

David P. Gushee

The Struggle to Love

If God is really in us in the form of the Holy Spirit, shouldn't it be easy to love one another?

—Margo Shelton, Victorville, California

THERE ARE TWO WAYS to approach this question. One would be to focus on the issue of love. The other would be to ask why it takes so much effort to live out *any* Christian moral obligation, whether love, or sexual fidelity, or economic generosity, or racial justice.

Let's place the question within a broader issue—historic Christian thinking about sanctification.

The most pessimistic stance, attributed to some strains of Lutheranism, is that the New Testament promises simply that God declares believers righteous on account of Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:21–26). In this view, our sinful condition is so profound that little if any actual moral progress can be expected in this life—indeed, the effort to make such progress actually draws us away from a trusting faith in Christ's atoning sacrifice on our behalf.

This view is untenable, however, because it fails to account for the hundreds of moral commands that the Bible does lay upon us, and the apparent expectation that we will at least attempt to obey them.

At the other end of the spectrum lies the Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification. According to this view, a total cleansing of sin from the heart through the Holy Spirit is available to believers (1 Thess. 5:23). As sin is purged from the heart, and the heart is instead filled with the Holy Spirit and love for God, dramatic moral change and real holiness become possible.

Thus some Christians have believed that the change could and should be so far-reaching that it is even possible to speak of moral perfection for the sanctified Christian. I find any use of the word *perfection* to describe Christian moral potential also untenable.

If in moral terms some Christians have expected too little

of believers, and others have expected too much, what should Christians expect of themselves and of other believers?

A clue can be found in a statement that the sober-minded theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once offered. He said that the grace of God comes in two forms to the believer: *pardon* and *power*. God's grace comes as pardon in that we wretched sinners are forgiven of our many offenses. We are *justified*. But God's grace also comes as power for believers to live a new kind of life; that is, we can be *sanctified*.

The question rightly implies that the Bible does promise access to God's grace as *power*, and thus, during those times when we see so little evidence of such power in our lives, we are distressed.

But what we must take into account is the New Testament teaching that this power faces *competing powers* in the world and in ourselves.

The power of the Holy Spirit is indeed an extraordinary power. But in this life, we Christians do not get unhindered access to that power, or better, we struggle to get free of

Reinhold Niebuhr said the grace of God comes as *pardon* and *power*.

those other powers that limit our access to the full power of the Holy Spirit. In the classic Christian tradition, these other powers have been called the world, the flesh, and the Devil.

The "world" is God's good yet fallen creation, a cosmic and human order badly

marred by sinful rebellion and presenting constant temptation, disappointment, and disorder (John 1:10; Rom. 3:19; 1 Cor. 3:19). The "flesh" is fallen human nature enslaved to sin and bent toward disobedience to God (Rom. 7; Gal. 5:16–26). The Devil is a personal being hostile to both God and humankind, and especially bent on seducing and tyrannizing the church (John 8:44; 2 Cor. 11:3–15; Rev. 12:13–17).

Why is it so hard to love? Because the power of the Holy Spirit competes in our very souls against these rebellious forces and sinful desires for our allegiance. The Holy Spirit, who lives in us, creates and then inflames in us a desire to do God's will—but not without opposition.

The good news is that this contest is unequal. God will ultimately prevail in the world, and in the yielded heart and life of the faithful Christian. The bad news is that it is still a contest, a fact we face every time we struggle to do what we know we should. That includes the challenge of loving one another. ©

David P. Gushee is Graves Associate Professor of Moral Philosophy and senior fellow of the Carl F. H. Henry Center for Christian Leadership at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee.