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Love is the pinnacle of spiritual maturity.

What is a true sign of spiritual maturity?

I asked myself the question and wondered if seeking and practising spiritual gifts is a sign of maturity? Are the people who seek God, prophecy, speak in tongues pray etc spiritually mature?

If maturity was measured by spiritual gifts alone than shouldn't children be considered mature in the faith because of what read in the scriptures.

Acts 2:17 (NIV)

17 "'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.

Should the children be considered spiritually mature just because they can prophesy and see visions? I don't think so.

We often think that spiritual maturity is linked with the amount or level of which we have or use spiritual gifts, and this was the case with Martin Buber a well-known German-Jewish theologian and writer in the 1900.

Martin Buber considered himself deeply religious, primarily concerned with mystical experiences that lifted him out of the earthly, ordinary experiences of everyday life. Buber was more concerned with the eternal than with the temporal, more focused on ecstasy than daily existence, and more interested in what lies beyond the world than in the world itself. All that changed after the young man who came to visit Buber that day in 1914 subsequently committed suicide.

The guilt Buber felt was not that he had somehow failed to remove the young man's despair, but that he had failed to be fully present to him. He was so preoccupied by his own experience with God earlier that morning that he failed to bring the full resources of his attention to their conversation. He did not turn to the young man with his whole being.

Instead of genuinely listening, he brought the equivalent of leftovers, a courteous but partial engagement. For Buber, the experience felt like a judgment on his whole way of life. He realized that it is possible to have

profound spiritual experiences, a “faith that can move mountains,” but that such a faith is worth nothing without a deeply present love for people.

What we see is that Buber fell in love with the tools for the mission and disregarded the mission itself.

He fell in love with the gifts of the spirit and spiritual disciplines and dis-regarded the reason for which they were given in the first place- to show love to humans by helping them with those gifts.

How many of us have fallen into this trap? Where we fall in love with the things of God and not love with the people he died for.

Many of us like Buber may have zeal for scripture, prayer, prophecy etc… but remain judgemental, critical, unapproachable, and disinterested towards people. The reality is that having or practicing these things does not mean you are spiritually mature.

As Paul’s says:

1 Corinthians 13:1-3 (NIV)
1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.
2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.
3 If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Without love we are nothing even if we practice spiritual gifts.

However, since we love spiritual gifts more than people the sad reality indicates that now days the love expressed in the church is no different to that of the world.

Just as we see in the world, we now see that in the church we have:

- High rate of Broken Marriages
- Division in the church amongst members over petty things
- We Judge people who come for help.
- Ministers neglecting their families to build their careers.
- Breaking of friendships
- We are fake in our relationships and not honest.
- And as we read in the story even death is a consequence.

This sad reality shows us that:

Christians shoot their wounded.

But despite devastating consequences displayed by the lack of loving one another we continue to love things more than we love people. But we should not be shocked at the outcome since we as a church have constantly remembered the first commandment but have for some reason forgotten the most important commandment right after it according to God himself.

Matthew 22:35-40 (NIV)

35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question:
36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"
37 Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'
38 This is the first and greatest commandment.
39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'
40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Jesus himself highlighted love for God and for humans as the most important yet we seem to forget that, but I understand this forgetfulness. We often forget scripture and are constantly bombarded and influenced by the culture and teachings of society.

What does society teach in our times?

Society teaches that showing love is a sign of weakness and that we should instead focus on ourselves and do anything for power- many men subscribe to this ideology.

All I have to say in response is this:

if showing love is a sign of weakness than God must be a very weak God!

We have established that practicing spiritual gifts etc does not mean you are spiritually mature. Then what is the indicator for spiritual maturity?

If its not clear yet than ill clarify by saying that Love for one another is a sign of spiritual maturity.

Asides for the words of Paul and Jesus claiming that to be true. if God who is love is the pinnacle of maturity than the more, we become like him the more mature we become. And we are the most like God when we love one another therefore, love is a sign of spiritual maturity.

What is love?

To love is to will good. Love has to do with your will (decision making centre) more than it has to do with emotions. The decision to always seek the best and good of a person is love.
That love comes with different emotions attached to it at different times and through different contexts e.g you might feel sad for a person you love; you might be angry for or at the person you love because of something that has happened to them or something they have done.

Love is not just an emotion- for example, if love were just based on emotions do you think God would choose to die for us? no he died for us regardless of all the pain and humiliation he would have to endure because he made a decision to will good for us regardless of the circumstances and that love is a sign of true spiritual maturity.
So, God has called each of us to will good for the next person in whatever form “good” looks like in that moment and context. Be it in the form of a slap, food, encouragement etc..

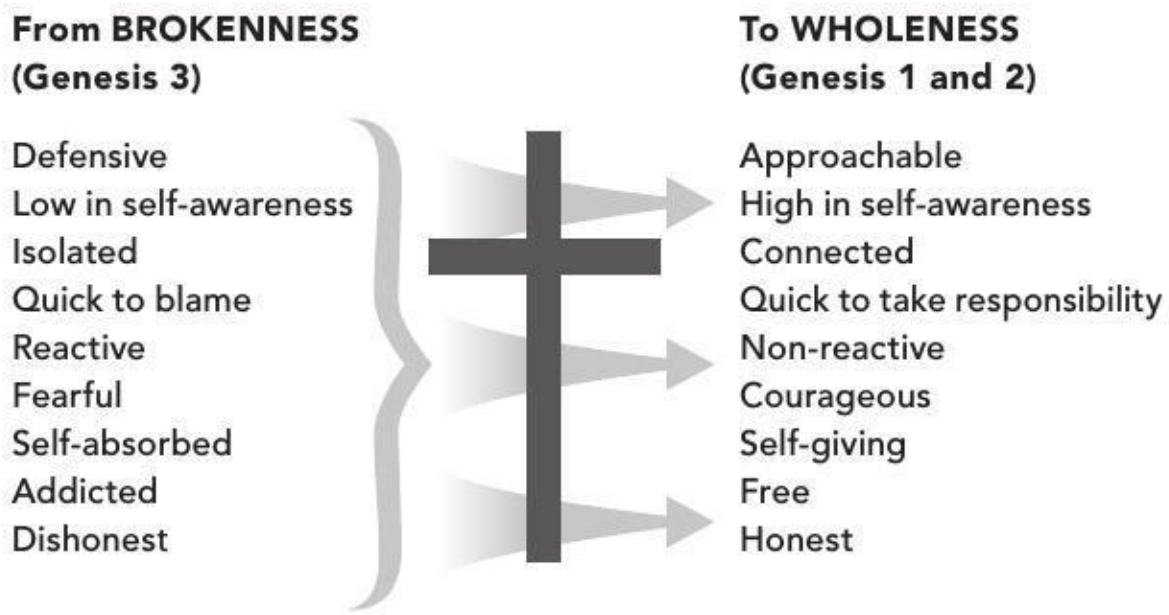
It Takes a choice to fulfil the bibles description of love (Corinthians) these traits describing love are not emotions they are based on decisions!

The question we must ask ourselves is…do I love (will good) for my neighbour and since God called us to show love to people how do we do it?

There are several practises to accomplish this, but I would like to highlight two today and Pastor Allan will highlight the rest next week for part 2 of this topic.

First, we have deal with the individual before the collective.

If we are broken as a people than all our relationship will end up broken and toxic as well, so the first step to loving is to intentionally move from a place of brokenness to a place of wholeness.



RELATIONSHIPS IN THE NEW FAMILY OF JESUS
Implementing the process on the image makes it easier for people to love you…remember no one likes a **VIP** (Very impossible person)

The second practice has to do with the collective and how we relate with others.

It is called I-It vs I-You relationships.

Following Martin Buber's encounter with the young man who later committed suicide, he developed a framework for understanding relationships that he defined using two-word pairs: I-It and I-You.

Buber proposed that I-It and I-You relationships represent two distinct ways of being with another person, that of an "I" toward an "It" or object, and that of an "I" toward a "you" a person.
When we relate to a person as an object or means to an end, we treat them as an "It." When we relate to people as sacred or holy, we treat them as a "You." 6 The following chart offers five key qualities that distinguish the two.

I-It Relationship	**I-You Relationship**
Distracted, goal-oriented	Fully attentive, listening-oriented
Others are objects or extensions of oneself.	Others are persons, unique and separate.
Judgmental, conditional acceptance	Nonjudgmental, radical acceptance

Monologue, debate, make my point	Dialogue, exploration, curiosity
Withhold myself, limited sharing	Offer myself, vulnerable self-disclosure
Closed, unwilling to learn or change	Open, willing to learn and change

The truth is that the nature of your relationships with people reflects your relationship with God. If you have and I -it relationship with God than the same will be true for your human relationships. Is it possible to have an I-it relationship with God? Yes, it is! Many people fall in love with what God can do and give them instead of loving who he is and knowing him.

Here is the truth:

Many are in love with Gods hand and not he's heart.

So, it is no surprise that these individuals are only interested in or disgusted by one's talents or lack thereof…. instead of loving the person for who they are they instead treat them as an object. The same sentiment is true that if you have an I-thou relationship with God seeking to know he's heart instead of hand than that will flow into our relationships as well because if you seek God's heart, you'll find that he's heart is for the people, and you will treat them as he treats you- with love.

When Martin Buber met with T. S. Eliot, a renowned poet, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, and a convert to the Anglican church in England, many expected it would be a difficult meeting for Buber. The two men's histories, religious beliefs, and circle of friends were totally different. At the end of their meeting, Buber was asked if he found his own opinions very different than those of Eliot. His reply offers us insight into what it means to treat another person as a "You" rather than an It. He said this in response: "When I meet a person," he said, "I am not concerned with opinions but with the person.

Martin Bubers story shows us how he saw the person (You) not he's opinions. (it)

For a variety of reasons, we often place false conditions on love and believe things like:

- I Won't love someone who has different views to me.
- If you want me to love you -you must see the world as I do
- Won't marry if you can't cook and bake.

The list of conditions can go on but eventually my advice to such a person is to go buy and program a robot to love…because you are never getting a human that will meet all your specifications. And remember that if the condition for love was based on total agreement than none of you would be married or friends or working together or in church together.

This type of conditional love is the reason the world believes Christian's are so judgmental. However, the I-you relation towards people allows us to love authentically while staying true to ourselves as well.

And this type of unconditional love is something I had to experience firsthand.

One night I Met a prostitute at a party I attended. She knew that I knew she was a sex worker, so she automatically expected me to treat her like all the other men treated her (as a sex object), but I decided to treat her differently by talking to her like a normal person. This shocked her and to add to her shock, I told her that I was not interested in doing anything with her. She thought I was crazy but because I showed her respect and love we spoke for about thirty minutes she opened and told me her life story which included the fact that she did not want to do what she was doing. After our conversation she went on her way with a smile on her face because she was not judged but loved in that moment.

After this experience I realised that Jesus went through the same thing I went through

Luke 7:37-48 (NIV)

37 When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume,
38 and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.
39 When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is--that she is a sinner."
40 Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said.
41 "Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.
42 Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"
43 Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said.
44 Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet,

but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.
45 You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet.
46 You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet.
47 Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven--for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little."
48 Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

- Jesus did not judge.
- Jesus forgave.
- Jesus loved.

While the Pharisee saw PROSTITUTE Jesus saw he's DAUGHTER- while the world sees a failure, we should see a child of God.

Jesus saw through the sin and saw the women and in loving the women still stayed true to he's beliefs, that is why the scripture alludes to the fact that he forgave her sins.

Can you do the same for the relationships that matter but you allowed to be broken because of Unforgiveness. For the people that left you because you hurt them and did not show them love. Can you do the same for the who sits next to you in church, in the office, in the cue in your family and in your own household.

Can you see past their imperfections and choose to love them anyway the same way Jesus chose to look past your sin and love you.

John 13:34-35 (NIV)
34 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.
35 By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Jesus left this command before he ascended to heaven, and the question we must ask ourselves is: am I know for my ministry? Gifts? Wealth? Or am I known because of my love for my neighbour.

This question is very important because the truth is:

God is more interested in your love for people than he is about your desire for spiritual gifts.

Love is the pinnacle of spiritual maturity.

Amen.