

The Apostle of Love. I got that nickname for two reasons. I did write the books known as the *Gospel of John*, and *First, Second, and Third John*. All have the themes of love in them. But I wasn't all sickly-sweet, because *Revelation*, a book hardly known for being lovey-dovey, I wrote that one, too. And I was referred to as the one Jesus loved.

Even though I am one of the more famous apostles, I am only credited with saying three things in the entire books of *Matthew*, *Mark* and *Luke*. My brother James and I asked if the Lord wanted us to destroy the Samaritan village. Another time, James and I asked to sit at Jesus' side in his glory. Those were two pretty dumb things to say, and the third isn't much better.

The only time I am credited with solely speaking a sentence is when I told Jesus, "Master, we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us." If you remember, Jesus chastised me saying, "Do not stop him, for whoever is not against you is for you."¹ So, even though it wasn't so complimentary, I do appreciate Luke remembering to tell that little story about me.

Don't think I am feeling sorry for myself. Everybody knew I was in the inner circle of the apostles, along with Peter, Andrew and James. Like I said, I was referred to as the one Jesus loved, so everybody knew I was the teacher's pet. What I didn't understand was that Jesus was training me for a purpose, three of them, actually. How about a preview of those purposes, so that you can better understand some of the other stories I will tell.

The first of my special purposes was to take care of Jesus' mother after he died. According to tradition, I took care of Mary for several decades. You probably would not be surprised if she gave me some special information for my own books that she didn't even share with our dear Dr. Luke.

The second was to live a very long time, and be a specific eye-witness and encouragement for the churches, especially as they suffered through persecutions by the Jews and later by the Romans. In fact, during the persecution by the emperor Domitian, I was exiled to the island of Patmos where I wrote *Revelation*. Some people believe that I lived to nearly 100 years-old, and was the only one of the apostles to die a natural death.

The third of my special purposes was to write the books I already mentioned. Matthew, Mark, and Luke did a wonderful job of telling the story of Jesus from a factual viewpoint, but the

¹ Luke 9:49-50

world needed to have a better understanding of how God, and Jesus, are loving, not just sovereign. I was uniquely gifted to tell the story from that viewpoint.

It was all pretty rosy in the early days of following Jesus. We hung around the lake where we had grown up, Jesus did miracles and healings, and he taught in a way that no one had ever heard. It was amazing...and fun.

At the beginning, Jesus treated us with the kid gloves we needed; spoon-fed us our teaching, explained it to us, protected us from the “mean kids on the block.” Then he kicked it into high gear.

We were walking along the road when three wannabe followers came to be with us. Up to this time, Jesus had gladly accepted people who wanted to be with him. This time, he asked for specific and immediate commitments from them. The first decided to leave when Jesus told him we were homeless. The second and third made excuses about needing to be with their families. We apostles looked at each other, and remembered that when Jesus called us, we left everything... immediately. We understood that Jesus’ comment about the three men was meant for us every bit as much as it was meant for them. “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”²

Then he kicked it into an even higher gear. Jesus took us, the apostles, and all the other committed disciples and sent us out in pairs to go ahead to where he would be teaching. That in itself wasn’t a big deal, but Jesus wanted to make sure we were going in his power and authority, not in our own. We were specifically instructed not to take any money or extra clothes with us. We were to go directly to our places of appointment without even talking to anyone on the way. And, when we got to those places, we were to find one house to stay in. We were to teach and heal the sick, and to prepare them to receive Jesus and his teachings. Those who accepted us were accepting him, and those who rejected us were rejecting him.

Needless to say, most of us were a little wary about the assignment. It’s one thing to say be healed, but it’s another thing entirely when they actually are. It’s one thing to hear a preacher preach, but another thing entirely to do it yourself. Jesus knew exactly what he was doing, and he knew that we were prepared to act under his authority. When we returned, we could not have been more excited to continue our ministry with him.

Our common response to Jesus from the trip was, “Even the demons submit to us in your name.” Jesus said, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. However, don’t rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” From that, we got a glimpse of how hard it was to keep focused on God and his kingdom, because pride was continually raising its ugly head.

² Luke 9:62

This was the time when Jesus began to reveal to us the magnitude of what we were involved with. He began to reveal to us how he really was the Messiah and the Son of God, and that what we were seeing was the fulfillment of everything we had ever been taught. Frankly, it was so crazy that we could only grasp a smidgen of what he was telling us. It wouldn't be until we had the Holy Spirit that we began to truly understand the whole picture.

We had so many simple pleasures during those early days. Imagine what fish and bread taste like when it's created out of nothing right in front of you? Imagine sleeping under the stars and listening to Jesus call some of them by their real names? Or for you fishermen in the crowd, can you imagine catching a net full of fish in one cast, when all of your previous casts had come up totally empty? Or the simplest of all pleasures, when Jesus looked you in the eye, and just smiled. My favorite?...hearing Jesus sing.

Once, a Jewish teacher was trying to test the Lord by asking, "What must I do to inherit eternal life." Any answer Jesus made was bound to get him in trouble with the Pharisees who were self-appointed guardians of eternal life, or the Sadducees who did not believe in the resurrection. Rather than give his opinion or ask for that of the teacher, Jesus asked him to say what was in the Law of Moses. To show off his knowledge, the man chose two Scriptures, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind" and "Love your neighbor as yourself." In agreement, Jesus said, "You have answered correctly, do this and you will live."

Rather than leaving after a good experience, or even asking what Jesus meant about "You will live," the teacher sought to justify himself by asking, "And who is my neighbor." When he said that, we just looked at each other and smiled. We knew he was about to drink some eternal life water from a firehose.

Jesus began a story by setting it up in a familiar setting. He said, "A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and was attacked by robbers. They stripped him and beat him, and left him half dead." At that point the teacher looked at Jesus as if he was being treated as a school child. Everybody knew it was a dangerous road that should never be traveled alone; and everybody knew you were fortunate if robbers didn't kill you. So he was probably expecting Jesus to criticize the man for being stupid.

Jesus continued his story by saying that a Jewish priest saw the man, but he passed by on the other side. Likewise, a Levite did the same. At that point, the teacher was starting to smell a trap, but he couldn't tell what it was. Surely the priest and the Levite should have passed by, because they would have become unclean if they touched the man and wouldn't have been able to participate in worship services. Surely the worship of God was more important than helping a stupid man. At the least, if they had stopped the robbers might have attacked them. So, the teacher nodded for Jesus to continue. He wasn't expecting the next twist in the story.

A Samaritan came upon the man and took pity on him. He bandaged his wounds and gave him medicine. He put the man on his own donkey and took him to a nearby inn where he paid for

the man's care until he could recover. Then Jesus asked the teacher which of the three travelers was the man's neighbor.

The teacher was in a complete bind. It was obvious that the Samaritan was the hero of the story, but the teacher had been taught to hate Samaritans because of their ethnic background. He couldn't even bear to say the word "Samaritan," so he just replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Instead of justifying himself, he had opened up the possibility that eternal life came through mercy, not through being a Jew.

Jesus looked at him, and simply said, "Go and do likewise." The teacher most certainly heard something he didn't want to hear. Instead of being justified by following rules, he now found himself under the obligations of love.

That teacher got a taste of what we had been experiencing nearly every day. God was interested in loving us and having us love other people. He was not so much interested in our following rules as having us love people.

Some of Jesus' best friends were the siblings Mary, Martha, and Lazarus who lived in the town of Bethany, only a few miles from Jerusalem. One time, we dropped by unexpectedly. You can only begin to imagine the whirlwind of activity that began as they extended the expected hospitality to us.

Jesus sat on a small bench, while the twelve of us sat in a circle around him. We heard the swoosh of a robe, and we saw Mary sit down at his feet to listen to him. I can still see her intense eyes looking up at his face in rapt attention and total love. I envied her ability to shut out the world around her and focus her love and attention on Jesus.

It wasn't long before we heard the swoosh of other robes, and Martha stood there. She broke into the conversation "Don't you care that my sister has me doing all the work by myself? Tell her to help me." Maybe you've felt like that before? Doing what you are supposed to do, feeling taken advantage of by those too lazy to do their part. Surely, Jesus was obliged to set things right.

Instead, Jesus tried to adjust Martha's values. "Martha, Martha. You are upset over unimportant things, while only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and I won't take it away from her." Martha needed to change, and her feelings of being taken advantage of would fall away.

Distracted by unimportant things...sound familiar? Oh, you may not have had the distractions we had, you've come up with distractions all your own. They seem important, I mean, you can't live without them. Martha was definitely focused on how the world functioned at the time. The trick is to see through it, all the distractions that ping and buzz and blast from a screen to vie for importance, to see what is valuable, and choose it instead. That's what love does. It focuses.

You want to kick it into high gear? I think you know exactly what to do. Take it from me, the one Jesus loved, choose love.