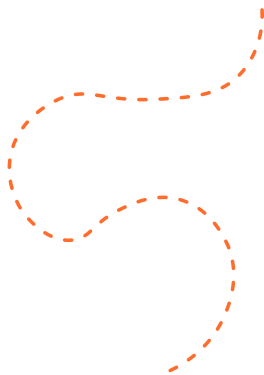




## Table of Contents

<b>Preface:</b> A Book for College (and Beyond)	11
<b>Introduction:</b> A Spiritual Walk	13
<b>Chapter One:</b> The Most Significant Spiritual Challenge in College	19
<b>Chapter Two:</b> Weakness—Not Such a Bad Thing	35
<b>Chapter Three:</b> Perfectionism—Friend or Foe?	49
<b>Chapter Four:</b> Dual Dilemmas—Doubt and Depression	65
<b>Chapter Five:</b> An Unclaimed Gift—The Sabbath	81
<b>Chapter Six:</b> Sexuality and Singleness	97
<b>Chapter Seven:</b> Beyond Me-ism—Servanthood	117
<b>Chapter Eight:</b> Living in a Safe Place—Community	133
<b>Chapter Nine:</b> Longing for God—Revival	147
<b>Chapter Ten:</b> Next Steps—Apprenticed to Jesus	161
Notes	175



## *Chapter One*

# The Most Significant Spiritual Challenge in College

About five or six years into my chaplaincy, I experienced an eye-opening, “aha” moment. Suddenly, it all became clear. I could now answer the question that I had heard time and again, “What is the most significant spiritual challenge for college students?”

Here’s how it happened. It was lunchtime in the college dining commons where I was hosting a meal with an off-campus guest. Eight or nine of us circled the large round table in the faculty dining room. A few faculty and a few students joined our guest and myself. As an incurable optimist, I always expect the most out of these informal gatherings. Often, I am disappointed. On this day, I was not.

Our guest was posing deep and probing questions, and the conversation proved to be enjoyable and enlightening. Then came the clincher: “What have you found to be the most significant spiritual challenge facing today’s college

student?” she asked. Silence. We all realized the importance of this inquiry, and no one was willing to break in with a half-baked response.

It was a familiar question, but it needed a substantive answer. With contributions from several around the table, here’s the answer we settled on: “The most significant spiritual challenge facing today’s college student is to know that they are loved by God.” We all agreed.

It doesn’t sound very deep, doesn’t have the ring of profundity. But I have been convinced over and over that this is indeed the supreme struggle for undergraduate students. And it’s probably the same for graduate students, faculty, staff, and anyone else of any age who is thoughtful, sincere, and spiritually sensitive. However, in my pastoral experience, I have found that undergrad college students are often the quickest to agree with that assessment and to eagerly seek a remedy for their personal lives.

### EMBRACING THE LOVE OF GOD

One of my colleagues in ministry, another college chaplain, James Bryan Smith of Friends University, has articulated this spiritual hunger that is so common and critical in the lives of students. His book *Embracing the Love of God* has received widespread circulation, and I have given away his book more times than I can remember.

Here’s how Chaplain Jim begins telling his own story and his personal struggle with knowing and experiencing the love of God:

I lived my early Christian life with the belief that God really did not like me. God tolerated me, I thought, in the hopes of improving me. One day I just might get myself together, quit sinning, and start behaving like Jesus. Then, I was certain, God would approve of me.

I got up early almost every day, praying and reading the Bible between five and seven in the morning. I fasted once a week, spent time helping the poor, and maintained straight A's in all of my classes. I entertained the idea of becoming a monk because I figured that by abandoning the pleasures of this world I would please God even more.

In a slow, almost imperceptible way, I developed an unhealthy conception of God. As a result, the Christian life became a painful drudgery. On the outside I appeared joyful and upbeat, but beneath the holy veneer lurked a bitter and unhappy person who secretly hated himself and the god he served.<sup>1</sup> [His use of the lower case letter "g" is intentional.]

What a story. That's where James Bryan Smith found himself in his own spiritual journey before arriving at an awareness of this biblical truth: God does not love us because we are good; God loves us because God is good.

This is the testimony of a sincere Christian who struggled to know God and to serve God. But it's the sad testimony of an unhappy and confused existence based on a faulty view of God. It's an all too common view that fails to understand the truth, the beauty, and the depth of the love of God.

Addressing the topic of the love of God does not require anything stunningly unique. Here, my interest is simple and straightforward in offering a reminder of something

we already know. It's my prayer that we might all be encouraged to embrace the biblical truth of the love of God in such a way that we would not simply *know* it, but we would *experience* it.

### A BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

One of the most important and helpful texts on this topic is from the first epistle of the apostle John. Our text is 1 John 4:14–19:

**And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.**

**God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.**

**We love because he first loved us.**

We need this passage of Scripture. We need to take it as prescriptive medicine for our sick souls. A psychiatrist once reported this statement coming from a sincere but desperate patient: “Make me sure that there is a God of love and I shall go away a well man.”<sup>2</sup> Late in the first century, the apostle John wrote his letter to Christian churches in Asia Minor. It was a letter written to Christian men and women

who desperately needed the reminder that the God they worshiped and served was a God of love.

John's purpose in 1 John 4 is to motivate his Christian friends to be people of love. And his argument in these six verses is that because God is love, because God has loved us in Christ, and because God continues to love us—we, therefore, must be people who love each other. It's a very practical message based on a very profound theological concept.

The love of God is such a deep and dynamic concept that it eludes a simple definition. God's love is, of course, more than emotion. It is a combination of qualities involving devotion, loyalty, kindness, grace, and mercy. A. W. Tozer's book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, is one of the most helpful volumes on the attributes of God. But Tozer professes ignorance in proposing a comprehensive definition of God's love. Tozer writes:

If we would know God and for others' sakes tell what we know, we must try to speak of His love. All Christians have tried, but none has ever done it very well. I can no more do justice to that awesome and wonder-filled theme than a child can grasp a star. Still, by reaching toward the star the child may call attention to it and even indicate the direction one must look to see it. . . .

We do not know, and we may never know, what love is, but we can know how it manifests itself.<sup>3</sup>

So how can we even begin to grasp the meaning of God's love? We have to point here and there in Scripture to various descriptions of the "love of God." We'll never understand God's love completely. But we can grow step by step

in our appreciation for that quality of the divine life and love of Jesus, who is the reason for our creation, our redemption, and our eternal life.

### PERFECT LOVE DRIVES OUT FEAR

The arrow that I would like to shoot at the text of 1 John chapter 4 lands in the middle of verse 16–17. “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus.”

When we think of the perfection of God’s love, we see it in His very character. God is perfect (Heb. 7:26) and God is love (1 John 4:8)—therefore God’s love is perfect. With God’s love there are no flaws, no mistakes, no limitations. Absolutely perfect.

But hold on. There’s an additional way of thinking of the perfect love of God, and we see it here in 1 John 4. Dallas Willard calls it, “the four movements toward perfect love.”<sup>4</sup> In 1 John 4:19 we read, “He first loved us.” This is where love begins. Its source is God. The second movement of perfect love comes as we reciprocate God’s love for us and we fulfill the greatest commandment in loving God. “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

Movements three and four are next as believers love “one another”—in the words of 1 John 4:12, “If we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.” These are the four movements of perfect love: God loves us; we love God; we love others; others love us.

Therefore, in this sequence of four movements we see

how love is “made complete among us” (1 John 4:17). This “completed love,” this “perfect love,” is not just God’s love for us or our love for God or our love for others or others’ love for us—it’s all of the above. And when we receive and extend these dimensions of the love of God, in the words of the apostle, “We will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus” (v. 17).

The children of God and the Son of God are loved by the Father. As God’s children, we can face the trials and temptations of life with confidence because we have the Father’s love to see us through. Life altogether changes for us when we understand and embrace the truth that God loves us.

This is why the apostle can go on to say, “There is no fear in love” (v. 18). In our English language we have incorporated use of the word phobia coming from the Greek word *phobos*. I don’t know if you have a phobia. There are all kinds of phobias—acrophobia, claustrophobia, and so on. I asked my wife what the fear of snakes is called. She said, “It’s called normal.”

In our text, 1 John 4:17–18, the apostle John is speaking about the fear of judgment. Technically, that would be called *krisisphobia*.<sup>5</sup> In the final judgment, eternal life awaits those who are trusting Christ while eternal punishment is the future for those who have rejected Christ (John 3:36). Therefore, our response to Jesus makes all the difference in the world—for now, and for eternity. When we embrace the Savior, we not only inherit an abundant future in the presence of God, but we receive the Holy Spirit whose perfect love within us drives out fear.

Let me tell you about a woman who grew up in a home that had an alarming absence of love.<sup>6</sup> She lived almost her



whole childhood in an atmosphere without love or forgiveness. Whenever her parents discovered a mistake she made, she was punished. And her condemning parents made sure she understood that her mistakes were sins.

As this young woman moved into adulthood, she couldn't forget anything that she had done wrong. She remembered it all, and she felt guilty about it all. Fortunately, she found a Christian counselor who helped her receive and appreciate God's forgiveness. As she experienced spiritual healing, she felt like a new person with a new beginning. She felt like a child again, being welcomed into the arms of Jesus.

This woman knew the hurt that comes with the fear of judgment. You might say that her fear was a fear of God's ultimate judgment, but all of that changed dramatically when she received God's forgiveness, acceptance, and healing. She became a witness to the truth that God's perfect love drives out fear.

### TRUE GUILT AND FALSE GUILT

As we consider the matter of fearing the judgment of God, it is important to recognize a distinction between true guilt and false guilt. I suspect that, for the woman whose story I just told, there was some true guilt and there was some false guilt, but she needed help in separating one from the other. The person with true guilt feels guilty because the guilt has been earned by sinning against God. With true guilt, the solution comes with confession, repentance, forgiveness, and possibly even restoration. When we come to God with a repentant heart, God is always willing to forgive and to remove the guilt of our sins. The psalmist describes his experience this way:

Then I acknowledged my sin to you  
and did not cover up my iniquity.  
I said, "I will confess  
my transgressions to the LORD."  
And you forgave  
the guilt of my sin. (Ps. 32:5)

Pastor and theologian John Stott helps us understand the meaning of repentance by saying first that it is more than shame or remorse. Instead, it is turning away from what has displeased God and turning in the direction of what pleases God.<sup>7</sup> This means that repentance involves a constant determination to "turn from sin" and "turn to Christ." It's a commitment to follow Jesus.

But what if our feelings of guilt remain even after our confession and repentance? Indeed, that is what often plagues the most sincere believers. We acknowledge our sin and we receive God's forgiveness, but we fail to remember that God has *really* forgiven us. We have been forgiven. We do not stand guilty before God. But we feel guilty. I believe that part of this is quite natural, and we might even expect it. There are consequences to sin. We reap what we sow. And it may take time to heal a guilty conscience. But with forgiveness there is healing, and we should also expect healing.

Dr. Earl Wilson, in his book *Counseling and Guilt*, suggests that it is helpful to remind people who struggle in this way: "You may still feel bad about your sin but you need to know that God is not stuck on it. God has more important things to think about. Christ died so that sin could be forgiven and right living restored."<sup>8</sup> That's pretty direct. But sometimes that's what we need to hear. When we find

ourselves suffering with unresolved guilt, it is often because we have too high a view of sin, and too low a view of God.<sup>9</sup> The words of 1 John 4:9–10 are a good reminder:

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Jesus sacrificed Himself in our place, and we need to accept His true forgiveness—which is easier said than done. True forgiveness that comes through the cross of Christ is absolute forgiveness. Once we have confessed our sin and determined to turn from that sin in sincere repentance, we are forgiven. And then, we need to embrace that forgiveness. We need to believe that God can and does forgive. It is the height of arrogance for us on this side of forgiveness to claim that more needs to be done.

Studying biblical texts on guilt and forgiveness or meditating on familiar passages like Psalm 103:12 or 1 John 1:9 may help. Conversation with a trusted Christian friend can be encouraging. When guilt is overwhelming, an experienced pastor or counselor may be beneficial. With our prayers, God uses various means of delivering hope.

In the chaplain's office, I have welcomed student after student who has been burdened with guilt and shame. Sometimes the guilt and shame are linked to personal sin, and there is personal responsibility associated with the removal of that pain. But the removal of pain is not the ultimate goal. It is godly sorrow, repentance, and acceptance of God's forgiveness that leads to a healing that lifts guilt and pain.

I remember Ryan, whose academic struggles were complicated by physical symptoms, including an inability to sleep. College work was too demanding for Ryan during his first semester, even though his high school grades and his college entrance exams were stellar. Once Ryan became convinced of the safety of revealing more to me, he was able to disclose details of a dating relationship that had gone too far physically. Through a slow and gentle process, Ryan confessed and repented of his sin, embraced God's true forgiveness, and found relief of the true guilt he had been carrying. As Ryan grew in his understanding of the unconditional love of God, he came to appreciate the ultimate source of a dramatic healing. It was God who restored his spiritual health, mental health, and even physical health.

So in the case of true guilt, the solution is true forgiveness. In the case of false guilt, or unearned guilt, the situation is quite different. In counseling other students, I have observed how guilt can be traced to overwhelming demands and unrealistic expectations of a campus culture or a home life. In those cases, it comes as a relief to identify one's guilt as false guilt that can be and must be eliminated by embracing the love of God that drives out fear.

Unearned guilt feelings come in great quantities among high achievers, perfectionists, and Christian students. The suffering of false guilt is just as painful as the suffering associated with true guilt. The self-condemnation of unearned guilt is usually revealed in statements about what a person thinks they "should have" done.<sup>10</sup> "I should have done better." "I should have studied longer." "I should have been more careful." "I shouldn't have let down my parents." These guilt feelings may come completely from within, or

they may have their source in the unrealistic expectations imposed by others.

So what is the solution to unearned guilt? The solution is not forgiveness, because forgiveness is not required. The solution to unearned guilt comes in understanding the love of God that casts out these fears.

This may be the time to consider another sense of “the fear of God.” The book of Proverbs describes the fear of the Lord as “the beginning of knowledge” (1:7) and “the beginning of wisdom” (9:10). Fearing God in this positive sense means revering Him so much that we desire to please Him alone. With that as our aim, we become less inclined to fear people, and we become less impacted by false guilt.

Guilt and shame and fear can paralyze us. These things can immobilize us. They can stall us. But we have no inadequacy that will separate us from the love of Christ once we are His children. In the words of the apostle Paul, “I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, **nor anything else** in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38–39).

### LOOK AT THE BIRDS

Jerry Kirk is a pastor friend from Cincinnati who I invited to campus to speak to students.<sup>11</sup> In one of his talks, Jerry told us how as a teenager he suffered with all kinds of inferiority feelings. He came to faith in Christ at the age of eighteen, but because his “receiving mechanism” was all messed-up, as he describes it, he couldn’t comprehend that God loved him.

Even so, Jerry attended college and seminary, was ordained as a pastor, and went on to lead a large and influential church. Yet, even as a successful pastor, Jerry felt it was extremely difficult for him to believe that God loved him. Oh, he knew it with his head, but he didn't know it with his heart. Instead, he always felt inadequate, that he never measured up, that his life and work were performance oriented.

Jerry went on to explain that one day, a member of his congregation shared something with him. Of course, she didn't know what her pastor was struggling with. The woman told Jerry how she had been regularly experiencing the affirmation of the love of God. She had a special way of reminding herself of God's love. It was a formula of sorts, a trigger mechanism. Every time she saw a cardinal, she was reminded of the love of God. She would stop to say, "Doris, I love you"—as if those words were coming directly from God.

Jerry liked this idea, so he started searching for cardinals himself. Every time he would see one, he stopped and said (as if repeating the words from God), "Jerry, I love you." And he would start talking to God.

But this wasn't enough for Jerry Kirk. After looking only for cardinals, Jerry decided to extend his search to birds of any kind. And as far as I know, to this day, Jerry is still looking for birds and finding God's regular reminder, "Jerry, I love you."

I don't know what kind of reminder you need, but if you are like me, you need one. You might try the bird thing. When you read the Scriptures, see how clear the message is that God loves you. Our text reminds us, "God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him" (1 John 4:8b-9).

You might want to start each day with a prayer like this:  
Loving God, help me to know, believe, and experience Your  
deep, deep love for me.

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## A Step Further

- *What is the most significant spiritual challenge for you right now?*
- *Do you believe the Creator of all things actually loves you?*
- *Do you “feel” loved by God even if you “know” you are loved?*
- *Do you find yourself growing in your love for God?*
- *Do you feel a sense of burden to “please” God or be a “better” person in order for Him to love you more?*
- *What’s the difference between fearing God and fearing God’s judgment?*
- *Are you feeling true/false guilt? In what ways?*
- *What is the appropriate approach to each of these types of guilt?*