine to feed the branches so that they can bear good fruit.

4 Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

5 "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.

There's a very important fact for us to glean here. We cannot bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit unless we are abiding in Christ, unless, we as a plant, or as a branch, are abiding in Christ who is the vine. We can't bear the fruit of God's mind unless we receive and are receptive to the sap that flows through the vine. We've got to be receptive to the facts that surround things.

If the branch, which represents us, gets bigger than the Master Vinedresser it won't and it can't, bear God's spiritual fruits. In other words, just because we can hold up a piece of organic fruit or vegetable doesn't mean we're a developing master gardener.

Likewise, the proof of a developing master vinedresser is that we must continually learn the true facts that come through Christ, the vine, from our Father, the Master Vinedresser. We're talking about his succession of facts that come from God. Not from us, not from our perspective but from His.

John 16:13 However, when It, the Spirit of truth, has come, It will guide you into all truth; for It will not speak on Its own authority, but whatever It hears It will speak; and It will tell you things to come.

The Holy Spirit, the sap in the vine, is going to guide us into all truth. These are very simple things, but easy to read over the top of. Only one can lead the other and that is we have to follow the Holy Spirit. So, if we are humbly leadable, we can be led into all truth, all the facts over time. Obviously that takes time to acquire all the facts. Just like with gardening; there's always something new that you haven't considered before.

All of these things that we learn, brethren, make our spiritual laboring enjoyable and fulfilling. Not boring, not tiring, not anxiety ridden, but interesting. We want to savor life despite the stresses just as God desires us to.

None of what we've covered so far is new to us and I think we would all agree without any question. But the question again comes up. Are we enjoying the benefits of our spiritual effort? Are we really enjoying the benefits? Or is there something lacking within us that we can't quite put our finger on? We look into our own spiritual lives. Is there something that's just not quite right? It could be that we're lacking something and aren't even aware of it although we need to be.

We can look at an example of that. We're going to take a very brief look at the Church of God in Ephesus. In the early verses, Christ talks about the good qualities in this Church. They were patient, they proved false apostles to be false apostles. They were discerning, in other words. And they hadn't become weary in it. They had stayed the course. In essence, the brethren there in Ephesus looked like an organic piece of fruit in the hand of someone who must surely be a master gardener in development:

Revelation 2:4 Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.

This was all wonderful stuff right up until we get to this one point. Christ says think back. You're missing something. You hadn't even thought of it. Maybe it's something we are

kind of aware but we can't put our finger on. He says, look back and go back to where you were as fast as you can. Move your heart and mind in that direction. Repent or be removed. That's how serious this is.

After hearing how Christ put it, they probably weren't even aware (the way it sounds when we read the verses) that something was lacking. Perhaps they were, maybe some were. But the reality for us is, this was written **to** the Church of God. Are we aware today?

Whether it's them in their time or us in ours, the natural inclination is to think we've got the facts right. We know. Yeah. We can read it. We know what we're supposed to be doing, what we're supposed to be thinking. What could be lacking? That's just natural for us to think.

In Acts 2, Peter has dropped the bomb, so to speak, on those who had been gathered at Pentecost. And he had explained that they had crucified Christ who'd been sent by the Father.

Acts 2:40 And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation."

41 Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.

42 And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.

The brethren here, they've just come to grips with the fact that they were really the ones who had put Christ to death – the Son of God.

We know just how thankful they would have been because we've been in the exact same position. After God opened our minds to the truth we began to understand the very, same thing. They would have been so happy, just like we were in God's mercy, that He had granted them grace to grow in. They would have been thankful for their newfound brotherhood, their new spiritual family. This wonderful family that they could be a part of, that they could grow together with. We felt the same way just as the Ephesians would have in their first love.

44 Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common,

45 and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

46 So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart,

47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

There is obviously no evidence here that they were commanded to sell their possessions or goods. As we get into this it's borne out that's true. They very likely didn't sell all the things that they had. We know that John took care of Christ's mother in his own home.

Acts 5:1 But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. (It didn't say they sold everything they had. They sold a possession.)

2 And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet.

3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?"

4 While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? (He didn't have to give it all. That was totally up to him.) Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."

Ananias and Sapphira sold a possession, a part of their total holdings. But they had agreed to keep a portion back for a particular purpose. We can probably rightly assume, that it was because they wanted to appear to be as great givers within the group.

The others that had been doing this, would have been giving in an organic manner from a pure heart and a pure conscience, simply as members of one another. Not trying to be somebody. Just as members of one another. These two gave under false pretenses. It was fake. They were trying to look real; they were trying to look pure of heart to those around them. And they were lying to the Holy Spirit which leads and guides us into all truth and helps us to bear the fruit.

In principle, this is what was happening in Ephesus. This is the very same thing that was happening in Ephesus. That's why they were told to remember and return to where they had been in their first love. To go back to it. Their spiritual lives literally depended on learning to love again because they had let it slide. They had let it slip. They had to learn to love again.

So, today let's take a look at what it takes to learn to love again. And so, we asked the question earlier, let's bear in mind as we go through this. Are we truly enjoying the good benefits of our spiritual labors? Are we truly? And if it's not 100%, let's very wisely identify through God's facts why it's not and how we can learn to love again.

- **Understand how important love is to God.**

We must understand how important love is to God.

1 John 4:9 In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him.

10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

We know well that Christ died so that we might have our sins forgiven upon repentance and faith in Christ's sacrifice. But that's just the surface. Earlier we were talking about the surface in gardening. This is just the surface in what God has done for us. He died for us when we were His enemies. Christ was sent into the world that after it had become populated according to God's plan so that we each could eventually and potentially enter His family.

God doesn't love us only when we please Him. He loves at all times. Before we were called and after we're called and all the way through the process to the end of our lives. He is genuinely concerned about every person who's ever lived. Genuinely.

Think of the people who may have treated you badly, maybe someone who appears to us in our minds as utterly incorrigible, the worst sort of a person. In love, God doesn't want them to die an eternal death. He desires that all should come to repentance and ultimately to life.

We know that not all people will inherit eternal life, but through love, He hopes they will. That's the aspect that drives God forward, drives His plan of salvation forward. Each one of us were just as guilty as any of those who we thought in our minds as incorrigible, they're horrible. Sin is sin. None of us are any different.

But brethren, we have to comprehend. We're looking at God's view of love. Love is why we're here as part of earth's population. That's why we're here. Love is why God has called us and will see to it that everyone has their chance to be called. We understand the plan of salvation. That's not our point here today. Love is how He patiently deals with us as we overcome throughout life. Time after time after time after time, He deals with us. And that's how He'll deal with every single person through time as they commit to live His way.

God is love and there is no selfishness in Him. There is none. There is none. In **Luke 12:32**, Christ said, **"Fear not little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom."**

Let's translate that to us today. In the life of an overcomer, that means that God finds pleasure in pulling the weeds around the plant that we each are. He enjoys it. He finds pleasure because "That's going to do them some good. They're going to get their roots down there where they need them now because they don't have to compete with all those rotten weeds." It's like we're His garden.

Love is His compulsion in amending the soil that's around us. Not only does it smell alive; it is alive. I'm fascinated with how God might contemplate what spiritual mineral do we need to get our roots in to help us to bear more fruit? How exciting that must be

to God as He's looking at His own family here. He's not just looking at random people. He's looking at His family; each individual who's going to be born into His family and He's excited to see how He can amend the soil around us, around each one of us so that we can slowly take shape. We can begin to really expand and develop on the vine and fruit is beginning to be born. How exciting does that have to be to God? In patience He waits for the fruit. And He does all these things in love. That's why He does them. That's what He is.

He's not anxious to produce any other kind of fruit. It is His good pleasure to put all the time needed into those who have embraced the priceless gift of His Son. It's His good pleasure. He enjoys every little thing that we overcome, every big thing we overcome. He enjoys every aspect of it because He knows that He's nurturing us along. We may not know it all the time but He is doing that.

Get this point in your mind. Our growth is the good benefit of our Father and Christ's spiritual labors. That's what lifts Them up. That's what smells marvelous to Them. That's life. In His love, God explains to us what it is that matters most to Him. And of course, we don't think this way all the time because we tend to think just like carnal men sometimes.

Isaiah 66:1 Thus says the Lord: "Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest?"

Out of all the things that God has made, which are utterly incredible and unspeakable in their beauty and magnitude, He wants to dwell with His people.

2 For all those things My hand has made, And all those things exist," Says the Lord. "But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, And who trembles at My word.

Now, let's translate that down into what we can understand very clearly, concisely. God desires more than anything else to dwell with those who are in their first love. That's what it comes down to. And God puts that far above the most magnificent physical things, temples or parts of the universe that He's created. He delights in those who are humble enough to truly learn to love as He does.

Those in Ephesus, as described by Christ, had good works. They hated evil, they were growing in patience and they identified false apostles, false teachers for what they were. But they had lost something infinitely more valuable. Despite all the good things that **'they'** were doing, they were losing their identity. They were losing their identity thinking they had it clear in mind. They knew the facts. We keep the Sabbath. We keep the Holy Days. We do all these things that we're supposed to do.

They were becoming the arbiters of their own works. The branches were getting bigger than the vine. We talked about that earlier. That's what happens. We become too big in

our own eyes. That's not first love. That's self-love. And that's why Christ said "Repent and change lest I remove you from your candlestick."

You see, in our first love, we humbly looked to our Father through Christ whom He made the Head of the Church. It would have been the same with the Ephesians in their infancy. Christ is the perfect example of first love.

John 5:18 Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God. (This is the context for what follows.)

19 Then Jesus answered and said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner.

Christ identified Himself as God's Son and then He goes on to acknowledge that, as Paul explained in **1 Corinthians 11:3**, that God was His head. The Father was His Head just as Christ is the Head of man and man is the head of the woman, etc. He did what His Father did. Did He do this because He was a peon. Is that how Christ saw Himself, as a peon, as a nothing? No, He did it because love doesn't parade itself, it is not puffed up. That's why Jesus Christ is the way He was and the way He is. Love does not parade itself. It's not puffed up.

The Jews who wanted to kill Him wanted to have preeminence over Him in the eyes of the people. That is the attitude of the world that we all have to fight and we have to get rid of those weeds out of our own minds.

You see, because of His humble attitude, He was one with His Father. Because He was in His first love and He never lost it, He was one with His Father. And these that wanted to persecute Him were apart from God, they were apart from the Father.

And so that we don't lose the thread of thought, Christ would have seen being under His Father's authority as a great benefit of His spiritual labors. He was close to His Father. There's nothing better than being close to someone that you love. That would have been a great benefit of His labors as a physical human being. Working together in 100% harmony with the hope of a family of likeminded beings in the making.

These are the things that we can deduce were in the mind of Jesus Christ and our Father. It's like mankind being garden of one mind and one thought, one purpose.

One other aspect is that we are each like Christ in that He is God's Son. We see how He followed His Father and had this first love for His Father. Those who've received the Holy Spirit are begotten of God, though not yet born. So, we are to be developing our Father's very own love within us which He and Christ are living symbols of. They encompass the word love. We are to humbly follow Christ's lead by living in our first

love. That's the example He set for us. We live in our first love. We don't want to depart from it and if we're apart from it we want to get back just as quickly as we can.

30 I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me.

Prior to our own baptism, we came to realize that we could do nothing and we knew that without a question. We could do nothing of ourself. God humbled us through our calling. And we were so eager to hear God's truths so that we could grow in coming to proper judgement. We could develop the mind of God. We could come to right conclusions instead of carnal conclusions and we could make decisions that would improve our lives and the lives of those around us.

All of this is possible for those living in their first love or for those who are learning to love again. This, again, points to how important love is to our identity as well as to our strength and our endurance.

John 13:34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

35 By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

This is what some in Ephesus had forgotten. Christ didn't say all people are going to know you are My disciples because of your works, your labor, your patience, your hatred of evil or because we exposed false apostles or false leaders. Our identity as God's people will be borne out in whether or not we love each other just as Christ has loved us. That is the identity of God's people.

All the good qualities Christ pointed to in regard to the Church in Ephesus, what about those? They were wonderful qualities and to be expected among God's people. But they were rendered useless in the absence of love. The absence of what God is. When God's not there it's very evident.

When the branch gets bigger than the vine and therefore, bigger than the vinedresser, credibility is lost. We look at the Church of God today and I'm not picking on anyone. I'm talking to myself and speaking to you and whomever, but when the branch gets bigger than the vine the credibility is lost. Listen to *Barnes Commentary* on verse 35:

This is, your love for each other shall be such decisive evidence that you are like the Savior, that all people shall see and know it. It shall be the thing by which you shall be known among all men. You shall not be known by special rites or habits; not by a special form of dress or manner of speech; not by special austerities and

unusual customs, like the Pharisees, the Essenes, or the scribes, but by deep genuine, and tender affection. And it is well known, it was this which eminently distinguished the first Christians, and was subject of remark by the surrounding pagans. "See" said the pagan "see how they love one another! They are ready to lay down their lives for each other." Alas! how changed is the spirit of the Christian world since then! Perhaps, of all the commandments of Jesus, the observance of this is that which is least apparent to a surrounding world.

Interesting isn't it? Powerful. Now, we know Christ's evaluation of many in Ephesus. And we know history is valuable in that it can inform us of the present. So, we'll bring it to the present, the question is, "How does Christ evaluate His one Church today composed of many organizations, and many congregations, composed of many individuals who are all free moral agents?" God gives us all the latitude to choose. Are we going to be like Him or are we going to be like what we want to be like?

Do I, do we, value love among us to the degree that God does? Do we value love to the degree that God does? Does it supersede all else? The answer to that, whether it's organizationally, whether it's congregationally or individually, will vary. Those who've retained or are learning and therefore recapturing their first love will know the answer to it and they will be motivated by it. We will be motivated by it.

- **We need to understand what love looks like in God's eyes and not what we want it to look like in order to suit ourselves.**

We need to understand what love looks like in God's eyes and not what we want it to look like in order to suit ourselves. And again, we're seeking the facts according to God just as we did in our first love. We're not looking here to disprove God. We're looking here to prove God.

1 Corinthians 13:1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.

2 And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

All the things Paul has spoken of, we would very naturally view in a positive light if the attitude is correct. And they are if we have God's love in us, those are good things. Otherwise, all these things are virtually nothing. This is God's perspective. This is the truth. These are the facts.

In Revelation, Christ wrote the remedy to them and to each one of us individually today. That remedy was, “Repent quickly and do your first work.” Any time we repent we have to know exactly what it is that we are turning back to or turning away from however you want to state it. We have to know. We have to get the facts. Paul provides those for us here:

4 Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up;

5 does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil;

6 does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth;

7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never fails...

Listening to these facts or truths about godly love is very settling to our minds. It is every time that we read them. It's like a load has been lifted just listening to these things. But now, God inspired Paul to immediately reestablish the actual value of the things that we can so easily begin to see as “our” identity, the identity that we like to have as the branch that we are is beginning to get bigger than the vine.

8 ... But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away.

The simple truth is that, in the end, only love goes on forever. That's all. That's all that's going to continue on. God's not going to immortalize anything but that. He is immortal and He does live forever. God is love and that is what we are to be growing into in our first love.

So, let's talk about what it looks like and what great benefits we can have in the doing of it. I'm not going to delve into all of these phrases that we just covered. You could have a sermon on each one of those phrases. We're just going to look at the very first one initially. Not because it's most important. It's certainly not. All of these phrases that Paul has described for us concerning love intertwine. They're all extremely important. We're just going to use the first one because it's the first one that I came to. We're going to use it as an example to help us reason our way through the rest of them. Let's begin with, loves suffers long and is kind.

As I mentioned earlier, hearing or thinking on these words is very settling to our minds. I think we would agree with that. When applied to our interactions with each other, we all want others to patiently and kindly bear with us as we work at overcoming. That's what we all want. It is the warmest of thoughts. It's a pleasant and good thought. It's pleasing to the self and it should be. It is one of the good benefits of a brother or sister in Christ's spiritual labor when they suffer long with us.

But the real question is, “Do we ourselves enjoy the good benefits of suffering long and being kind to our brothers and sisters in Christ as they slowly or as they speedily overcome through life?” That’s the real question. Because we know that there can be contentions, there can be strife, there can be suspicions and jealousies, unkind judging, improper motives imputed, and sharp words spoken.

But in love, God suffers long with each one of us as we do some of those very things. He suffers long with us. He does so in the hope of a good outcome over time. In other words, our God is not one who is out there to cancel anyone. There’s no love in that. It is a part of His good pleasure to give us the Kingdom.

Our Father has His hands in the soil that we’re each planted in. It’s not boring to Him. It’s not an unpleasant task or disgusting to Him to contemplate how He can better amend the soil for us time after time as He patiently works with us and endures with us. He considers, “How can I improve it for them? How can I help them through this?”

Love breaths deeply of the soil around each of us. That’s how God works with us. You can just almost see Him breathing in the smell of it all. Wonderful smells that come from life in the soil. How can God improve it for each of us despite the stresses? That has to be stimulating. God looks down and He sees us in awful stress and He looks at it and He knows the answer and He’s contemplating, “How can I best bring that into them with the least amount of friction to speak the truth in love, the easiest way I can for them to learn.”

What trace mineral do they need to get us to the next stage of development? Do we need the mineral of understanding, of wisdom, of correction, of following a friend’s uncompromising example? If we can enjoy the thrill of amending the soil for the plants that we grow, how much more so can we enjoy the benefits of our spiritual labors among ourselves? It’s organic, brethren. We have to see it that way. It’s organic among ourselves as the body of Christ. How much do we appreciate being able to suffer long with others and to be kind?

Patiently bearing with each other as we overcome smells fantastic because there is obvious life in the soil. And life in the soil means there is hope. There is hope of production ahead of a harvest. Look at an illustration of bearing with another:

1 Peter 3:1-2 Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, ² when they observe your chaste conduct accompanied by fear.

Here we see love is communicated dynamically by overcoming evil with good. Not tit for tat. Not, you did this, I’ll do that. No. It’s overcoming evil with good. If an unconverted mate can be won by the pure, unflinching (and that means continuing, continuous) conduct of thought, word or action, of one who truly loves the other enough to set the right example, how much more so would that be among the brotherhood?

Those in their first love will do this because they humbly believe God's directives. They haven't become so important that they know more than the Vine or the Vinedresser. And brethren, if we want love to grow, we can't let our minds decide for us what is the best way to develop love and unity among ourselves. It's God's way.

Proverbs 25:21 If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; ²² For so you will heap coals of fire on his head, And the Lord will reward you.

Paul said something very similar to this in **Romans 12:20**. In essence, we see that if we do the opposite of the world around us by following Christ's example in a humble, first love attitude, there is a good chance that such kindness will prick their conscience and cause them to reconcile with us and very possibly with God thereafter, which would be even better. Regardless, Solomon adds that if we truly love in this way, God will reward us. What does that encompass?

We could probably think of a lot of rewards we would like to have. But let's go to Matthew 5 and we'll get to the answer here. Christ is going to get to the point here where He talks about a reward.

Matthew 5:43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

44 But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,

You and I both know that there have been times and there are times when we've treated our brothers and sisters in Christ in a way that we would treat an enemy out of our own self-love, out of our own view of what should be growing out of the mind.

In our first love, we are eager to say, "Yes this is what I want to do." Just what Christ has said here. Or to go the extra mile if you read the verses up above there. To go the extra mile, to bend over backwards. But what now is there about a reward?

45 that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

God can reward us with anything He wants to give us any time He wants to give us anything. That's not a question. But what greater gift could we have than that we become recognizable by those around us as the children of God? Not stuck on themselves. They're living in their first love. And they love like God loves.

With this blessing, being children of God, we become credible examples of His gospel message; someone worth listening to, someone to learn from. And that of course, is our destiny during Christ's millennial reign. It will be a time of teaching others to always live

in their first love. And we'll know something about it because we've had a training ground here. And we've had Satan to overcome which makes it very, very difficult.

- **Get your hands into the soil that love grows in.**

Get your hands into the soil that love grows in. Smell the earthy aroma of something organic and pure as God created it to be. It's the smell of good things to come, of good fruit to come. What I'm saying is, brethren, the more that we experience selfless love, the more we will want to experience it.

When we begin to understand how important love is to God and what it truly looks like, the more fascinated we will become in learning and applying it in our own lives among ourselves as God's people. It's fascinating. It's stimulating. It's interesting.

Earlier we discussed feeling stressed for time and we asked ourselves if we truly do enjoy the good benefits of our labors. If we feel more stress than benefit, what do we often do? I know what I do. I try harder. I just push harder in whatever direction trying to get ahold of whatever it is that I'm not attaining. I can't put my finger on it but I know I'm not there. I've got to just try harder.

And we can find ourselves brethren, striving but never attaining simply because we haven't gotten our hands into the soil. We have to have our hands in the soil. In other words, if we want to be satisfied and try so hard to make it so, not realizing that the satisfaction that we innately desire is found in the giving of self, not in the getting for self. Not in the elevation of self. It's in the giving of self. That is where satisfaction and benefit for our spiritual labors is. We desperately need to get our hands into the soil that love grows in.

Let's consider a few examples to illustrate this point. And we'll reflect on a few of the other phrases from 1 Corinthians 13. When we think about the Church organizationally, congregationally or interpersonally, we can easily not feel the benefit, we can, not feel satisfaction. We can become like Peter when he forgot what he had learned about Gentiles coming into the Church. We can get to feeling that way. We can think there should be something more from our labors.

No doubt, those whom Christ spoke of in Ephesus, at least some of them felt that way. They did not appear to know why and therefore, they weren't getting their hands into the soil. Their soil needed amending. And we look at them. What applies? Solomon wrote that by pride comes contention.

What we can deduct from that, is that pride will send up walls. It automatically sends up walls and barriers between us and among us so that we don't even look like Christ's disciples. We just look like people as we read from the commentary there. We just look like anybody else in the world. There's no benefit, there's no satisfaction in that.

If we're honest with ourselves, like Ananias and Sapphira, we often want to be noticed. We want to be noticed by others. They postured themselves to look like great givers just as we can in so many different ways so that we can get preeminence over others and we can try to be somebody. We all know what I'm talking about. We want satisfaction for ourselves. We're grasping for it but we're not getting it. Not able to grasp it.

But with our hands in the soil, we know that love doesn't parade itself. It's not puffed up. We know the needed amendment is humility. And humility comes from the Latin word humus which means soil. We could liken humility then to living soil, soil that's blessed by God. Something that's really good to grow things in.

Humility is that vital thing found in those in their first love. Satisfaction and benefit is found in the giving of ourself. Do we feel benefit in our relationships? Is something lacking in our relationships? With our hands in the soil, we'll know to check for a particular trace mineral that might be deficient among others. I'm just looking at one at this moment because here's a good scripture to accompany it. It's the mineral of kindness. This applies equally to men and women. It virtually makes no difference at all:

Proverbs 31:26 She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness.

This woman isn't known for encouraging compromise, which tears the Church apart. She doesn't do that. But she is one of those who'd be known for speaking the truth in love. And this is done from a meek and quiet spirit. You see this is living soil that is producing something really good. Handle this soil, smell the life in it and enjoy the fruits of your labors. It's enjoyable to be a kind person who doesn't cause offense and speaks the truth but kindly in love.

You know we can feel a lack of benefit or satisfaction as a result of things beyond our immediate control as well. But again we need to get our hands into the soil. We need to be thinking about it. This is an example that we're drawing upon from the Apostle Paul that we can easily relate to today without any explanation:

Philippians 1:15 Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from goodwill:

16 The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains;

17 but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel.

Where is the satisfaction in what he has just described? Where is the benefit in this? What is lacking in the soil?

18 What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.

Nothing was lacking in Paul's soil at that moment. There was something lacking in the soil of those preaching from pretense. But not in Paul. Nothing was lacking. And why? Because love rejoices in the truth. Love rejoices in the truth.

We can think that's fine, but I still think I might not be totally satisfied. We might still feel a little bit on edge instead of thinking the way that Paul was. Could our soil be lacking in the major element of faith? Well, yes, of course. If we don't see it like Paul did there's a lack of faith there.

God doesn't need us to hold His hand because someone may be called to His truth through false pretenses. The world's not falling apart. A good thing has just happened. He is holding our hands and those who have been called by whatever means He sees fit to do so and He will provide for His own. We know all these things by faith. We don't have to become radical. There is satisfaction in not getting bigger than the vine. We don't have to be stressed. We don't have to be stressed over what we see around us.

Now, let that soil sift through your fingers and breath deep of its richness and enjoy the benefits of your labors. Even though we live in a fractured Church right now, God is going to take care of the faithful. God will take care of those who are in their first love. I know He wants us all to return to that first love:

1 John 4:19 We love because He first loved us.

You know, with our organizational and congregational or our personal differences and at times lack of humility and therefore lack of faith, we can wonder about love growing within the Church.

But the thing is brethren, love is organic, it is pure. And the thing we can know about it is that it never fails. It never fails. Christ's selfless love went out from Him to its recipients of which we are among those recipients. And because it's a living thing, it grows in the willing. It grows in those who are humbly in or returning to their first love. That's what we can know for sure. It doesn't fail and it won't fail. God intends for us to be a link to that continual growth of the gift. We are to be that link to make it expand because just like negativism can expand within the Church, so can love. And it's organic and it's powerful because it's fueled by the Holy Spirit.

And as with Christ, it's not about getting, it's about the joy and the satisfaction that we can have in the giving of ourself.