

LOVE IDENTIFIES THE TRUE CHRISTIAN CONGREGATION

Note to the speaker:

Help the brothers to understand that love, not perfection, identifies the true Christian congregation. Show that since all are imperfect, even responsible brothers make mistakes and need to be forgiven and shown love. Warmly encourage all to display “intense love for one another”—the kind of love that “covers a multitude of sins.” —1Pe 4:8

LOVE IS THE IDENTIFYING MARK OF THE TRUE CHRISTIAN CONGREGATION (3 min.)

Should we expect all members of the congregation to be perfect?

Were the apostles and early Christians perfect?

Is it really possible for any of us to be perfect today?

Love, not perfection, identifies the true Christian congregation (Joh 13:34, 35)

But some confuse love and perfection, expect too much of others

They use the imperfections of others as excuse for stumbling (*w88 8/15 29-30*)

Do you expect perfection of others? What should you expect to see in the Christian congregation? (Ro 14:4; *w77 714*)

WHY LOVE IS THE FOREMOST IDENTIFYING MARK OF TRUE CHRISTIANS (5 min.)

Love, the “surpassing way,” was more important than special gifts of spirit that first-century Christians had (1Co 12:31; *w78 9/15 17-18*)

Love is even greater than faith and hope (1Co 13:13)

Love sums up entire Law (Ro 13:9, 10; *w90 11/15 14-15*)

Paul reminded Christians that they owed love to one another (Ro 13:8; 1Jo 4:11)

Since love identifies true congregation, we need to learn how to apply love in response to daily situations and problems

To help us do that, let us consider first-century Christian examples

FIRST-CENTURY CHRISTIANS WERE NOT PERFECT PEOPLE, BUT THEY SHOWED LOVE (17 min.)

Imperfections were evident; even among apostles (*it-1 128*)

Jealousy, ambition, and lack of humility showed up on a number of occasions (Mt 20:20-28; *gt 62, 98, 113, 115*)

But why did they act that way?

By inheritance, humans incline to think more of themselves than they ought to think (Ro 12:3)

World tries to cultivate sense of superiority, getting ahead of others

Disciples had been reared in Jewish religion, which stressed position or rank in all dealings (*gt 62; w75 723 ¶4*)

Should not be surprised that at times imperfect humans are disposed to seek position and prestige

Peter, though prominent, had to be corrected several times

Rebuked by Jesus for wrongly motivated thinking (Mt 16:22, 23)

Boasted of his supposed superior faith and standing before other apostles, but then denied Jesus three times (Mt 26:33, 34, 69-75; *it-2 619*)

Refused to follow instructions from God and was corrected (Ac 10:14-16)

Yielded to fear of men, showed partiality to Jewish converts—though having been instrumental in conversion of first Gentiles to Christianity—and was corrected by Paul (Ga 2:11-14; *w90 11/1 31; w75 345*)

Jesus continued to use Peter prominently (Joh 21:15-17)

Peter's deep love and other fine qualities outweighed his imperfections (1Pe 1:22; *w77 437-40*)

Paul, though exemplary in love and devotion, had imperfections

Paul and Barnabas, prominent elders, had “a sharp burst of anger” over small matter and parted company (Ac 15:36-41; *w90 6/15 13-14; w75 344*)

Love prevailed in spite of imperfections in congregation (Read 1 Peter 4:8)

In all these cases of imperfection, love covered “a multitude of sins,” indicating that the disciples ‘had love among themselves’

Philippians showed genuine love toward Paul in spite of his imperfections (Php 4:15, 16; *it-2 631*)

The true mark of love covered over the mistakes of prominent ones, who, we might feel, should have known better

How would you have been affected by the mistakes of the apostles as recorded in the Bible? Would you have stumbled? Or would you have forgiven them in love?

CHRISTIAN LOVE COVERS IMPERFECTIONS (17 min.)

True Christians imitate their Creator in his love for mankind

They do not wait for fellow Christians to be perfect before showing love to them (Ro 5:8; Eph 5:1, 2)

Must have balanced view of our relationship with one another

Because of inherited imperfection, all are inclined to do wrong (Ro 5:12)

Within us is tendency to be envious, to become provoked, to brag, to be unforgiving, and so forth (Jas 3:2)

Though all must work to overcome such tendencies, sinful inclinations *will* find expression among Christians (Ec 7:21, 22; Ro 7:15-20; *g89* 7/22 19)

To expect perfection of our brothers, or of ourselves, is unrealistic and will only bring disappointment

Paul's description of love shows how we can deal with one another in recognition of one another's imperfections (1Co 13:4, 5; *it-2* 277-8; *w93* 10/15 17-22; *w92* 7/15 27-31; *w89* 10/15 18-19)

"Love is long-suffering and kind"

It gladly puts up with the idiosyncrasies and differing opinions of others, is not harsh, but kind, respectful

"Does not become provoked"

There may seemingly be reasons for becoming provoked, but imperfections of others are reasons for applying love

"It does not keep account of the injury"

Yes, there will be "injury," so be ready to show love

Unloving to harbor grudges or review how certain ones have sinned against us (*w78* 9/15 20)

Intense love helps members of the congregation to cover over mistakes committed by overseers, who are also imperfect

Hebrews 13:17 encourages obedience to those watching over us, even though they are imperfect (*w89* 9/15 23)

FOLLOW THE WAY OF LOVE DESPITE IMPERFECTIONS (3 min.)

True congregation no longer identified by gifts of spirit but by love that "never fails" (1Co 13:8; *it-2* 278; *w75* 2/1 95)

Though not condoning wrongdoing, be liberal in showing love that "covers a multitude of sins"

As part of true Christian congregation, heed Peter's counsel: "Above all things, have intense love for one another" (1Pe 4:8)

(Adhere closely to the outlined material, and observe the indicated timing of each section. Not all cited texts need be read. Source material in parentheses need not be mentioned)