

The Brother You See

By David Feddes

Almost everyone you know has some characteristic you don't like, something that rubs you the wrong way. If you know anyone long enough, they are sure to do something that bothers you, and often it's not just a one-time thing but a habit, something they do again and again. The better you know someone, the better you know their faults. In some cases, you also know things you like that outweigh the faults. But some people aren't very likeable, and the longer you know them, the less likeable you find them.

Meanwhile, God is perfect. He never does anything wrong. He has no bad habits. God is supremely smart, perfectly fair, and amazingly creative. God is the source of beauty, the inventor of pleasure, the fountain of joy. God is strong yet tender, just yet merciful, master of galaxies yet friend of the small and unimportant. The better you know God, the more admirable traits you discover. God is the most loveable being in the universe.

It would seem far easier to love God than to love people who aren't very likeable. But the Bible says in 1 John 4:20, "Anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen." Does that sound backward? Isn't God more loveable than the irritating people we know? Isn't it possible to love God but to detest and avoid certain people?

The guy with the bad complexion, the bushy eyebrows, the big belly, and the weird laugh, the guy who always interrupts you before you can finish a sentence, the guy who thinks too little and drinks too much, the guy who is often wrong but never unsure of himself, the guy with bizarre beliefs and disgusting behavior—wouldn't it be easy to love God without loving an ugly, irritating, hardheaded klutz like that?

Or what about that snooty woman with the whiny voice who gossips too much, criticizes too often, argues too loudly, apologizes too rarely—and also happens to be your wife? You may be wondering how much longer it will take for her to drive you crazy. What could you have been thinking when you decided to marry her? If you ever loved her, the love is long gone. Can't you love God without loving that screechy nightmare of a wife?

What about that family with the obnoxious teens, the horrible music played horribly loud, the people who are always bickering with you about something—and who happen to be your next-door neighbors? What about churchgoers who act pious on Sundays but treat employees like dirt—and who happen to be your employers? Such people aren't easy to love. Can't you love God without loving lousy neighbors and greedy church members?

Apparently not. Scripture links love for God so closely with love for other people that the one is impossible without the other. If you don't love the brother you see, you can't love the God you don't see.

Looking for Loopholes

Does that sound like too much to accept? You might want to look for loopholes. If the people who upset you most happen to be women, you might be glad the biblical statement speaks of the brother you see and not the sister. Brother means a male, doesn't it? Can you get away with detesting irritating females in your life? Not a chance.

The Bible uses the word *brother* inclusively, meaning male and female, brother and sister.

If you get along with your family and relatives, you might be glad the biblical statement speaks of the brother you see and not of people who aren't relatives. Can you get away with not loving those who aren't part of your family? Not a chance. The word *brother* in Scripture covers much more than blood relatives.

At this point, another loophole might appear to scholars and pastors trained in exact biblical interpretation. Expert exegetes know that the Bible often uses the word *brothers* to mean fellow followers of Jesus. In fact, that's what 1 John 4:20 means when it speaks of the brother you see. This verse is part of a call to love fellow Christians, brothers and sisters in Christ. It's not speaking of love for all people in general but about the love Christian people have for other Christians.

This is technically correct, but is it a loophole not to love some of the people you meet? Is it okay not to love non-Christians as long as you love people of the same faith? Not a chance. The Bible says, "Let us do good to *all people*, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Galatians 6:10). Christians have a special obligation to love brothers in Christ, but that's not a loophole not to love people who don't know Christ.

Beware of using a technically correct interpretation as an excuse not to love certain classes of people. If you say, "Who is this *brother* I must love?" you sound like the biblical scholar who once asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" The scholar raised this question in a discussion of the Lord's commands to love God above all and to love your neighbor as you love yourself. This man knew there were people he didn't love, but wouldn't it be okay not to love them as long as they didn't count as neighbors?

In response Jesus told a story about a man beaten by a gang of robbers and left beside the road. A preacher hurried past without helping him. A worship leader hurried past without helping him. Then a half-breed foreigner, a Samaritan, came along. He gave the victim first aid, brought him to an inn to recover, and paid all expenses. Jesus concluded the story by asking the scholar, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The scholar could only reply, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus turned the question around. Instead of asking, "Who is my neighbor?" and looking for loopholes, Jesus teaches us to ask, "How can I be a neighbor?" and look for people to help.

If you're an expert sitting in a comfortable lecture hall analyzing the question, "Who is my neighbor?" you might decide that some people (such as lowlife Samaritans) don't qualify as neighbors at all. You might think your neighbor is the person most like you, the person you find easiest to fit in with, perhaps a fellow scholar, preacher, or worship leader.

But if you've been robbed and beaten, if you have no money and are losing blood and may die if nobody helps you, it changes the whole neighbor question. When you're looking for loopholes, you're eager to disqualify certain people from being your neighbor so that you don't have to love them. But when you're desperate for help, you're hoping that somebody—anybody—will act as a neighbor and a brother to you.

When the Bible says, "Anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen," don't look for loopholes. Even if they don't fit the exact definition of brothers in this particular Bible passage, even if you consider

them not brothers but enemies, Jesus commands, “Love your enemies.” There are no loopholes not to love. If you don’t love the people you see, you can’t love the unseen God.

The Unseen Arranger

But that brings us back to the problem we started with. Isn’t it easier to love a perfect God than imperfect people? Not necessarily. God deserves love more than anyone else, but we can’t see him. We can’t touch him. We can’t do anything to help him because he doesn’t need us. Many of us don’t know what God is really like, and we may fool ourselves into thinking we love him when in fact we only love our own imaginary version of God.

In fact, some of the things that make God most worthy of love are some of the things we like least. As sinners we tend to dislike anyone holier than we are. We tend to dislike anyone smarter, stronger, and more capable than we are. Some of the people we dislike the most are those we envy the most. But God is the one we envy most of all, even if we don’t admit it.

We wish we could be God. We wish we had God’s power to do whatever we want. We wish we had God’s authority to decide what’s right and wrong. We wish we had God’s freedom to run the universe according to our own agenda. Deep down we wish we could be God. We resent the fact that God gets to be God and we don’t. This resentment of the invisible God shows up in our resentment of the people God puts in our life.

It’s easy to think that love for God is feeling good vibes toward him, saying a few pious words, and maybe singing a religious song now and then. But one of the main ways to show true love for the unseen God is to love people we see. You might say, “I love God. I think he’s wonderful. But you should see the horrible family members and people I have to deal with. I can love God without loving some of those bozos.”

Here’s a gentle question: Who put you in that particular family? Who brought you into that neighborhood with those irritating people down the street? Who got you a job working with people who infuriate you? Who expects you to love people whom you’d rather never have met? It was God.

God is the one who arranges your life. If you hate the arrangement, you hate the Arranger. If you hate the people he has put in your path, you hate the Lord for putting them in your path. According to the Bible, God arranges your life and relationships. He sets the timing of your life and decides your exact location, with the intent that you would reach out for him and find him (Acts 17:26-27). God shapes all things—including every detail of your life and every relationship—in keeping with his purpose and plan (Ephesians 1:11). So if you hate the way your life is going, and if you hate the people in your life, the one you really hate is God. Don’t lie to yourself. If you don’t love those you see, you can’t love the unseen Arranger who made those people part of your life.

Loving God’s Icon

Another reason you can’t love God without loving people around you is that each person serves as an icon of God to others. The Bible says that God created man in his own image and likeness. Another word for image is icon. Scripture says that it’s ridiculous to praise God with your mouth and then use that same mouth to curse

humans who are made in his image, who are his icons (James 3:9-10). Since God is invisible, one way to show love for him is to love his icons.

Some religions specialize in statues, pictures, images, and icons. But God has never allowed his people to make idols or carved images to represent God or to be objects of devotion. One reason for this is that the invisible, infinite God refuses to be limited, misrepresented, or controlled by use of images. Another reason is that God has already made icons toward which we can show our love and devotion for God. Our fellow humans are God's icons for us, and we are to serve the Lord by serving them. God doesn't want us kissing pictures of Jesus or bowing before statues we have made. God doesn't want us to love and serve any icons we make. He wants us to love and serve the icon *he* makes, the image of God in other people. Those people aren't actually God, of course, any more than I am God, but I must see each one as God's icon and treat them as I would want to treat the Lord himself if he were in that particular situation. Proverbs 19:17 says, "He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for what he has done."

Jesus says that at the end of the world, he will tell those who are saved that they gave him food, clothing, shelter, friendship, and hospitality. They will ask, "Lord, when did we ever see you in need?" Jesus will say, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). Jesus will then tell the damned that they neglected him and refused to help him when he needed it. They will say, "Lord, when did we ever see you and not help you?" Jesus will say, "Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me" (Matthew 25:45). The way we deal with other people is something Jesus takes personally. Your relationship to the Lord shows up in your treatment of others, for each human is God's icon, created in his image.

If you find some people hard to love, it's probably because their personality clashes with yours and their goals get in the way of yours. But if you can't love someone you see because of the differences between you, how can you love the unseen God, who is far more different? You are much more like your fellow sinners than you are like God. Part of your training ground in loving God, who is absolutely different from you, is learning to love people who are only somewhat different from you.

An icon is a physical connection with something spiritual. Spiritual attitudes show up in physical actions. Another person is an icon of God, and your material acts of love are icons or visible tokens of your love for God. The Bible says,

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth (1 John 3:16-18).

If you love the Lord and are headed for heaven, it shows up in physical help for the brother you see. If you reject God and are headed for hell, it shows up in your neglect of the physical needs of God's icon, the brother you see.

God's Brand of Love

You can't love the unseen but deserving God without loving your seen but often undeserving brother. It might seem easier to love the deserving than the undeserving, but here's the reality: if you love God at all, it's only because he loved you first. He loved

you when you didn't deserve it. Jesus laid down his life as a sacrifice to pay for your sins. Jesus didn't die for you because you deserved it but because you needed it. And if you are saved and the Spirit of Christ lives in you, you love others and give of yourself to help them, not because they deserve it but because they need it. If you've been loved with God's kind of love and have been saved by it, that same kind of love will flow through you to others. In 1 John 4, the Bible says,

God is love. Whoever lives in love, lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us, so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him... We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:19-21).

If you don't love others, you don't love God. You don't even know him. If you don't stand up for the weak and help the needy, you don't even know the Almighty. The Bible says of a godly ruler, "He did what was right and just, so all went well with him. He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is not that what it means to know me?" declares the Lord (Jeremiah 22:15-16). If you think knowing God is a matter of inner feelings or mystical experiences, think again. God says that to do right and help the needy is to know him.

When you know God, you know he helps the helpless because he helped you when you were helpless. When you know God, you know he forgives the undeserving because he forgave you when you didn't deserve it. When you know God, you know he loves his enemies because he loved you and bled for you when you were still his enemy. When you know God and experience his kind of love, you will show such love toward others.

Climbing Down a Chimney

To show love for God, start by loving those closest to you. Our first introduction to other people—and the first test of love for God—is family life. One way to measure how much you honor God is how much you honor your parents. If you won't love and honor parents you can see, you cannot love the heavenly Father you can't see. How well do you get along with your sisters and brothers? How much do you fight and argue with them? Do you really care about your extended family? Family is the first test of love for God and for humanity.

Some people claim to be great lovers of humanity. They have like-minded buddies who share their interest and whose company they enjoy. They have ideals for society, and they like those who share their ideals. But many of these idealists and lovers of humanity can't stand their own family members, and that makes me doubt whether they are such great lovers of humanity after all. You don't love humanity if you only love a few of your favorite, hand-picked humans but don't love those who are part of your life without your choice.

British author G. K. Chesterton wrote, "The best way that a man could test his readiness to encounter the common variety of mankind would be to climb down into any house at random, and get on as well as possible with the people inside. And that is essentially what each one of us did on the day that he was born." Coming out of your mother's birth canal was kind of like climbing down a chimney into a house you didn't

choose and landing among people you didn't know. They are the first people you must learn to love. Anyone who does not love his family, whom he has seen, cannot love humanity in general, whom he has not seen and does not really know. And he certainly cannot love God. Failure to love and care for relatives and immediate family makes a person worse than someone who doesn't believe in God at all (1 Timothy 5:8).

Loving the World

Love for humanity starts at home, but it doesn't stop there. If you know Jesus, love goes beyond the biological family to include the family of God. You feel special affection for fellow Christians and special obligation to help needy followers of Jesus. Even then, you haven't reached the limit of love.

You are more directly responsible for some people than for others, but you are never free to write anyone off or to dismiss an entire class of people as beyond the boundaries of your love. The Bible says that God loved the world, and our love, like God's, must be worldwide and not be limited to our own group or nation. As individuals we must show love, and even as societies and nations, we must build policies on helping others, not merely on taking advantage of them.

What if a high-ranking government official declared that his main goal was to keep his nation rich at the expense of poor nations? What if a country proclaimed itself a land of opportunity, freedom, and human rights, but said that such things were irrelevant for dealing with other nations? It would be bad politics for a government to say such things openly. But in a 1948 top secret memorandum which was later declassified, George Kennan, the head of the Policy Planning Staff of the U.S. State Department at the time, declared:

We have about 50% of the world's wealth but only 6.3% of its population... In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without positive detriment to our national security. To do so, we will have to dispense with all sentimentality and day-dreaming; and our attention will have to be concentrated everywhere on our immediate national objectives. We need not deceive ourselves that we can afford today the luxury of altruism and world-benefaction... We should stop putting ourselves in the position of being our brothers' keeper and refrain from offering moral and ideological advice. We should cease to talk about vague and ... unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of the living standards, and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts. The less we are then hampered by idealistic slogans, the better. (Policy Planning Study 23, February 24, 1948).

Someone who wanted to express that policy approach in a simple slogan would say, "It's the economy, stupid." If someone accused the United States of trying to stay rich while keeping others poor or of dismissing the ideals it claims to stand for, Americans might object that the accusation was unfair and that the accuser was an anti-American radical. But this was not a dissident accusation; it was a policy paper. I'm sure not every government leader felt this way, but it wasn't just a low-level nobody who called for using power to maintain a huge wealth advantage. George Kennan was perhaps the leading American foreign policy thinker during the past half-century.

Such an approach involves love of money and trust in power, not love of people or trust in God. A nation which cares only about itself and takes advantage of others must repent or perish. An individual who cares only about himself and takes advantage of others must repent or perish.

In our homes, in our neighborhoods and churches, in our own nation and in relations with other nations, God calls us to love him by loving the brother we see. Whether doing personal acts of love for an individual or seeking public justice in the affairs of nations, our relationship to God becomes visible in the way we relate to others. Love God by loving the brother you see.

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