

Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave... He now showed them the full extent of his love... He poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him... (Then he told them) 'Now that I, your master and teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.' John 13:1, 5, 14-15



Loving others - as the Lord loves us



Do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. But seek God's kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Luke 12:29, 31

When have you had opportunity to wash someone's tired dusty feet? Or in some similarly down to earth way shown loving care? Again, how does this physical action picture a more spiritual service that calls for caring and humility?

Experience

Recall times when you have felt really loved by someone, or loving towards someone. Were these with your parents, partner, or children? Other relatives or friends? A pet, an entertainer you idolised, or some unfortunate you took pity on? What have those occasions taught you about loving - about how it's inspired, or how best expressed?

Meditations

What evidence do you see around you of God's love? (What makes you question it?) How much evidence do you see of people loving one another? How much do we produce of our love? Reflect on how Jesus loved! And what we need to do to 'follow him'.

All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above, then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all his love.

Harvest hymn

The Lord creates and provides on a cosmic scale, provides for our needs with boundless care and wisdom, and so variously - generously supplying resources for body, mind, and spirit; wisely noting our failures and, while assuring us of forgiveness, insisting that we need to change; appealing for us to serve others, and convincing us that we have the love and strength to do so. No doubt you can think of more. What an amazing demonstration of love!

But what an impossible example to follow! However intensely we love anyone, we cannot hope to show it in such style. It would seem arrogant to make any comparison between our very best efforts and those of our Heavenly Father. Can we any more realistically hope to follow the example of the Lord on earth? After all he did say,

As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.

John 13:34-35

How did he love those disciples? By befriending them, helping them to understand life, trusting them to join in his teaching and healing work. Maybe it's not beyond us to treat other people like that. But of course there's more. In repeating the command he added,

Greater love has no-one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. John 15:13

We are reminded that many people like us have been challenged to risk death in defending friends, families, or country against violent attack, and we may well doubt our ability to do the same. However, 'laying down one's life' can carry other meanings - for instance, giving up a comfortable lifestyle or ambitious career, in order to relieve famine, combat disease, or serve in ways that are less dramatic but still demand long-term commitment and bring no reward other than that of feeling useful.

Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Mark 10:43-45

There are three important elements in our growing love.

One is simply obeying God's commands, which may be rather superficial unless we develop more inward elements, and it is certainly not the Lord's way of loving. We can think more deeply, get to understand the reason for these commands, how variously they may apply, and feel greater sympathy and compassion.

Jesus said, If you hold to my teaching you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.
John 8:31-32

We may also feel the Lord's love flowing into our hearts bringing greater warmth, into our minds giving truer insight, and on into our activity making it more right and kind. Swedenborg calls these three elements natural, spiritual, and celestial, and describes heavenly communities based on each. However, they may be variously mixed in us.



Insofar as we reach a celestial character, we hardly need to think what love requires of us, since Divine Love is flowing through, using us as 'channels of his peace'. Often though, we still need to reflect as lovingly and humbly as we can, remembering what truth we have learned and relating it to our life experience: What is this neighbour's real need? How can I best help towards it?

Our potential to love and serve may really be greater than it feels. Charities continually remind us that even gifts which are small by our standards can make a huge difference to people in deprived areas, especially overseas. The richer countries of the world could, with only moderate effort, totally transform the conditions of life in the poorer countries. What a chance to let God's love flow through us!



Teaching focus

Love consists in having one's own belong to another and in feeling another's joy as joy in oneself ... What is it to love oneself alone, and not another outside oneself by whom one may be loved in return? ... Divine Love must necessarily be and exist in others whom it may love, and by whom it may be loved. For when there is such a need in all love, it must be most of all in Love Itself – infinitely. Divine Love and Wisdom, 47-48

Can it really be that our love, although on a much smaller scale, is of the same essential quality as the Lord's?

Unless the Lord loved all people as a father does his children, and unless the inmost heaven from the Lord loved them as a mother does her infants, there could not possibly be any parental affection on earth. Spiritual Diary 1683

So all true love begins with the Lord and his heavens, yet just a little can flow out through us. There's an immense reservoir for us to draw on!

Bible focus

The Lord has appeared to us from afar saying, 'I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness. I will build you up again ... Again you will take up your tambourines and go out to dance with the joyful. Again you will plant vineyards ... and enjoy their fruit.' Jeremiah 31:3-5

Reflect awhile on these sensory images of building, music and dancing, planting and harvesting. What spiritual benefits do you see pictured by them?