

# Adventuring with God

with Jeanne Hedrick

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## My Spiritual Epitaph

I remember being at a Bible study many years ago where the teacher asked us what we would like to have inscribed on our tombstone as our spiritual epitaph. The idea was that it would be instructive to us to know what our main spiritual goal was, so we could begin to pray about it being fulfilled in us.

At the time, I struggled with what I would choose out of the dozens of possibilities. We could only pick one short statement (since gravestones don't have a lot of room), so we had to carefully consider how it would be crafted. *She glorified God* seemed like a good goal, but I realized it wasn't specific enough to be very helpful.

As I sat there with a lot of things rolling around in my head, I was suddenly struck with inspiration. I felt this statement was perfect – short, but full of implication for every area of my life. If I could master this, I would find the means of securing all my other spiritual goals. Here's the statement I came up with that night: *She learned to love.*

Some of you may be surprised. You might be thinking: "What's the big deal about that? Everybody knows how to love. All you have to do is find people you enjoy, you spend time with them, you bare your hearts and share your dreams, and voila! Love is the natural outflow. You don't have to *learn* to love ... it's an expression of feelings from deep within."

Maybe we view love this way because we invest most of our time and energy in our circle of friends and family – the people with whom we share common values, ideas, behavior, and good will. As long as we stay in this circle, it's relatively easy to serve and be kind, since we are relatively sure our efforts will be appreciated and reciprocated.

In other arenas, showing love is much harder – impossible, in fact, without the help of the Holy Spirit. It's in this context that we earn the commendation of Jesus. He told His disciples in Luke 6:32, "*If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them.*" It's when we act lovingly

toward those who don't love us that we demonstrate a quality of love that's rooted in the character of God. Jesus continues in verse 35, "*Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.*"

That kind of love is supernatural, flowing out of the Holy Spirit residing within us: "*God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us*" (Romans 5:5). Our sinful nature doesn't have this kind of love. It prompts us to act out of selfish motives in almost every circumstance. It may be okay with serving people we have a natural affinity for, but it just doesn't get the point of trying to love those who are difficult to be around – the people who are hateful, manipulative, touchy, or draining. To love them, we'll have to learn how to access the resources available in the Holy Spirit.

The apostle of love wrote, "*We love because he first loved us*" (1 John 4:19). It's out of our recognition of His great love towards us that we begin to develop a measure of humility and compassion that'll enable us to extend good will to everyone around us, even our enemies. "The knowledge that God has loved me to the uttermost, to the end of all my sin and meanness and selfishness and wrong, will send me forth into the world to love in the same way. God's love for me is inexhaustible, and I must love others from the bedrock of God's love to me" (taken from the May 11<sup>th</sup> reading, *My Utmost for His Highest* by Oswald Chambers).

When we allow God to send us out into the world as instruments of His love, we learn a lot in the process. First, we learn how inadequate our human love is. Second, we learn that we're not the only objects of God's love: He loves every individual in the same way He loves us. Even the ones that seem so unlovely to us bear God's image, and Jesus counted them worth dying for.

Like us, they need His redemption from sin, and they will come to know Him through kindness and grace, not judgment and censure. "*At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived*

and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy" (Titus 3:3-5).

The good news about trying to love the unlovely is that God will pour out His blessing on both the one acting in love and the one receiving it. Everyone benefits. What may start out as a strained, resentful act of service can be transformed by the Holy Spirit into service that genuinely reflects God's kindness and mercy. This is the bonus that C.S. Lewis mentions in his chapter on love in *Mere Christianity*. "Do not waste time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him."

This is the process of learning how to love. Even our natural love relationships can be enriched and deepened by God's love flowing through us. During the last few years, I've taken on more and more responsibility for my elderly mother's care. I've always "loved" her in a human sense, but I'm beginning to see that our relationship was largely based on superficial and selfish motives. I loved her mostly because, as my kind and giving mother, she was always "there" for me when I needed her.

Now our roles have changed, and I've been placed in a position of having to "be there" for her. This shift hasn't been easy for either of us, but God is working out His good purposes through it. The days when I'd like to run away from the pain of seeing her decline

so rapidly, and the times when I'd like to lash out in frustration at her inability to cope with her new role, teach me that I still have much to learn. I have a long ways to go before I can claim my spiritual epitaph.

I'm not giving up, though. Learning to love is just too important. Throughout the New Testament writings this spiritual virtue is elevated above all the others. In the classic passage on the subject, 1 Corinthians 13, Paul wraps the discussion up with an impressive summary: "Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails" (vv. 7-8). No wonder he urges the believers in Colosse to make it their top priority: "Over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity" (Colossians 3:14).

Love will follow us into eternity. When we reach heaven, we'll no longer need to exercise mercy or faith, to prophesy or heal in Jesus' name, but love will always be central anywhere God dwells. One of the joys of heaven will be that we can finally grasp "how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ" (Ephesians 3:18).

Before He returned to heaven, Jesus prayed to His Father: "I have made you known to them [the disciples], and will continue to make you known in order that *the love you have for me maybe in them*" (John 17:26). If we aspire to reflect the character of God, we must major in love. All the other courses in His spiritual school are great and helpful, but the truth is, they are optional. Love is the only essential virtue we must have if we want to graduate with honors.

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"Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee, God of glory, Lord of love;  
Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee, opening to the sun above.  
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness, drive the dark of doubt away;  
Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day!

Thou art giving and forgiving, ever blessing, ever blest,  
Wellspring of the joy of living, ocean depth of happy rest!  
Thou our Father, Christ our brother, all who live in love are Thine;  
*Teach us how to love each other*, lift us to the joy divine.

Mortals join the mighty chorus, which the morning stars began;  
Father love is reigning o'er us, brother love binds man to man.  
Ever singing, march we onward, victors in the midst of strife;  
Joyful music leads us sunward in the triumph song of life."

(Henry van Dyke, 1852-1933)