

School of Agape love (volume 3)

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Lesson 101. Fear, Guilt, Duty, or Love?

People devise all kinds of ways to invite their acquaintances, loved ones, and relatives to church. And if someone has been persuaded to attend a meeting, we want so much for that person to stay, to repent, and to understand that the church is an ark of salvation guided by Jesus. What, then, should be used as a means of keeping churchgoers in the church?

During the time of the Soviet Union, communist ideology sowed the seeds of atheism. People were taught that there was no God and that faith in Him was a relic of past centuries or a fairy tale for old women. But that godless regime collapsed, and the long-awaited freedom of religion took its place. The iron curtain of communist ideology fell. Everyone received the opportunity to know God personally and make an individual choice.

Missionaries from all over the world poured into the country that had opened its doors to the gospel. All the foundations of the “wonderful future” collapsed, creating an atmosphere of spiritual emptiness. And, as we know, a vacuum draws into itself everything that has some substance. A miracle took place: an evangelistic campaign was held in the very heart of Soviet atheism, in the Kremlin Palace of Congresses. A nation of unbelievers was introduced to the God Who had not been known in that country. Bibles were given to people in the streets, Christian books were distributed, and people were invited to spiritual programs. And the people came. Sports arenas were filled with those who desired to hear the good news. The time for great changes had come, and those changes took place. In one way or another, every person made a choice. Those who came to know God decided to unite their lives with Him, entered into covenant with Him, and began sharing the good news with all their neighbors. I, too, was caught up in this wave of enlightenment and discovered many things for myself. To this day, I am so grateful to God that He found me and drew me to Himself at that very time.

But the days pass, one generation takes the place of another, and with them the conditions of life change and new opportunities arise.

What was effective about thirty years ago no longer has the same power today. Yet people must be saved; they need to be kept. There is still so much to be done! I look at the world, at how rapidly it is developing and sinking into Christian atheism, and I understand that certain steps must be taken.

However, new times also open new opportunities that once could not even have been imagined. Today everyone has the right to preach openly about anything he desires and to share everything he considers right. Whatever you say, you will always find an audience willing to listen. It seems that our future belongs to bloggers, who are now fighting to attract more subscribers and feeding on the likes of their viewers. This is a strange paradox of our time: the more foolish the information or the presenter, the more attention it attracts. While truth is changing its shoes to step into new opportunities, falsehood quickly adapts to the present situation and flies around the world at cosmic speed.

But God's people live by the concepts of past years and are very reluctant to rise and embrace change. Tradition is not the best means of attracting attention and keeping a person. Once it has become established in the heart, it sets the direction of movement like railroad tracks, and it can be difficult to change anything. Then I begin doing what I do not understand simply because that is how I was taught and what everyone else does.

Yet the religious world has very effective methods of attracting and retaining people—methods that make it possible to manipulate a person's conscience and persuade him to act as a leader desires.

Fear paralyzes a person's will, and in that condition he is ready to accept any insane idea that offers even the slightest hope of avoiding hardship, destruction, or crisis. The enemy of souls proposes solutions to problems that contradict common sense, depriving people of freedom and the right to choose. But fear

does not save a person from danger. Instead, it drives him to make hasty decisions without consulting reason, guided by the instinct of self-preservation. When understanding finally comes, deceived souls realize that they have gone very far and no longer know how to escape the dead end in which they find themselves.

Love casts out fear. It opens boundless prospects for other approaches and ways of looking at the solution of problems. Love is reasonable and is not led by emotions. Love has a deep relationship with God, Who intervenes and delivers in times of danger. Love teaches me to trust the Lord in every crisis and points to the possibility of deliverance from all fear. It even neutralizes the fear of death by offering a better future.

Guilt works somewhat more effectively than fear. It convinces me that I am a sinner under the curse of the law, which has sentenced me to death. Many people—and children as well—can quickly be made to do or refrain from doing certain things by being given to understand that otherwise they will be guilty before the law or before God. Awareness of my guilt is good in itself and should lead me to repentance, to a desire to change my life and bring it into harmony with God's requirements. But if I make guilt the guiding principle of my life, happiness will leave me forever. It is difficult to live under the burden of guilt. A believer lives in fear of making a mistake and sees the punishing hand of the law in everything. This feeling, which serves as a means of manipulating the human will, distorts the character of the loving God. With what sorrow the Lord receives His children who live in perpetual repentance, seeing themselves as exceptional sinners who deserve death and are pleading for mercy. "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner!" How does Eternal Love hear such an appeal? The merciful Father loves to forgive and justify His children. It pleases Him to see those who understand the power of His love and live in its light, experiencing continual joy and gratitude for God's mercy and goodness.

Love frees me from the burden of guilt; it gives that burden to Jesus and rejoices in freedom. The believer is under God's

grace. He lives in obedience to His law and therefore is no longer a slave to sin. Jesus took the burden of my guilt upon Himself and drank that bitter cup so that I might be free.

But there is a very effective means of manipulating the decisions of the most advanced Christians: a sense of duty. A very high price has been paid for me, and I need to do something to repay that debt in some way. In addition, I must justify God's confidence in me.

Unfortunately, the most sincere children of God fall into this trap—those who are ready to give even their lives for the faith and for their dear Lord. When they hear that they are indebted to God, they joyfully begin to labor in order to work off that debt. They may even neglect the principles of health and their personal comfort, if only they can do everything correctly, as they believe God expects. "I must" becomes the most powerful driving force behind my convictions, and because of this motto of my life, I see a path that I myself am making narrower. I choose asceticism so that no one will hinder me from fulfilling my duty.

But the hour comes when I collapse from exhaustion. I can no longer do anything, and then I no longer want to do anything. Disappointment sets in. I am simply incapable of carrying this burden of perpetual duty. I want to rest and do nothing. I am tired of everything, I feel miserable, and I have lost interest in everything.

Love solves the problem of duty; it fills the mind with the meaning of a life of love. Love guarantees my freedom from a sense of duty.

Homework 101

1. What did you understand from this lesson?
2. Share how you came to Jesus.
3. Why should we not draw people to God by means of fear, guilt, and duty?
4. What do you think guarantees our freedom and solves our problems?
5. What method did Christ use when He drew you to Himself?

6. Can these motivating feelings in ministry be classified as salvation by works?
7. Please read 1 Timothy 1:5; 1 John 3:11; James 2:12; 2 Corinthians 3:17; and 1 John 4:18 in the light of this lesson.

Lesson 102. There Is No Fear in Love

Fear is a condition of the human mind when a person expects or experiences some calamity. It is a very negative feeling that can cause mental disorders and even drive a person into panic, resulting in unpredictable consequences.

The Bible identifies several kinds of fear that should not be confused with one another. Apart from their name, they have nothing in common.

The fear of God is a condition that God desires to see in us. Such fear is a special expression of respect for the Most High as the Creator, as a loving Father, and as the merciful and just King of the universe and of our Earth. This condition implies that we acknowledge God as our Master and desire to please Him in every detail of our lives. The fear of God is joy in knowing the Father's character and restructuring our entire way of life and thinking according to the requirements of God's law and commandments. It is the fear of doing evil.

In this case, the fear of God is the most positive condition of the human mind. While a person remains in this condition, the soul opens to receive love and becomes able to analyze God's requirements soberly. The believer then follows these instructions in a spirit of joy and love.

The fear of the Lord is love for God; it is faith in Jesus and accepting Him as one's personal Saviour. It is the desire to have a deep, personal relationship with Him and to remain in that relationship continually.

The fear children have toward their parents and a wife toward her husband is respect similar to the fear of God, together with a desire to please them and do something pleasant and useful.

The fear believers experience before the majesty of God's manifestations of power and miracles is reverence and wonder at the providence of the Most High. It is humility and profound respect before their Lord and an acknowledgment that He is Master of the situation.

Fear in anticipation of calamity is already a negative response of the soul to existing circumstances.

This kind of fear can have many components and change according to a person's perception. It may resemble anxiety, worry, timidity, fear of the unknown, foreboding, terror, or panic. If these processes escape the control of reason, they prompt frightened people to behave inappropriately and to act contrary to common sense. In some cases, the body produces adrenaline, which increases its physical capabilities and enables a person to do what he could never do under ordinary circumstances.

But the saddest aspect of such fear is that a person's will becomes paralyzed by feelings and is ready to submit to any instruction or proposal that offers a way out of the existing situation.

The enemy of souls knows these characteristics of the human body and tries to use them for his own purposes. The best way to make a person afraid is to portray God as a Being Who hates sinners and waits for every opportunity to punish and chastise them. To convince people even more thoroughly that he is right, Satan begins attributing the qualities of his own perverted character to God and tries to prove his fabrications from the Bible. People believe this lie without even attempting to discover for themselves what God is truly like.

If I have come to believe that the Lord is cruel and punitive, then the only solution is to appease an angry God. All kinds of intermediaries, intercessors, good works, donations, special prayers, and pilgrimages supposedly accomplish this very well. Those who are unable to please God are said to face inevitable punishment in this life and even after death.

What happens in the mind of a person who believes such a teaching about God? Such people want to run away from the Creator. But God is omnipresent, and it is impossible to hide from Him.

Before I knew God, I experienced feelings like these, and I can honestly say that I was very afraid. As a defense, I chose hatred

toward God and decided to sin in defiance of Him, because I understood that punishment awaited me in any case—so why not live for my own pleasure? I was not afraid to do evil, and I considered all God's ministers hypocrites and profiteers. Yet such a life leads to nothing but fear and neurosis. Sin does not make a person happy.

By God's mercy, I met Jesus, and He assured me of His love and His acceptance of me just as I was. I was simply captivated by such an approach and joyfully believed in such a God. It turned out that He had always been this way. All my stereotypes about Him were destroyed; I saw the true beauty of God's character and ceased to be afraid of Him. This revealed knowledge became the starting point of my new life. I began devoting time to the study of this mysterious Being named God and made many amazing discoveries. My new heavenly Father appeared before me as a wise and loving Parent. I loved Him with all my heart and soul and decided to enter into covenant with Him through baptism by immersion.

There is no fear in love. Furthermore, fear distorts the true beauty of God and obscures His mercy, presenting only a punishing sword.

Our world has created an entire industry of fear. All forms of mass media teach us that living in sin is beneficial and necessary. The blind lead the blind, the greedy profit from the fear of the foolish, the proud bring the timid under their control, and the cunning manipulate the minds of the trusting. This entire Babylonian industry plunges people into intoxication and oblivion, offering an escape and imaginary freedom while casting them into the hopeless slavery of passions, fears, and vices. And in case they come to their senses, all kinds of medications and remedies already stand ready.

It is very easy to manipulate the minds of those who live in fear. The recent pandemic showed what frightened people are capable of. One hears all kinds of stories, from the foolish to the insane. In such a condition, a person is capable of signing anything, surrendering his freedom in exchange for a sense of

security, putting on any chains, and entering any prison, if only he can find peace.

But God offers a way out—His love, which very simply casts out fear. Why be afraid of those whom you love? Why dread anything when you are under the most powerful Protection? Where should you run when you are an overcomer?

There is no fear in love, because fear hath torment, while love brings delight.

We are counseled to save others with fear, and there is wisdom in this. People need to be told about the terrible recompense for sin and the inevitable penalty for every evil, but the solution must also be shown by explaining that only God's love is able to correct and eradicate it all.

Fear frightens and paralyzes, but love inspires and sets free. Now choose.

I know people who talk a great deal about problems, crises, and how terrible everything is. After speaking with messengers like these, it becomes so difficult to live under the weight of their news. But I also know those who, like the sun, bring joy to the soul and heart and carry so much that is positive within them that one wants to live—and to live forever.

Whatever I feed my soul is what I will be able to share. Why be afraid when I can love? Why perish from fear while awaiting calamities when I can rejoice while awaiting Christ? Why believe something that destroys the mind and life when God has given us so many beautiful truths and hopes in His Word?

But if I consciously or subconsciously choose the path of godlessness, it will lead me into slavery to sin, a life of fear, and torment of conscience.

I choose love, and I begin to live in joy and happiness.

Homework 102

1. What did you understand from this lesson?
2. Is fear something positive in your understanding?
3. Why are frightened people easier to control?

4. What does obedience motivated by fear lead to? Does God desire to have such obedient children?
5. How does love set us free from fear?
6. Why is there torment in fear?
7. Please read 1 John 4:18; Job 28:28; Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 8:13; Jude 23; and Revelation 21:8 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 103. A Sense of Guilt

In 2007, my friends and I conducted seminars on Christian topics through Skype. Each time, we invited listeners to help people solve problems they could not handle on their own. One young man contacted us and tearfully told us how he had killed an acquaintance. His mother-in-law had run into his home crying out in pain because a fork had been stuck into her leg. The man quickly learned who was responsible and ran off to deal with him. As a result, he beat the offender so severely that the man died from his injuries at the scene. The court acquitted the son-in-law and passed no sentence upon him. In the eyes of his relatives and friends, he became a hero. But he understood that he was a murderer and could do nothing about it. His guilt weighed upon him so heavily that he no longer wanted to live. In this condition, the man turned to us for help, sobbing into the microphone. I listened and did not know what to do. I understood that all my knowledge was insufficient to help this person. But I knew the One Who knows how to resolve such matters. While I listened to his story, my heart earnestly prayed for wisdom and cried out to God for guidance so that I might help solve this problem. When he finished describing his experience, the Lord gave me the clear thought that I should assure this young man of God's love and forgiveness. I had no experience in offering such comfort, but I decided to try. I began speaking what the Holy Spirit gave me at that moment, while my friends listened and prayed about the situation. We read many Bible passages about forgiveness and the assurance of God's love, gave this burden to Jesus in prayer, and assured the man of God's acceptance. I simply watched the miracle of God's grace at work and marveled at how quickly it could change a person's mind and establish within it the authority of Christ and God's love. Within an hour, the sobbing man, crushed by grief and guilt, was transformed into a new person. He became calm, began to smile, and joyfully exclaimed praises to God. We all experienced an awareness of God's presence, and our gratitude knew no bounds.

Later, I spoke with this man several more times, and I always heard him express joy and gratitude to God for healing his soul in this way.

Guilt is a person's awareness of responsibility for violating ethical standards or rules established by society or law. This feeling may be objective or subjective. For example, if I visit someone and break a beautiful vase, I objectively see that I have caused damage to my acquaintances. In this case, guilt prompts me to seek a solution by apologizing, explaining myself, feeling ashamed, or offering to compensate for the loss. Or I may begin blaming myself or those who placed the vase in the wrong location. The reaction may differ, but the guilt is objective.

In another case, an acquaintance devises a solution to his problems at my expense. To involve me, he describes the situation in a way intended to create a subjective sense of guilt within me. He may recall experiences from the past and speak about them in order to prompt me to take the actions he expects, even though I am not actually guilty before him. This is often seen in families, when children are blamed for their behavior in order to make them do or refrain from doing something. For example: "Son, because you behave so badly at school, your mother has become ill."

In both cases, a sense of guilt arises in a person's mind, and he must make some decision and take some action so that this condition will go away.

Awareness of guilt is not something positive. It destroys a person's inner peace and brings suffering, distress, worry, remorse, anxiety, fear, and other negative emotions into life. Then the person begins searching for a way out or falls into despondency.

God gave His law to our world, and He placed within its requirements an emotional recompense for violating its ordinances and committing lawlessness. A sinner cannot live peacefully or be happy in evil. The guilt that comes from God enables a person to understand that he has transgressed the

law. Through this awareness, the Spirit of God draws the human mind to Christ so that forgiveness and deliverance may be given in Him. This path of freedom from guilt and sin was provided and established by God Himself, and God's grace heals the mind of the repentant soul.

But the enemy of souls does not want a person to experience such deliverance from the power of sin. He invents different religions and arguments, offers salvation by works, and gives people false peace and false teachings in order to keep deceived souls under his control by diverting their attention from Christ. Satan also skillfully uses subjective guilt to sow his seeds of grief and despondency through this condition of mind. To accomplish this, he has an entire army of agents who, sometimes unconsciously guided by the influence of evil spirits, learn to manipulate people's minds in order to achieve their own goals. At times the enemy of souls personally instills this feeling in those who have come under demonic influence through disobedience to God's requirements. If we consider the fact that we are all sinners, I believe each of us has experienced or is experiencing something similar while being unable to resolve the matter independently.

If this concerns only me and my own condition, then I begin destroying myself. This is harmful to me. But if I become the source of such influence and begin manipulating another person's mind in order to accomplish my plans, I unwittingly take responsibility before God for that person's life and salvation. I assume an authority to control another person's conscience that does not belong to me.

The expression, "You should be ashamed of yourself!" may not always be right in the sight of Heaven.

Love teaches me to respect the opinion and freedom of my neighbor, even if that person is a member of my family. Love does not condemn people for their mistakes and sins, but always looks for opportunities to improve the lives of those who have gone astray or are committing sin. Love delivers me from both true and false guilt by drawing me to Jesus and enabling me to receive forgiveness through repentance and confession of

my mistakes. So that I will not commit such offenses again, God desires to endow me with love, which brings heavenly harmony into my life and makes it beautiful in my heart and in my surroundings. Love heals the soul from every sense of guilt, and it does not admit the subjective influences that Satan attempts to impose upon me through his agents. My love for people reveals God's love for His creation and gives thirsty and deceived people an opportunity to touch the eternal Source of grace and discover in Him the beauty of God's character.

By loving my neighbor, I bear the surest testimony about God, and many proofs are not required, because words of love have power to create what is beautiful in people and to bring happiness and peace into their lives. Sometimes you simply speak with a person, and afterward he rejoices and exults merely because Jesus touched him through you. Friendship and a relationship of trust are established. Love binds us with eternal ties so that, in this condition, our souls may be preserved until the day of the glorious Coming.

Homework 103

1. Did this lesson reveal anything new to you?
2. Is a sense of guilt something right?
3. What should we do so that we do not live under a sense of guilt? How can we be freed from it if it is present?
4. How can objective guilt be distinguished from subjective guilt?
5. How can we manipulate another person's conscience without even realizing it?
6. How does love deliver the soul from guilt?
7. Please read Galatians 5:22; Matthew 27:37; Zechariah 3:4; Psalm 32:5; and Exodus 20:5 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 104. A Sense of Duty

It is written that “the borrower is servant to the lender” (Proverbs 22:7). Is it good to be a servant? I think many would say no. But is it good to be a servant of God? Here one must pause and think before answering. Some of the apostles called themselves servants of God, and in the light of their ministry to people, it becomes clear that this is a special title not given to everyone.

A sense of duty is a state of mind in which I understand that I have unfulfilled obligations to someone, and this awareness prompts me to do everything possible to settle my debts and become free.

A sense of duty can be a good motivation to organize my actions systematically in order to gain freedom and independence.

In a positive sense, a sense of duty may be called gratitude, which changes the motive behind the relationship. For example, if I see matters in this way—“I am so grateful that you lent me money and helped solve my problems, and I will do everything possible to repay you more quickly”—then such a motive and state of mind does not spoil the debtor’s life. On the contrary, it contains a positive element.

Are we indebted to God? The more I come to know the Creator and the more I discover the beauty of His character, the more I realize that I owe Him a debt I can never repay. At the same time, the Lord does not demand repayment of this debt. He is ready to give me everything necessary for my sustenance and happiness. It turns out that He created me in order to serve me with His riches and bestow His blessings upon me because He loves me. It is His love for me, together with my awareness of this pure relationship, that produces responsive feelings in my heart, frees me from the sense of indebtedness, and fills my being with love and gratitude. Therefore, I desire to do so much in return.

But the enemy of souls attempts to pervert God’s love and present it in a different light. If he succeeds in convincing

people that God gives on loan in order to receive something in return, the soul falls into the harshest slavery and spends a lifetime trying unsuccessfully to escape it. How many teachings are built upon the idea that a person must do something to appease his god and earn what that god offers! Many rituals, traditions, holidays, and services directed toward God have no meaning whatsoever, yet they are scrupulously observed because this is customary and because people believe they please God. We await such events and congratulate one another without considering whether anyone needs them. Unfortunately, all of this distorts God's character, making it impossible to understand what He is truly like.

I am very often compelled to help some of my friends emerge from a state of deep disappointment and resentment toward everyone around them—a condition into which they have fallen because they became emotionally burned out while serving in some missionary project. At first, I thought this was merely the problem of workaholicism, when a person desires to do more than he is able. But when the number of such friends increases and their problems are the same, one begins to understand that the philosophy of communism has penetrated Christianity and is attempting to embody itself in missionary service. If I build my ministry upon the motto that any means are acceptable for achieving the goal, how will Heaven regard it, and how right will it be?

While working with people, I noticed that only two very powerful motivators give them tremendous momentum and the energy necessary to accomplish assigned tasks: money and love. Every other slogan and incentive eventually collapses, damaging people's minds as well. But someone must pay the money; it must be available, and if it is available, it must be used to develop the work rather than pay wages. Love, meanwhile, must be obtained from somewhere, and a person must know how to use it and must learn it. When neither one nor the other is available, the most reliable remaining means is to convince a person that he is obligated. Unfortunately, this works.

But the debtor's soul longs for freedom and searches for it.

Let us consider the following illustration.

A man and a woman met, fell in love, realized that they could not live without each other, and decided to start a family. After the wedding, the husband made a list every morning of the tasks his wife had to complete while he was at work. In the evening, he checked whether everything had been done correctly. This continued year after year. The wife performed her duties without complaint, and the husband performed his. Their lives became a routine of tasks and obligations toward one another.

Then tragedy struck, and the husband died. Afterward, someone appeared who loved the poor widow and offered her his hand and heart. She accepted. They had a wedding and a honeymoon. Then the time came for ordinary daily life, and the new husband handed his wife a folded sheet of paper. She groaned in horror, "Oh, not this again!" Her husband looked at her in surprise and said, "I wrote you a poem. Read it." He went to work, while she attended to the household. Every morning, a new surprise from her beloved husband's imagination awaited her.

One day, while sorting through her belongings, the wife found among them a list of tasks from her first husband. The memories made her feel ill. She decided to destroy the paper immediately, but then she picked it up and read it. All the pain and suffering of the unbearable slavery of her former family life swept over her in the form of bitter tears. She read the list of tasks and grieved over the lost years of her life. How she rejoiced that everything was different now, that she was free and happy, and that she could do whatever she desired without fear of punishment or accusation! Suddenly, an understanding dawned upon her. She read the entire list again in bewilderment. She was now doing the very same tasks and even more than had been required—and she found joy in doing them. She wanted to do even more, but her husband asked her to leave some time for him as well, to which she gladly agreed.

It is not difficult for me to do something good for those whom I love. This gives me special joy. At times, I even become very sad when all my good deeds and words remain unclaimed and unwanted. Then I must rejoice simply because I am a friend who is ready to love at all times. But if I am given to understand that I must do something because it is my obligation, my sense of responsibility helps me complete the task. Yet without love, it becomes such a burden that I want to cast it off as quickly as possible and find something more interesting that brings joy to my soul. Sometimes, however, life and circumstances compel me to be what I must be and do what must be done, and I have to prepare myself for it. I have noticed that as soon as I begin investing all my love in such duties, the work becomes more interesting and easier than it is without love.

Freedom is good, but if it makes me lazy, there is nothing good about such freedom. Satan will always find something to occupy an idle person.

The Bible calls us to “owe no man any thing, but to love one another.”

Based on this verse, I enjoy asking my friends, “When are you going to repay your debt?” Some repay it immediately, while others have nothing to give. But I share what I myself possess.

Homework 104

1. Did you learn anything new from this lesson?
2. What kinds of debts do you know? Is it good to have debts?
3. How can a sense of duty be distinguished from ordinary responsibilities? What is the difference?
4. Can people’s minds be manipulated through a sense of duty?
5. Have you experienced anything similar in your life?
6. Is it right to have a sense of indebtedness toward God? After all, an enormous Price was paid for us!
7. Please read Proverbs 22:7; Deuteronomy 15:2; Nehemiah 5:8-11; Matthew 18:23-35; and Romans 13:8 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 105. A Sense of Pity

Pity is tenderness, forbearance, and compassion toward a neighbor who is in a difficult situation, behaves strangely, or looks improper. Pity may also be directed toward oneself or be connected with missed opportunities.

“I am very sorry!” is a wonderful expression that quickly resolves many issues without explaining the true causes and motives. Please remember it. It may prove very useful.

A sense of pity may be prompted by love for a person or by the soul’s response to a situation that calls us to become involved in another person’s problems.

From childhood, we are all familiar with situations in which we fell or hurt ourselves while learning to live and walk, and our parents felt sorry for us because we were in great pain. Then they allowed us to continue making the same mistakes. I think it would have been very foolish if, out of pity, I had refused to teach my child to walk merely so that he would never fall. Instead, my love for him is directed toward teaching him, through falls and bruises, to behave in such a way that he can stand firmly on his feet and avoid harming himself. As a result, we see around us a society of people who do not fall without cause and who know how to solve their problems independently.

Who most often arouses my pity? Those who are poor, ill, dying, orphaned at a young age, bereaved, or hungry. In short, people who find themselves in a situation in which they cannot help themselves and are unable to change anything.

How do I treat such people? Sometimes I pass by if the person is a stranger. Sometimes I become involved in their concerns and offer whatever help I can. At other times, I try to understand the cause and help them look at matters differently.

The enemy of souls can also use pity to place me in a foolish position, disappoint me, rob me, or humiliate me. In recent times, he has used the talents of fraudsters, who play their

roles very skillfully in order to achieve their goals. By winning my trust and attempting to arouse my compassion, they seek to force me to do what they want. In such a situation, the enemy uses all my positive emotions so that I will be guided by them. I have often witnessed such people gaining trust and receiving money, assistance, respect, and sometimes even gaining control over people themselves.

I remember a case in which a young sister from our church decided to marry a practicing drug addict. To every argument from her parents and friends, she replied that if she left him, he would die without her. Fortunately, she was persuaded not to take this step. But I know many broken or unhappy married couples who started families out of pity for themselves or their partner without understanding the consequences of such a choice.

How many beggars on the street are actually in need of help? And how much money given in response to appeals for medical treatment has never reached its intended purpose?

The saddest thing is when people who have experienced this and realize that they were deceived declare that they will never help anyone again for the rest of their lives. Many begin responding to every situation and request in precisely this way.

Yet God teaches us to exercise discernment in charity and to be guided by reason more than by feelings.

If I consult reason and God when starting a family, and after it has been established, I bring feelings and emotions within the bounds of propriety into the development of its relationships, I run the risk of being happy for life. But when everything happens in the opposite order, my behavior arouses the pity of those around me.

Jesus addresses me by calling me wretched and miserable and saying that I do not even know it. But I believe Him and understand that this is true. The Lord then offers me a way out. He gives me an opportunity to correct the situation and continues caring for me even if I do not decide to heed His counsel.

When describing the life of Jesus, the Gospel writers sometimes mention that the Lord had compassion on people, and He always did something useful.

When it comes to helping a poor person, the question is often asked: Is it better to give him a fish or a fishing rod? There is discernment in this approach.

When my wife and I arrived in Germany, the authorities immediately provided us with financial assistance for our living expenses because they understood our need. At the same time, they enrolled us in language courses and paid us an allowance for attending them. After we completed the courses, we were given the opportunity to find work or receive vocational training in order to qualify for a well-paid position. I noticed that the authorities in this country combat poverty so that even the poorest people may have enough and lack nothing. Some abuse this approach, while for others it provides real support and removes fear of the future.

Even during the pandemic, the German government assumed responsibility for sustaining its people by providing real assistance to those who encountered financial hardship. Some laugh at such naïveté, some resent the wastefulness, and some are very grateful for such treatment. It is impossible to please everyone.

Love always grieves that unhappy people surround it. It continually seeks opportunities to alleviate human suffering. It knows what it must do in each situation. Yet people will never all respond to love's actions in the same way. Love believeth all things, but at the same time it sees everything. Love is discerning, yet it is also considerate of human needs. It always gives the very best it is able to give.

When love is present in my sense of pity, the enemy of souls will lose even if I help a fraudster.

Once, while vacationing in Russia, I met a woman and a girl near a church who tried to convince me that they had lost their home in a fire. I decided to investigate and began asking questions. The girl burst into tears and stopped answering, and

I understood that she had been drawn into this scheme against her will. These people genuinely needed help, but they wanted to obtain it quickly and dishonestly by exerting pressure upon feelings of pity and compassion. After their deception was exposed, I decided to give them money, explaining that I was giving it out of love because I understood their need, especially since I had something to share.

How does God see our humanity? Genesis 6:5 says: “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” Can this verse also be applied to our time? Yes. What does Eternal Love feel as He looks upon us? Pity and compassion belong to God, but His pity and compassion toward us are as great as God Himself. In order to correct our wretched condition, He gave us His only begotten Son—gave Him forever—in order to gain us forever as well. I valued this gift and believed that it was also given for me. I accepted this Gift of Heaven. Now I am very happy, and I have no intention of dying. Ever. Love has so many pursuits that an entire eternity is needed to carry out all its plans. It brings joy to know that the Lord has provided this as well for those who love.

I have never once regretted believing God and setting out upon this path. I only sometimes regret that I did not do so earlier, from childhood, but the Lord has turned even this to good. Love is discerning.

Homework 105

1. Did you learn anything from this lesson that is beneficial to your soul?
2. How do you understand the feeling of pity? Have you experienced it in your life?
3. How can the enemy of souls use this feeling to harm a person?
4. Is a sense of pity bad or good? Should we fight against this manifestation in the heart?
5. What relationship does pity have to love and to our school?
6. Is it bad if I do not experience such feelings?

7. What should I do if a friend asks to borrow money while playing upon my feelings?
8. Please read Revelation 3:17; Hosea 11:8; Exodus 2:6; Matthew 10:36; Luke 7:13; 15:20; Matthew 14:14; and Mark 6:34 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 106. If I Have Not Love

I think that everyone who has read the Bible has been captivated by the beauty of the verses in chapter 13 of the First Epistle to the Corinthians. I am no exception. I also noticed that I had reread this chapter many, many times and had even memorized some of it, yet I did not understand what it was about or how it concerned me. I did not even doubt that I possessed this very agape love. Since it was written about in this way, it must belong to me. Sometimes I even asked God to give me this love, without understanding what I was asking for.

When my daughter was about five years old, she could boldly declare that she knew how to drive a car. This meant that her father would sit her on his lap and let her turn the steering wheel while the car was moving. Although this took place in a small village at a low speed, with her father's hands and feet controlling things below, my daughter felt like a professional and believed that she was the one driving the car. I experienced approximately the same feelings when I read about love and tried to do some of the things that were written.

But when a crisis encompassing every area of my life came, I realized very clearly that I had no love. When everything was going badly and all my values and attachments were collapsing, for some reason I began to understand that I was nothing because there was no love in me. By faith I gave all my problems to Jesus. I did not ask for money, health, peace, or a good job, because I understood that none of these things would fill the emptiness in my heart where love was meant to dwell. Of course, I did possess something of this gift, but only enough to keep me from starving to death. And that did not make me happy. My whole soul began to cry out to the Lord. I honestly told Him that I had no love and did not want to live this way any longer. If He would not give me this very agape, then without it I needed nothing else. That was approximately the meaning of my prayer. I was completely honest and direct. Why deceive myself, much less God? I do not think that I told my Heavenly Father anything new. He knew and saw all this perfectly well

and had waited a very long time for this prayer of mine so that He could answer it.

I am not giving you a rule for how to ask God for love; I am simply sharing my experience. Everyone has his own perception and needs. But God listens to the heart and understands very well what it is asking for and what it needs.

And so I pleaded and received what I asked for. It was a very short prayer, but it contained the cry of my soul. And God performed a miracle for me. Somehow I suddenly understood that He had answered. My first thought was about my wife, whom I was planning to divorce, something we had discussed from time to time in recent days. The Lord showed me that when I learned to love my wife, I would then be able to love everyone. Yet at that time it was easier for me to love everyone than to love one person—my wife. I am deeply ashamed that I lived this way, but it was precisely the absence of genuine love that weighed so heavily upon me. Without it, my entire existence had lost its meaning.

After my prayer, I understood that something had happened. My aversion toward my wife disappeared, new thoughts arose, and I began to notice that some previously unknown power had begun to bring about changes within me. I thought I would now collapse from happiness beneath such a gift from God, but this gift came down with all its weight upon every area of my life, pressed me to the ground of despair, and began squeezing all the filth out of me. How unpleasant it was! Yet at the same time, God gave me the assurance that He loved me. How I wished that someone would explain to me how love works, how it manifests itself, and how to direct it. I was afraid to tell anyone what was happening to me, because I understood that no one would comprehend it. How I wished that at that time I could have studied in a school of love and, through the experience of others, discovered all these mysteries of the struggle taking place in my heart. But Jesus Himself taught me. He did not abandon me to myself, but began drawing me to Himself and teaching me to discuss every problem and task with Him. And He is the true Teacher of love. Revelations about

what love is and how it works constantly came to me. I rejoiced in them and saw them manifested in my life, but then I forgot them because there were so many. Yet they concerned only me and brought joy to my heart.

Gradually I learned to love my neighbors, delighting in this power within me. I had no plans to bring this experience before the public, and I modestly rejoiced in the new revelations and experiences within myself. At the same time, however, I understood what power I had come to possess. I directed this weapon against various people and always saw victory. Over these years I became so accustomed to overcoming by love that I can no longer imagine any other outcome of the battle.

Then one day the Lord prompted me to tell my brothers and sisters about what was happening to me. I began sharing my knowledge and experiences. Before this, any subject I raised provoked arguments and disagreement, because I liked discussing things that caused problems. But this time I understood that the subject was serious and difficult and had to be presented in accessible language. I spoke. It worked. Silence in response. Then I spoke again, and again. No one argued, but no one asked any questions either.

The subject of love is probably the deepest subject and the one least discussed. If we take clothing and diet, for example, everything is quite the opposite.

But Jesus leads onward. The love within me and my knowledge of it grew into a fire that became difficult to contain. I will not say that everyone who receives the gift of love must experience the same thing, but do not be frightened if strange things of the kind we are studying begin to happen to you.

The most impregnable fortress before the power of love is my neighbor's freedom of choice. Everything I allow God to embody and produce within me becomes my experience and discovery, and God works wonderfully. But if I wish to make this the possession of a friend, I come to the wall of his choice and perception and understand that this is foreign territory, which one may enter only by special permission and remain in

only for as long as one is allowed. This is an entire science that the Lord reveals as one becomes immersed in His love.

And so time passed. I love. I open 1 Corinthians 13 and marvel. I understand what Paul is writing about. I have experienced all of it; I see that this is indeed how it is in my life. Every definition contains depth and has already become my personal experience and a victory within me. And I realize how dreadful and severe the warning is concerning who I am without love. My heart contracts with pain: what if I should be found among that number? That would be everything—the end of everything. It is difficult for me to imagine my life without love. I will consent to any trial, as long as this gift remains with me. Without love, I need nothing in this world, and the world itself becomes empty and lifeless.

Yet the truth that without love I am nothing will one day become clear to everyone. It will be especially painful to realize that it was very near and readily available, but I simply had no time to understand this matter, accept it, and study it. Without love I will never know Jesus as He desires and expects. And it will be very frightening to hear Him say that He does not know me. This will become the horror that many Christians will experience, and then it will be too late to correct anything. I choose love.

Homework 106

1. What new things did you learn from this lesson?
2. Can you also tell how you came to God?
3. Who is Jesus to you? How do you picture Him, or how do you know Him?
4. Please read 1 John 1:1-4 and Acts 4:20 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 107. Do I Need Love?

The world offers us thousands of forms of entertainment. The benefits of civilization provide us with many pleasures. Advertising at every turn instills in people the idea that they can be happy by possessing something. Numerous religions offer all kinds of paths to salvation and to the attainment of higher realms and knowledge. Christianity has its own history of development and has divided into hundreds of denominations, each of which considers its teaching true and correct. The world has never before seen such an abundance of things, opportunities, and information. We can call free of charge from any point in the world to any other place in the world and at the same time see the person with whom we are speaking.

Through the Internet, we can buy anything, sell anything, learn anything, earn money, and lose it. With the help of a satellite, I can see how people live at any point on the planet and plan a route to any place. I can acquire knowledge in any field without leaving home. If I wish, I can create my own religion or open my own online church, preaching there every day whatever I desire.

Entertainment, temptations, and pleasures have become accessible with the movement of a single finger. Not even the boldest science-fiction writer of the last century could have imagined what we now have and use by means of an ordinary smartphone. And all this is the beginning of diseases—mental, spiritual, physical, infectious, and virtual. The world has become one vast leper colony and is merrily rushing into the abyss of sin, rejoicing in the utter emptiness of its discoveries.

Looking at all these achievements, one wants to ask, 'Have they made us any happier?' Strange as it may seem, all the benefits of civilization multiply vanity and busyness but do not give rest to the soul. This can be understood very easily when we go out into nature and immerse ourselves in the world of God's creation. Then the soul merges with pristine beauty, the eye delights in the magnificence of the Creator's creative thought,

the spirit grows calm, and peace comes. Nature needs no improvement or inventions; even in its disorder it looks very harmonious. The soul, wearied by the world, touches God's love expressed in nature and finds rest in the embrace of the natural world.

But then fear arises about what I will eat, where I will live, what I will live on, and what I will wear. My mind returns once more to daily cares and vanity, struggling for survival in this mad world. And again I leap into my hamster wheel to continue the exhausting race to nowhere.

But then news reaches me that there is a remedy for all the diseases of civilization called 'Love.' I try to find a definition of this word on the Internet. What will it not show me there? From a pink heart to group orgies—and all this is called by one word. The enemy of souls has worked very hard to distort the meaning and significance of God's love. Nevertheless, we human beings understand what is meant, but we cannot comprehend the depths of what this means for me personally. And how can I receive it?

At times the invitation to receive love passes by our ears as just another piece of information. But if we stop, look closely, think about it, and delve into this gift of Heaven, an entirely different world opens before us—a world governed by completely different laws and created for all of us in order to make us happy.

Love, happiness, and friendship are still in demand, but they have become conditional, and if I violate those conditions, retribution becomes inevitable. Conditionality destroys my faith in people, my faith in stability, and my faith that anyone truly needs me. Where is this love? Show it to me, and I will believe!!! This cry of the soul has become the outcry of those who are searching.

From childhood I was taught that a friend is someone who does not betray. But I understand that I myself am a traitor, so what can I expect with such a nature? You teach that true love

exists? Where is it? Let me see it! Let me touch it and experience it! I am already tired of these fairy tales!

Is there anyone in this world who truly loves—freely, at all times, regardless of how he is treated, without theatrics or unnecessary words? Will he be able to love me? Will he have enough strength and time to endure all my attacks and answer all my questions? So far I have encountered only deception, hypocrisy, and cheap counterfeits.

I read the Bible, and love is described so beautifully there. Perhaps people once lived that way. Back then there was no Internet or electricity, life was simpler, and people had nothing to occupy them, so they learned this art. But now it is the twenty-first century. We have discovered everything, yet we have not become better. And the smarter machines become, the more foolish become those who rely upon their artificial intelligence, which replaces human relationships for them.

Let us suppose that love exists, that it is available, and that it can be mine! And so I find it, receive it, and begin loving everyone. Who am I now? A black sheep. Who needs someone as holy as me? At least, conditionally, I still belong in this world if I live by its rules. But love is a game without rules. Every stereotype collapses, and you do not know where the blow will come from. Every attack is met only with kindness and patience, calmness and understanding, respect and joy. You expect quarrels and accusations in return, but you hear apologies. I peer at these strange people and cannot understand whether they are foolish and spineless or very strong, since they are able to restrain their emotions in this way and repay evil with good. I try them from every side, and everywhere I find the same thing. I insult them, but they smile; I curse them, but they bless me; I persecute them, but they pray for me; I rob them, but they calmly part with their possessions and thank God for such trials; I kill them, but they ask God, 'Lay not this sin to my charge,' because I know not what I do. How can I understand this strange love? Or perhaps I am the strange one, and they are normal? I look around, and the whole world is like me. Surely the whole world cannot be wrong while these

people are right? Yet there is something in them that draws me to them. They are genuine; they are steadfast; they have an Example to follow, One Who endured everything and in precisely this way overcame the world. I have no example. I have the Internet, in which I live like a fish in water, but I do not know where this water is flowing. They say that at the end there is a waterfall and rocks and that everyone will perish. What if they are right? How I do not want to die. And if I die, what will change? Nothing at all. What is there after death? They say that people like me will fare very badly—no chance for mercy, no prospect of justification. Here and now, something can still be changed. But how? What can I do? Can love do it? I do not believe it. Still, why not try? Hey, God, I am ready; give me this love too!

I knew that nothing would happen. It is a pity I had to humble myself like that. These are all fairy tales for old women. Yet those strange people received something from God. They are positively glowing with happiness. Perhaps I asked in the wrong way? I cannot ask any differently.

Do I need this love? And why do I need it? To drive my girlfriends crazy? But 'this lawn will have to be mowed.' What am I to do with this gift?

It appears that I am turning into a philosopher.

Why am I living in this world? How I long to be loved freely, always and at every moment. I would give everything for such a friend.

They say that Jesus loves in precisely this way. I ought to learn in greater detail what this means. What if it helps? Jesus, help me!

Homework 107

1. Have you ever tried to see yourself through the eyes of an unbeliever? What did you see?
2. Why has the message of God's love within a person become unpopular in this world and even in the church?
3. What did you not understand from this lesson?

4. Whom did you see yourself to be as you studied this lesson?
5. Why is it better to be loving than to live without love?
6. Do I need agape love? If so, what should I do with it?
7. Why is it so important to possess this gift in the last days?
8. Please read Psalm 14:1-7; Psalm 15:1-5; John 17:26; Romans 12:9; and 1 Corinthians 16:14 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 108. Worship

Why has God chosen love in particular as the victor's weapon for the last days? In essence, one could devise any means from the positive qualities of character and call it an instrument of spiritual warfare. Love could be made merely one component among the many qualities of the human soul. And how can we prove to an uninformed person, or persuade him, that he needs to acquire love, learn how to use it, and direct it?

We have already established that this is Christ's prophetic command, which He clothed in the symbols of gold tried in the fire and oil for the lamp, in which He Himself is also concealed.

But in order to understand the full and correct answer, we must determine what kind of conflict will take place in the last days. Against whom and for what will this war be waged? And how can we stand?

In chapters 12, 13, and 14 of the book of Revelation, we read about the history of Christ's church, persecution, the power of the beast, and the message of the three angels warning the world. In chapter 13 we read verses 3-4: '...and all the world wondered after the beast. And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto the beast: and they worshipped the beast, saying, Who is like unto the beast? who is able to make war with him?' Then verse 8: 'And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.' Verse 12: 'And he exerciseth all the power of the first beast before him, and causeth the earth and them which dwell therein to worship the first beast, whose deadly wound was healed.' And verse 15: 'And he had power to give life unto the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak, and cause that as many as would not worship the image of the beast should be killed.'

All these verses have one word in common—'worship'—which is repeated in a special way in different circumstances. The purpose of the conflict Satan is waging on Earth is to compel or

persuade the world to worship him or the power that represents and serves him. In the very last days, all the political, religious, economic, and executive structures of our society will enter this conflict on the devil's side in order to use secular power to accomplish the designs of the wicked one. The culmination of this conflict will be that everyone who does not worship the beast and the dragon will be declared an outcast of society and put to death.

In order to stand in such a war, we must know what kind of war it is, what it is directed against, where it takes place, and how to resist it. We must possess the whole armour with which we will have to fight in the final battle.

I will say at once that this is a spiritual war, and there will be no tanks, airplanes, or machine guns in it.

We read the First Angel's message in Revelation 14:7: 'Saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to Him; for the hour of His judgment is come: and worship Him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.' And verse 9: 'And the third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, If any man worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand...'

Here we read that God Himself, through His messengers, warns this world about the danger of false worship and about the severe punishment for those who worship Satan and receive the mark of the beast. We see God's punishment in verse 11: 'And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.'

There will be no peace for those who choose Satan, and these people will perish forever.

Worship is the expression of special reverence, respect, and preference, and the dedication of time to something or someone. It is connected either with compulsion or with the conscious choice of a person who esteems the object of worship above himself. One may worship in spirit by mentally agreeing with the demands of a higher power, or literally by bowing the

knees and performing the deeds commanded by the ruling authorities.

A very similar example of worship can be seen in chapter 3 of the book of the prophet Daniel. King Nebuchadnezzar made a golden image and commanded everyone to worship it. We read verses 5–6: ‘...ye fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king hath set up: And whoso falleth not down and worshippeth shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.’

These words and commands are very familiar.

The whole world watched this event, and everyone worshipped the image except three young men who were faithful to God. They were brought before the king and were respectfully asked once more to worship, but the young men firmly refused and were delivered to death in the flames of the furnace. Yet they did not perish, for the Lord Himself came to them in the fire and preserved them, allowing them to pass through this trial.

All these things are symbols of the final battle for us. Just as these three young men overcame because they loved God, worshipped Him alone, and obeyed only His requirements, so in the last days only those who obey God in everything and thereby demonstrate their love for Him will overcome. Such people will stand firm in trials.

And what does love have to do with this?

Let us look at Calvary. The cross upon which Jesus hung was the most convincing proof of God’s love for humanity. In this conflict, sin and the Creator’s love met. The destiny not only of all humanity but also of the entire universe depended upon the outcome of this conflict. Does God truly love fallen human beings so much that He is willing to die in their place and for them? Love went to death and by its death conquered death. It took power away from him that had the power of death. Christ overcame in this conflict. He is the true Victor. And what was His weapon in this war? Love for God and love for humanity. He did not worship Satan and did not violate a single one of God’s

commands. The law of God's love was written in His heart, and He was faithful unto death.

Training in this law continued throughout Christ's earthly life, and at Calvary, in the fiery furnace of suffering for our sins, the final test of the purity of this love took place. But in this flame there was no one beside Jesus to strengthen Him, and only one thief on the neighboring cross became a man who believed in the crucified Saviour and supported Him during the difficult hours of trial.

And in the last days, the Lord Himself has come again to teach His people love and to be with them during the trials, when all who do not worship the beast will be put to death. But love for God will help them stand and overcome the enemy in this conflict. And love for people will form the victor's character for the proper strategy of warfare in the last days.

It will be impossible to gain this victory over the beast and the dragon by chance. It will be impossible to obtain it by merely choosing whom to worship.

Jesus once said to the Samaritan woman in John 4:23: 'But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship Him.'

If I do not worship God throughout my entire life, my decision during the trial will not change my sorrowful destiny.

The mark of the beast will already be upon me, while those who love God will bear the seal of God. They will already have been tested and admitted to the final baptism of death in order to conquer it forever. And the Lord Himself will be beside me in this conflict so that the flame will not scorch me. This war is taking place now between my right and left ears, and my victories now are preparing me for the final battle. And Love will triumph.

Homework 108

1. What new things did you learn from this lesson?

2. Why is it important to worship God in spirit and in truth?
How do you understand this?
3. What goal is Satan pursuing in the last days? Who will be on his side?
4. Where does the war take place? And why is love needed in the last days more than ever before?
5. What helped Jesus overcome at Calvary? And what will help us?
6. How can I determine now whose side I am on?
7. How does love help me decide the issue of worship?
8. Please read Psalm 95:6; Psalm 132:7; Daniel 3:18; John 4:22-23; 5:24; Revelation 14:7-12; 17:12-14; and 12:11 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 109. The Habit of Loving

The Lord knows what awaits us and what trials we will encounter. He knows all the designs of the wicked one. He sees what the enemy of the human soul is capable of doing. And the Lord permits us to pass through these trials and to demonstrate in practice to the entire visible and invisible world of spirits what God's grace accomplishes in the hearts of those who have dedicated themselves to Jesus.

For the sake of His chosen children, the Lord God Himself has come to take part in this battle and to overcome. Prophecy describes the battle of the last days as the Lord's war, which He wages and in which He defeats the adversary. We read in Revelation 17:14: 'These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them: for He is Lord of lords, and King of kings: and they that are with Him are called, and chosen, and faithful.' Then Revelation 19:15 says: 'And out of His mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it He should smite the nations: and He shall rule them with a rod of iron: and He treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.'

This is God's war, which we will not see in its fullness. The kings of the earth are earthly powers which, under the influence of evil spirits, will enact laws for the destruction of all people who do not worship the beast and his image.

Any secular decree directed against God would look rather foolish in the eyes of an atheistic society, and apostate Protestantism would also consider such laws madness. But the essence of the conflict will be that those who rise up in battle against the Almighty, while calling themselves His children, will think that by punishing those who do not receive the mark of the beast they are serving God and defending His dishonored name.

The mark of the beast itself and his image will be presented to the world as God's command, which must be obeyed in order not to bring the Lord's judgments upon oneself.

God pours out His judgments to draw people's attention to His law and to salvation in Jesus, but Satan distorts these actions of God and presents them as punishment upon those who do not receive the mark of the beast. The enemy claims that the whole world is suffering because of these believers. This approach will arouse indescribable fury against those who are declared guilty.

I will give an example. In the army there is always tension between soldiers and officers. But officers possess authority and can give orders. In order to torment the soldiers, they sometimes arrange foolish tests that the personnel take seriously. If they simply say that today you will make a forced march instead of resting, everyone will be indignant, and the commanders will have problems. But if they set an impossible condition in advance—for example, that everyone must form ranks within one minute—and present it in such a way that you will lose your rest because of the person who violates it, there will be no complaints against the officers; instead, all the soldiers' anger will fall upon those who were late to form ranks.

Something similar will happen in the last days. Sin must be punished, and human wickedness will provoke God's wrath, but Satan will point to those who are faithful to the Lord as the source of everything that is happening. We know similar examples from history, when God's children perished simply because they chose love and faithfulness to God and lived according to that choice. The St. Bartholomew's Day massacre is a vivid example.

In essence, this is Satan's conflict against God. Although in the Middle Ages the dragon had power to destroy, kill, and conquer, in the final battle of our time he and his allies are presented as defeated. Satan knows the outcome and trembles, yet he is preparing for battle in order, if possible, to destroy even the elect.

But the Lord is preparing His people. His desire is for these people to awaken, shake off the enchantments of this world, and learn to rely completely upon God in their daily battles, fleeing to Him and heeding His counsel in every detail of life.

Love is the best means for enabling the soul to understand God's will and put it into practice. It is the motivation that does not weary the soul but, like a sail spread wide, carries my vessel across the waters of this world and brings me where I ought to be. My task is to keep this sail of love open and to know where I am sailing and what plans God has for me.

The small trials I experience today teach me to trust the Lord in every detail and to ask Him for strength for my small victories. I am becoming accustomed to living in love toward people, seeing in this the joy and meaning of my existence. In this way I gladden God's heart, showing Him my love through obedience to the truth.

And these small achievements prepare me for the great battles and victories I will have to experience in the near future. If it should happen that my death prevents me from living until that time, I will still appear as a victor in the eyes of Heaven.

Love is given to me now so that through this gift I may allow the Holy Spirit to unite my humanity with the Divine and may give Jesus authority in my heart. It is precisely there that the final battle will take place. It is precisely there that the ultimate victory over this world and Satan will be accomplished. It is precisely there that all the kings of the earth will suffer their final defeat. And the reason for my victory will be my habit of loving my neighbor and my Lord Jesus, and of asking God to protect me and fight the battles as I grow. Such love is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, cultivated not by me but by God within me.

The enemy of souls seeks an opportunity to deprive me of love—this connection with God—and he does not object if I afterward perform my good deeds. He knows that if I have no love, it will not be difficult for him to use my deeds to advertise the works of darkness. 'Look, everyone! You can do good without God!'

Let us recall the truth that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil contains an element of good which, without God, kills the person who eats its forbidden fruit. Performing good deeds without God is like eating the forbidden fruit with a smile and merriment, showing everyone one's cheerfulness and the

beauty of one's actions. At times I pluck this fruit and, before eating it, offer a prayer of thanksgiving and then joyfully partake of this food.

For example, a sister fell into depression because of loneliness, and a brother in the faith decided to help her escape this anguish by leaving his family in order to save her soul. They prayed for God's love toward one another and bestowed it in caresses, rejoicing in and delighting in their new experiences. Then they decided that they had been made for each other. They married, asking God's blessing upon this undertaking as well. Was it a good deed? In the eyes of these people, perhaps the answer is yes, and Hollywood might even make a film about it and call it 'True Love.' But this is fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It brings death to the soul.

Love without faithfulness to God and to the person toward whom one has obligations is not love but the lust of the flesh. Thoughts and feelings are not yet deeds, but they form the character. If the principal motive of my thoughts and feelings is love, it will be reflected in all my deeds and will make every action of mine right in the eyes of God.

I heard a story about a little boy who, after learning to write, decided to record his genuine feelings of love for his father by writing about them to him. So that everyone could see and read them, he chose a nail and his father's new car. The son's love had the right motive, but it resulted in a bad deed. And God is now teaching me to perform right actions with the right motive.

Homework 109

1. What did you understand from this lesson?
2. Against whom is the world fighting when it accuses me?
3. Who will triumph in this spiritual war? Why has the victory already been foretold?
4. How can I determine whose side I am on?
5. Where can I learn the enemy's strategy so that I may repel his attacks?
6. Does God's love in my heart give me victory? If so, what does this look like?

7. Please read 1 Thessalonians 5:23; 2 Thessalonians 1:12; James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:10; and 1 John 4:4 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 110. Give Glory to God

The message of the First Angel, who proclaims it to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people, is this: 'Fear God, and give glory to Him; for the hour of His judgment is come: and worship Him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.' Revelation 14:7.

What does it mean to 'give glory to God'? From a human point of view, I understand this to mean saying aloud, 'Glory to God!' This phrase has become so firmly established in people's speech that it now serves as a connecting expression used briefly to convey positive emotions or favorable comments about someone. God's name is often spoken in vain, which is a direct and flagrant violation of the Lord's commandment.

The enemy of souls knows how awe-inspiring God is in His majesty and how holy and great His Name is. He knows that speaking this Name draws the attention of all the angels and of God Himself, so that they may learn for what purpose it has been used in speech and what can be done for this seeking or grateful person. But their interest is met in response by emptiness of thought and an absence of meaning. Then the commandment spoken by God in Exodus 20:7 comes into force: 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain.'

But the angel's message does not call us merely to pronounce this phrase. It has a very deep meaning and brings a great blessing to those who discover the true significance of the proclaimed truth and apply this knowledge in their lives.

Glory is the giving of honor and praise to someone, the exaltation of someone's merits and achievements, and someone's fame and popularity. This is how the word is commonly understood in conversation. But such a definition does not reveal to me the very essence of the First Angel's message. If I understand the word only in this literal way, I will merely speak about it more often.

In the light of the Bible, glory may be defined as a brilliant radiance and a manifestation of God's power. But what does the Lord Himself say about His glory? I believe this is the best explanation of the meaning of the word. We read in Exodus 33:18-19: 'And he said, I beseech Thee, shew me Thy glory. And He said, I will make all My goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy.' Then we read in Exodus 34:5-7: 'And the Lord descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.'

God has opened His heart to us and revealed the beauty of His character.

The Name and glory of God are the expression of the Creator's character; they are His essence, His mercy and justice united.

The First Angel's message calls me to give glory to Him. What does this mean? What does Heaven expect from me in response to this appeal? I must understand it correctly and, once I understand, obey it. For the First Angel's message is not given as advice but as a command. I am called to fear, to give, and to worship—three actions that must be understood correctly and applied in my life according to that correct understanding.

To give glory to God means to reflect His character in my life. The group of 144,000 is described in Revelation 14:1 as follows: 'And I looked, and, lo, a Lamb stood on the mount Sion, and with Him an hundred forty and four thousand, having His Father's name written in their foreheads.'

God's Name upon the forehead is Christ's character embodied in my mind. Wherever I may be, my disposition will reveal itself

according to who I am. The formation of my character for Eternity is the most important task God has given me. I must accomplish it in my life and become established in it after being tested on every side. Simply speaking God's Name, even consciously and not in vain, will not change very much in my life.

Once I saw a picture in which God's literal Name was written upon the foreheads of the saved. It looked absurd. This was also how I imagined God's glory. But when the meaning of God's command was revealed to me, I understood that a great work upon myself awaited me.

A simple declaration that I want to possess the character of Christ is also a superficial understanding of the truth.

What is the essence of God's character? He has already answered, and His definition shows that it is the manifestation of His love.

Once again I have come to this wonderful gift of God, into which He has placed Himself. Can I receive God's character and learn to possess agape within me without communing with God? Am I able to love anyone if I do not possess this gift? Can I have God's Name upon my forehead if I do not know Jesus personally? These are the most important questions for my soul. It is worth seeking the correct answers to them and, having found them, putting them into practice in my life.

When I ask God to give me love, I thereby express the desire to possess the character of the One Who is Love. Merely receiving an emotional experience will not change very much in my heart. But when this principle of Heaven becomes my motive and the driving force of my being, I will rightly reflect God's character in my life.

In essence, the First Angel's message sounds like this to me: 'Reveal God's character in your life, in every trial, toward every person!' When I understand this and ask God to help me, my training begins. In it, God Himself writes His Name in my heart and establishes it in my mind, just as He promised.

It is impossible to ignore this command and remain faithful to God in everything else. If I am poor in love, I will not be able to share it with anyone. I am incapable of producing within myself what God must do. If He has promised me that He will write His law in my heart and mind, then He Himself will do it—not I by my own strength and not any other one of my friends.

How can I give God the opportunity to accomplish this work in my life? This is also important to understand.

Let us consider an example. A good man wanted to get to know me and become my close friend. He gathered all the information about me, questioned all my friends, studied my biography, and viewed all my photographs and videos. At last he met me and declared his intention. One does not often meet people like this. And so we communicate. From our conversations I already see his genuine interest in me, in what I do, and in what I plan. I see how interested this man is in me, and his sincerity and thirst to know me as a friend move me to reveal more to him than others know. I begin sharing the secrets of my life and my soul, and I see that he listens and accepts everything. He supports all my plans; none of my projects or undertakings take place without his participation. He does not judge me for failing to understand my goals but loves me as I am and longs to know me still more. Do you dream of such a friend?

God has this very same dream for each of us. The realization of this dream is called the formation of my character. By beholding God in this way, I begin to be transformed under the influence of His grace. And now He enriches me with His love. This is how love is formed.

Homework 110

1. What did you not understand from this lesson?
2. What did you understand from this lesson?
3. How can I give glory to God in the circumstances of my life?
4. How can I determine whether I am giving glory to God?
5. Why is God's Name written or placed upon the forehead?
What does this mean?

6. What relationship does love have to the glory of God?
7. Please read 2 Corinthians 3:18; 1 Corinthians 15:40-41; 2 Corinthians 8:23-24; Ephesians 3:16-19; Philippians 3:18-19; 1 Thessalonians 2:19; and John 5:44 in the light of our lesson.
8. Did you hear God speaking personally to you?

Lesson 111. The Bank of Love

If I urgently need funds to pay for a service or buy something very important, but I have no money, what should I do? I go looking. I begin thinking about where I can quickly earn some money, or I remember people who owe me something and try to ask them, or I run through my mind those who might lend me money until payday, or I go to ask the bank.

I remember an occasion when I ran out of money and, on top of that, had forgotten my wallet at home, yet I needed to buy material so that I could work and earn my living. It was not a very pleasant situation. But as a believer, I began asking God for counsel about what I should do. The matter was resolved, life did not end, but I clearly understood how dependent I was upon having money. In that case, the solution proved simple. I had to return home and get a bank card that allowed me to borrow money at a high rate of interest. Then somehow I had to pay it back.

Unfortunately, for many people such a lifestyle of living on credit becomes a lifelong trap from which there is no escape. They borrow money in order to pay another debt. This burden presses them down, and they live in perpetual debt even when they earn something. I dreamed that a kindly millionaire uncle would appear in my life, pay off all my debts, and make me rich besides, so that I would have no worries. But this uncle never came. I had to seek other ways.

There is also a kind of debt that deprives the soul of peace and drags me to the very bottom of a deep abyss from which I cannot escape by myself. It is sin, which is the transgression of the law. It is impossible to pay this debt by my own strength, for the wages of sin is death—eternal death. In order to pay such a debt, I must die this death. One day I will approach the cashier, where I will be told the price of what I took in the department store of life, and I will receive the right to pay my debt. I will not be able to avoid this event even if I do not believe in it. I will simply be confronted with the facts, shown everything I purchased, and given the sentence I deserve; then

it will be carried out. And who will lend me his eternal life to pay for my eternal death? Once the sentence has been pronounced, it will be too late to change anything. The accused will no longer have any chance to solve this problem in another way.

Now we have time to resolve this matter and to resolve it correctly, as God offers. He has a wonderful plan. I have the opportunity to accept this plan and begin putting it into practice in my life. Or I can go my own way and try to solve my problems by myself.

Jesus paid my debt of sin. He died, and His death is sufficient to cover all my debts. But the problem is that I am accustomed to living in debt. I spend more than I receive, and the more I come into contact with people and with this world, the greater my debt becomes. Once again I come to Christ, and once again He assures me of forgiveness. But this cannot continue forever. I need to become rich so that I spend my own funds rather than those of another. What am I to do?

In my understanding, there is a great problem. It is that I am still alive according to the flesh while being dead in spirit. I breathe, but to the creditor I am dead, and he will come to take what belongs to him.

Yet Jesus has provided a way out. He calls me to buy from Him gold tried in the fire so that I may become rich. He desires to make me rich and happy.

Gold. This symbol contains the faith and love of Jesus, which He desires to exchange for my debts and for my time. This is true wealth. It becomes mine if I enter into such a transaction. By accepting this plan for my enrichment, I become a very wealthy person in the eyes of Heaven. An account is opened in my name in the Heavenly bank, and I receive unlimited access to God's treasures. It is very important to understand the essence of how this institution operates.

An earthly bank is arranged in this way: I take something in order afterward to repay it with interest. I must have income from another source in order to pay the amount entered on my

loan. I have to do this continually. Until I repay this debt, the bank has a claim upon all my property and upon the collateral against which I borrowed the money. The greater my debt, the poorer I become.

The Heavenly bank operates differently. Love and unlimited access to its treasury are given to me. A strict record is kept of how much love I have taken to pay for services and goods. When I approach the Banker for another loan of trust, all the bank's servants rejoice and hold a celebration. In their eyes I become a very wealthy person. The more love I take in order to give it to others, the richer I become. Yet it is never enough for me, and I dig channels so that love may constantly flow through them into my life and water the crop I sow. Again and again I ask for love. Eventually, I become so accustomed to this extravagance that I begin to regard the Heavenly bank as my own home. I do not even worry about how much remains there. I simply take in order to give, and after emptying all my pockets and baskets, I possess still more. I begin to depend completely upon this Heavenly treasure, because I cannot imagine what else could be used to pay for people's services.

The world hates me, for there the struggle is to ensure that no one is rich, while Heaven struggles to ensure that no one is poor. I need only choose whose side to take.

Every deed of love I perform is carefully noted in the Heavenly records. I have a banking history in which all the opportunities I used and all those I missed are recorded.

The bank employees and those who have access to Heavenly resources have a special garment made of Heavenly fabric, white and radiant with purity. I am asked to wear it always so that I may be distinguished from the world.

There are many people in the world who are rich in earthly money, and they are very proud of what they have achieved. The meaning of their lives is to preserve and multiply this capital. Many of them live as though they will never die. They cling to their treasures, afraid to share them with those in need.

Different laws operate in the Heavenly bank. God's money must work and must be continually invested and sown under every circumstance. This flow must not be stopped. If I cease taking love, all the host of Heaven becomes concerned and desires to help me correct the situation. All the power of Heaven works to repair this failure. Concern over the funds I have not received gives the ministering spirits no rest. The cause is investigated, light is sent, and everything grows still while awaiting my decision. I decide to love and ask for money for this purpose. What joy fills the vaults of the Heavenly bank! How they strive with one another to pour these funds abundantly into my life. And how amazed they are that I ask for so little.

Sometimes I make a very foolish request: 'Please give me just a little so that I can survive.' Heaven is perplexed. Why so little? Having such an unlimited resource and access, why do I insult them so with my false modesty? It is a mystery.

But the doors are open, and they are waiting for me. Then it becomes clear that I do not know how to spend and do not understand that such wonderful opportunities exist. A search begins for those who could teach me. The process of my education is set in motion.

Homework 111

1. What did you understand from this lesson?
2. Are you in debt to Heaven? How has this problem been resolved?
3. What is the essence of the carnal Christian's problem?
4. What does Jesus offer in exchange for my debts and my time?
5. How does the Heavenly bank operate?
6. What does Jesus expect from His people?
7. Please read Mark 4:25; Romans 3:23; 6:6-7; Hebrews 4:16; 10:19-20; 2 Corinthians 9:6; Ephesians 5:14, 18; 3:20-21; and Luke 12:48 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 112. Whosoever Hath, to Him Shall Be Given

There is a saying in the world: 'Money flows to money.' It is drawn from life and bears the imprint of a consistent principle.

This is a kind of spiritual law. And, of course, it does not refer to the amount of money, but to wisdom in investing it, which knows how to multiply wealth. If you are a small entrepreneur, small clients with modest projects will come to you. If you begin to grow, people of greater importance will notice you. When you become established, influential people with large sums of money will take an interest in you, and they will be ready to entrust their funds to you because you have become significant.

And when you become very, very great, the whole world turns its attention to you. Everyone watches you closely, trying to understand the success of your life and identify the pattern of your growth. And the children of this world are often far more perceptive and enterprising than the children of light.

I imagine the amazement of the angels when they learned that the time would come when, at the very end, Christ would come to give His love and faith personally to each one, to clothe His chosen ones with Himself, and to grant them the Power of the Holy Spirit so that they might be filled with special wisdom and light. Even the boldest angel could not have dreamed of this. It had always been available to unfallen beings, and they lived in it naturally. But now sinners are offered what they have not deserved, and in such abundance and in such a form. And the King of the Universe Himself distributes and multiplies it. The angels imagined the genuine interest that this news and such an event would arouse, and they prepared to be ministering spirits to those who would come for Heavenly purchases. A whole army of holy beings stood motionless, awaiting the throng at the Saviour's feet.

How amazed they were when their King went to plead with His subjects to let Him into their dwellings and to buy something useful for themselves. They looked upon Him as a peddler,

making it clear that they had no time to consider what He was offering. And if You are so determined to teach us something, then do it while we sleep and rest.

Amazing! The Heavenly treasure prepared for distribution lies unclaimed, while those who show interest are content with crumbs from the table. And if someone does dare to ask and receive, people assail him from every side, trying to persuade him that he should attend to practical matters instead of discoursing on subjects no one understands.

The law of money that we mentioned at the beginning is very much in harmony with the laws of love. And the law of the multiplication of love is prophetic. It is fulfilled in the lives of those who make an effort and begin to consider Jesus' offer carefully, who begin to ask for God's love and distribute it to their neighbours, investing their time, the powers of their minds, and their whole selves. As a result, it becomes evident that one asks for a little but receives far more than was requested. The treasure acquired is multiplied so greatly that the mind is unable to comprehend it.

But love accords with my heart. It is in complete harmony with human nature and restores my entire being to its original beauty and purity. My corrupted mind does not resist such restoration if my will decides to take this step. Love returns me to the natural condition of soul that was established by the Creator Himself.

I imagine the joy with which Jesus spoke about this law of multiplication, anticipating the sight of thirsty crowds beside Him, longing to possess the talents of love. And Heaven has a great abundance of this treasure. There is so much of it that an entire Eternity is needed merely to understand that love is infinite in its multiplication.

But when love approaches the wall of my house and tries to enter the dwelling, it does not attempt to break in. Instead, it gently offers itself, hoping to be heard.

When the disciples asked why Jesus taught in parables, we read the answer in Matthew 13:11-12: 'Because it is given unto you

to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath.'

Not everyone understands why such wonderful gifts are clothed in symbols that may not be understood, may be misinterpreted, may be ignored, or may simply go unnoticed. Why make it so complicated?

I have noticed that when you speak directly to people, calling things by their proper names and plainly explaining the importance of love in the last days, the necessity of possessing it, where and how it may be obtained, and how it works, there are some who simply do not hear you and do not understand what you are saying. Later, they do not even remember that you explained anything to them. Love seeketh not her own. It knows how unpopular it is among God's children, and sometimes it is left to fulfil the second, sorrowful part of the Prophecy about love—to take away from a person even that which he has. When it leaves a life, it leaves forever, never, never again to become part of a soul occupied with vanity. This place is immediately filled with all kinds of counterfeits, and the person rejoices in self-sufficiency without even understanding that he has been left forever. But the day will come when the mind is illumined with the clear realization that without love I am nothing, and that nothing I have achieved or acquired profits me. The wisdom of this age will become the burden to which I chained myself with my own hands, and with such ballast I will be unable to do what Christ desires to see in me.

He loves everyone, and His desire to save has not been exhausted, but my will does not belong to Him and does not know His gentle voice.

What does it mean that 'to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance'? It means that I have heard about what the Lord has prepared for me and about His desire to sell it to me. I begin to take an interest in it and to thirst to acquire it. I take modest, timid steps in the indicated direction, sometimes doubting whether I will receive even a small amount. I receive

it and run away rejoicing. What I acquired passed through me and became part of another person, who either accepted it from me or rejected it, and once again I am poor. I go for more and notice that I ask for very little but receive an abundance of treasure. I give it away, yet it does not run out. I try to keep it for myself, and it spoils.

Joy and happiness simply follow close upon my heels, continually pouring their revelations and emotions upon me. I ask only for love, nothing more, yet I am given faith, friends, happiness in every trial, and things great and inaccessible that I do not know. I marvel at God's generosity and do not know what to do with it. I run to distribute it, but encounter walls and closed doors. How sad it is when you love but no one needs you today, while those who need you do not know that you exist and that you are seeking them in order to make their lives more beautiful.

I begin to experience the same response that Jesus sees toward Himself. As He was persecuted, so I am persecuted; as He was heard and received, so I too am received. All His prophecies are fulfilled in my life if I am open and meet the conditions. I comprehend the power of love, and it becomes mine forever.

It is like the time when I learned to drive a car, passed the examination, and received my licence. Now I have a lifelong right to drive, and no one will deprive me of this knowledge and experience.

As I taste love and comprehend its depth and mystery, I receive the right to it, and it becomes eternally mine in all its fullness, according to my need.

Homework 112

1. Please read these passages very carefully in the light of our lesson: Matthew 13:11-15; 21:42; 25:27-30; Mark 4:23-25; Luke 8:16-18; 18:23-27.
2. What did you understand from this lesson?
3. Do the verses above relate to agape love?
4. How can someone who does not have anything still have something?

5. How can I determine whether I possess love and whether it is multiplying within me?
6. Why is the Lord so strict and decisive in His punishment in these examples?
7. Does this account apply to all people or only to the chosen?

Lesson 113. Love Does Not Commit Adultery

And now I love. It is so interesting and joyful. It brings new thoughts, new feelings, new emotions, and new plans into my life. It is the most powerful weapon in the entire Universe, entrusted to me. It is also many, many other things that are very difficult to describe in words, and much more that is revealed step by step.

And when I immerse myself in this new world, previously unknown to me, I am amazed at the opportunities and influence that the Lord reveals.

And many questions arise to which no one but God can give an unequivocal answer. And the Holy Spirit teaches me those simple truths that are in complete harmony with God's law.

One of the most frequent and difficult questions sounds approximately like this: 'Can a brother love a sister without violating God's commandments?'

The world has an unequivocal answer that creates a firmly established stereotype of relationships and, like a high wall, sets boundaries for my mind: 'There is no such thing as friendship between a man and a woman!!!' Many peoples and societies have accepted this rule and made it part of their culture and thinking, or even their religion. It has a special advantage in preserving the moral purity of relationships amid widespread corruption. However, this understanding also brings psychological problems, and many people develop mental disorders.

We were created by Love for love. And when I return to this condition, I enter into harmonious relationships with my neighbours. I live at peace with everyone. My heart finds peace in loving those around me. It also desires to receive the same love from them so that it may rejoice in such relationships. If this is taken away, a person begins to search for it.

But the enemy of the soul seeks an opportunity to pervert my mind and lead me into sin. For this reason, God gave the

seventh commandment, which says: 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.'

Adultery is physical unfaithfulness, a sexual relationship with someone who is married and lawfully belongs to another person. If it occurs between people who are not married, it is called fornication. Any sexual perversions also fall under the law of the seventh commandment and are condemned by God.

Jesus broadened the understanding of this commandment, making it clear that it can also be violated at the level of the heart and thoughts. Of course, there is a difference between thinking and doing, but in the eyes of Heaven both become transgressors.

But what happens to my heart when I begin to love? Of course, I must consider toward whom my love is directed. If it is an evil person, I want to shut myself away and have no contact with him. Through my flesh, the wicked one tries to persuade me to distance myself from this person and to return the same evil for evil. But the Lord makes it clear that this person is a teacher who tests my strength, and I choose love and begin a war in which there are no defeats.

Then a dear person appears who seems simply made for friendship. The heart is naturally drawn toward a close relationship. In return, you encounter friendly respect, acceptance, and admiration. And then the enemy of the soul begins his artillery barrage.

At first it comes as a wave of new sensations, of novelty in the relationship and the experience, which overwhelms you. You understand that your love has found a response, and your imagination immediately constructs rosy prospects called 'what if...' All of this remains within the bounds of propriety, for I am a Christian. And no one sees what is happening in my head. But I begin to fall in love. There is no escaping these thoughts. Like flies, they sense something unclean and refuse to fly away.

Then Jesus' words of warning come to mind, and reason comes to its senses and begins to put things in order. It does this very gently so as to harm neither me nor other people. I choose

faithfulness to my wife in thought and action. I enter into battle with the flesh. I call upon Jesus for help, and He sets me free. I am ashamed and pained that I could even have thought such a thing.

When I allow love within me to love another person, it affects not only me but also the one I love. People see that they are truly loved and accepted as they are, without conditions, but with the whole heart, without evil intentions or lustful suggestions. And if the enemy of the soul has no power over me, he tries to tempt the person whom I have decided to love. Temptations come instead of blessings. It should not be so, but Satan tries to pervert and defile everything.

God has taught me to establish boundaries in relationships that immediately define what is permissible. They deprive both me and my friends of the opposite sex of every opportunity for evil temptation. I declare that I love and greatly value my wife and daughter, and that within these boundaries I am ready to communicate with, serve, and help everyone whom the Lord gives me as a friend. I do not forbid others to love me, nor do I hinder God's love from expressing itself through me, but I ask for wisdom about how to do this so that everything may be right and approved by Heaven.

I always remember that there is a seventh commandment, and in its light I weigh every thought that comes and every word that goes forth.

Words of love have healing power and can raise souls to new life. They reveal to other people the beauty of God's character in you. You may be the first person in your friend's life to show selfless love and open a new world of the beauty of God's Kingdom.

I too am a living person who thirsts for human love, and I am surrounded by souls who thirst for this love. And if someone appears who meets these needs, the heart is naturally drawn toward the relationship and values it.

It must be remembered that, for all the joy of friendly relationships, there is also Christian ethics, which lays down

specific requirements. Touching, teasing, being alone together, flirting, and similar interactions are forbidden by God. They sow seeds of temptation that spring up very quickly and lead souls into sin and spiritual death.

Love does not commit adultery even at the level of thought, yet it preserves its power and sees the goal it seeks to attain.

To love does not mean to commit adultery. Love is the most proper and respectful attitude toward a person who greatly needs God and desires to see Him in my character and in my love.

Love and friendship between brothers and sisters do exist, and they are pure. Such love cannot defile relationships, for it is love that represents God.

When children of different sexes are born into a family, the parents see no problem in this and teach them to love and respect one another, which afterward brings a person joy throughout life.

My friends who are sisters bring me great joy. They are a special blessing from God and a gift from Him. I love them, but I love my family in a special way, as families love.

And even if I meet a sister who is kinder, friendlier, more considerate, and more cheerful than my wife, I choose to remain faithful to my spouse even at the level of thought, and within these boundaries to be friends with those whom the Lord gives me.

Love guards my heart from evil and distinguishes darkness from light. The Lord places His approval upon pure thoughts and protects such a person from temptations, and the wicked one toucheth him not.

And ahead of us lie trials that only love can overcome. 'Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.'

Homework 113

1. Did you learn anything new from this lesson?

2. What happens to the mind of a person who violates the seventh commandment?
3. Why is it so important to be careful when communicating with the opposite sex?
4. Do you think genuine friendship between a man and a woman is possible without an intimate relationship? Are you certain of your understanding?
5. Why do even my thoughts about people of the opposite sex matter to God?
6. What should I do if my heart has become attached to someone and prayer does not help?
7. Can there be exceptions to the seventh commandment? For example, what if I meet a believer who loves both me and God, is very kind and gentle, and is ready to help me in ministry, doing so with a pure heart?
8. Please read Exodus 20:14; Leviticus 20:10; Jeremiah 3:1; Matthew 5:27-32; Proverbs 6:32-35; and John 8:3-11 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 114. Spiritual Conflict

Although the enemy of the soul has received a mortal wound and knows his end, he nevertheless remains a very active tempter and continues his attacks. Very many people are under his power, sitting in the bonds of sin and in the prison of prejudice without even realizing what power they obey. But love delivers the tormented soul from Satan's influence and gives it the right to freedom.

And the deeper a person has fallen, the more firmly Satan holds him. These bonds also hold those who have sold their souls to the devil and knowingly entered into a covenant with him. Now these people are Satan's instruments for destroying others like themselves. They live in constant fear and are bound by circumstances, knowing no way out. But Jesus is able to set free every soul that believes in Him, acknowledges Him as Saviour, and begins to cry out for help. For this purpose, God chooses me as His instrument and representative.

The spiritual conflict between God and Satan has a rule according to which these supernatural powers do not enter into open battle to gain souls, but use people to accomplish their plans and purposes. They also exert spiritual influence in the form of thoughts and feelings, inviting people to choose one course of conduct or another, or to take part in the war.

And my will always faces the choice of which side to take. As a person who believes in God, I can choose between good and evil; I am free in my decision. And I choose God and His love. If a person is under Satan's power, he too can choose, but only between evil and abhorrent evil. His will is obedient to Satan, who uses every means to persuade the soul not to turn to God for help and light. And evil is sin, which separates the soul from God and makes it Satan's ally.

A soul under the power of dark forces knows no way out and is enslaved by the wicked one's convictions. It is certain that there is no other path and that the condition in which the person finds himself is the only right one. But God loves the

sinner and sends His children into his life. He pours His light into the kingdom of darkness in order to draw lost souls to Christ, give them something new and beautiful, heal the damaged mind, and fill hearts with hope, faith, and love.

God could very quickly gain the whole world and bring everyone to repentance if He permitted His angels to appear openly to fallen people, heal their diseases, and speak convincing words of truth. And the angels would gladly do this without growing weary and would labour until all people turned to the light. But this is contrary to the rules of spiritual warfare. God reveals Himself in this way only to particular people and makes them His prophets; then through them He declares His will.

God does not often address humanity directly with His voice. We know from Scripture that when God proclaimed His commandments, He did so Himself, speaking them with His own voice to all the people, and afterward He also wrote them upon stone with His own hand. We also read that the Father spoke to the people three times concerning Christ's mission: at His baptism, on the Mount of Transfiguration, and in the temple when the Greeks sought Jesus. In other instances, people were always chosen through whom God revealed His will to humanity and manifested His power.

Christ was born as a man, and He was the true image of God, showing people with perfect accuracy the genuine character of God the Father. In Jesus the glory of God was revealed to this world. He is the Light, and the darkness comprehended it not. Every word of Christ has power and meaning; it works and to this day accomplishes the purpose for which it was spoken. Behind these words stand the power of God Himself and His entire army of angels, ready to perform and bring to life in people everything contained in them. But a person is needed who will read, hear, declare, or proclaim them.

If Satan appeared to this world in all his splendour and beauty, he could very quickly seduce everyone and convince them that he was right, performing miracles and signs before curious people. But he has not been given such power. We read that on

one occasion he was permitted to appear visibly to Christ during the temptation in the wilderness, while in all other cases he used his agents who had come under his influence. The enemy of the soul also has prophets and people with whom he communicates directly and through whom he can manifest his strength and power.

The enemy of the human soul is also given the ability to put thoughts into a person's mind, deceive trusting people, and persuade them to accept his ideas, using his own methods and instruments of influence.

Satan cannot read people's thoughts; otherwise, he would become an omnipotent ruler and win on every front. But he can send temptations and afterward observe a person's behaviour.

The deceiver of souls commands an entire army of fallen angels who are united in their plans and obedient to their leader. Each of them has his own sphere of influence and territory in which he has power over a person's mind and body.

Our world is divided into spheres of influence belonging to good and evil. Unclean powers are permitted to have their places of vice, where they can destroy souls unhindered and devise their schemes. And God forbids His people to enter the enemy's territory except when it is necessary to pull someone out and save him.

God likewise has His own special territory, where He has power to convince people of the truth and to destroy Satan's plans and delusions.

The Bible is God's territory, where the enemy has no power to change anything. But he tries to distort the simplicity of clear truths and, through his accomplices, persuade people to accept a distorted understanding of God's character.

The church is a place of worship to God, and here the Creator has tremendous influence upon the mind of a person who worships Him in spirit and in truth. Yet the enemy of the soul has also set his hand to this place in order to create many denominations, confuse people, and fill the world with false

teachings about God under the mantle of religion. But the Bible destroys such deceptions in the lives of those who know and study it.

Satan's places of vice are known, and there is no need to list them. But there are also territories of the devil that I carry in my pocket and enter without thinking, not understanding that they are places of the enemy's influence. Music, films, shows, news, advertising, games, pornography, dating, shopping, and similar things are all weapons of temptation available with a single movement of a finger. One touch of a smartphone screen, and I am in the enemy's territory, and my soul tastes forbidden fruit. Some of these things may indeed contain an element of good, but the danger lies precisely in the fact that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil contains something good as well. Satan was once very good and knows how this affects the mind. And now his army includes many kind people who do much that is good for goodness' sake, but their actions do not contain God's love, which draws the soul to Christ.

Agape love is God's territory, where the enemy has no power whatsoever. He cannot counterfeit such a way of thinking. God desires His people to possess this power of love and live in it, and then they will be God's most powerful instrument in accomplishing His plans. Love and truth are two sisters who always labour together, and they draw souls to Christ, in Whom there is salvation and love.

Homework 114

1. What new things did you learn from this lesson?
2. Why are angels not permitted to be visible?
3. What power do angels have over people?
4. What are the supernatural forces of good and evil fighting for?
5. Why is a human being's presence important in this spiritual conflict?
6. Does all good come from God? If not, give biblical examples.
7. Why is it dangerous to enter territory under Satan's power?

8. Please read Job 1:6-22; 2:1-10; Matthew 12:26; 16:23; Luke 22:3, 31-32; Acts 5:3; 2 Corinthians 11:13-14; and Revelation 20:10 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 115. Love Thinks of Others

Lately, I have caught myself thinking about how to make things good for those with whom I communicate and have contact. My mind is focused on this. And it works to create this good: to help someone, talk with someone, support someone. There is a special kind of satisfaction in this way of thinking. For me, there is no greater joy than knowing that my friends are happy, love one another, and walk in the Lord.

As I listen to and read your answers, I experience with you the revelations that you share with me and with others. I am learning together with you, and although I have not answered a single lesson, I try not to fall behind you.

Like many of you, I too want to find time to sit down quietly, read the lesson, and consider carefully what is hidden there.

Do not think that I am some radiant super-brother who goes easily through life and loves to talk. I am a sinner who needs the Saviour no less than you do. Although I write about what I possess and what I have experienced, I understand that I still know so little. I esteem you better than myself, and this helps me rejoice in your successes and discoveries.

I also find satisfaction in the fact that we have touched upon the most eternal subject, which throughout all our endless days of life with Christ will delight us with its discoveries and amaze us with its depth. It is impossible to grasp and know all love at once. Like God Himself, it is eternal and infinite in its mystery and wonder. It is great and mighty, like the One Who is Love. We stand with the little buckets of our needs beside the universal ocean of love's limitless possibilities and dream of filling our feeble vessels with it so that we may understand what agape is. And the most amazing thing is that we succeed. God answers our needs and prayers.

I am so joyful that I can serve you by sharing my experiences and knowledge. What took me years, you can comprehend in a moment and enter into this joy without particular difficulty.

There will still be difficulties, but of a different kind, not like mine.

How I long to sit with you face to face, give you what your soul thirsts for, answer questions that remain unanswered, see your smiles, and rejoice in your interest.

The statistics of love are that many are called, but few are chosen. Jesus calls the whole world, but few respond. Of these few, most have no time to grow, while those who go further are fearful and complaining. Among the fearful, some are more curious and move forward, but only a small group among them dares to ask for more. These people receive what they desire, yet only a few of those who receive decide to go still further. As a result, just before the finish line, you look around and wonder whether you have been running in the right direction. But you see the goal and the joyful faces of the victors, and you make one final leap of faith, only to land and make another, and another.

Friends, remember one very important thought that will greatly sustain you in hours of trial. Eternity is worth entering, Eternal life is worth fighting for, and Jesus is worth befriending.

I do not know how much time I have been allotted on this earth, but I know that this brief time has been given to accept the right to Eternal life, which is hidden in the eternal knowledge of Jesus. For many of us, it has already begun, never to end.

Eternal life has its own laws, one of which is called 'love one another.' I am determined to live in obedience to this command, and the Lord teaches me what this looks like in practice.

Whenever love is discussed, everyone immediately imagines how it will affect him. Even the world desires to be loved. And when love is defined as the union of mercy and justice, everyone desires to see only mercy shown toward himself and justice toward his enemies. Such egoists we are. But love teaches me to be strict and demanding with myself, my deeds, and my words, and to be generous and forbearing toward other people.

You cannot imagine how interesting it is to clothe my thoughts and knowledge in words of love and then give all of this to you, friends. I know that not everyone will accept it and not everyone will understand, yet it is joyful all the same. I do not consider the time I spend on you and on your well-being to have been wasted. You will be the reward for this labour, and throughout Eternity you will delight me with your smiles and shining eyes. What could be better?

I do not save anyone, and this school does not save anyone. But together we are all learning the love that comes from Jesus Who saves, changes us into the likeness and image of God, and grants us the right to Eternal life in the presence of God.

Love is the guarantee of our salvation. Like a seal, it covers our foreheads and serves as the distinguishing mark of the soldiers in Christ's army.

If I have love, then I am not as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. Then all my knowledge, faith, and tongues will profit me.

It is far easier, better, and more pleasant to love than to hate. Moreover, you have God's approval and an inward assurance that this is the right path. And you see what a beautiful condition of mind and way of thinking it is.

In the light of love, all God's actions become understandable, and you perceive wisdom in His decisions and His foresight of the great misfortunes that would arise if everything were left to take its own course.

When, without seeing a person, I choose love in my relationship with him, then when we meet face to face it is not difficult for me to act in love and do what love prompts me to do. This is a kind of personal Gethsemane, where the chief victories occur before the meetings, battles, and trials begin. If I am already asking for love toward you now, then when I meet you it will be very easy for me to decide to continue loving you, for my heart is already prepared for such an attitude and awaits only an opportunity to allow the Holy Spirit to use me to bless others.

In all of this, I respect your choice and do not expect the same attitude toward me, for I know from experience that everyone needs time to decide, understand, accept, and respond. Not everyone believes that this is genuine, for people are accustomed to deception and inconsistency. The enemy of the soul also introduces his doubts and does not want to release his subjects into the light. He tries to pervert every pure relationship, calling it darkness and lust. Very often, he causes people to see in me the very sins that belong to those who look at me. You listen to people's assertions and are amazed. And the closer your neighbour is to you, the more subtly he can hurt you if he is led by another spirit. But love forgives all things and endures all things. It continues to love, and this is its distinctive quality. This provokes Satan to intense rage, and he seeks by these very means to induce others to respond to your love. But at the same time, God also influences your neighbour, and even contrary to his own character, he may open himself, let your Jesus enter, accept you, and experience the new birth of beautiful feelings.

Sometimes you do not know what surprise love will bring. But it works miracles and changes everything in life. And all of this happens naturally, for the soul is united with the Creator in love and finds rest. It finds a quiet harbour and does not wish to leave it. This is the very best thing one can possess.

Homework 115

1. What new things did you learn in this lesson?
2. Has the course of your thoughts and prayers concerning other people changed?
3. Do you think the good news is proclaimed only to the chosen?
4. What do you experience when someone tells you that you are loved? Does it appeal to your heart?
5. State the purpose of your life. What do you expect from the Agape School of Love?
6. During this time, have you experienced having your love answered with judgment and accusations?

7. Please read Luke 14:24; 16:16; Philippians 2:3-5; 4:6; 2 Corinthians 11:29-31; 1 Corinthians 9:26-27; Proverbs 19:11; Psalm 50:23; Isaiah 42:16; and 53:10-11 in the light of this lesson.

Lesson 116. I Love You

The expression 'I love you' is probably the most common in the world of advertising and the rarest when addressed to me personally. It is pleasant for me to realize that some seller has the most sincere feelings for me and wholeheartedly desires to make me happy, but to achieve this I simply lack his product. By acquiring it, I will prove to him that I love him too. This is how we love one another.

Cards and pictures bearing words of love are also very helpful. You send one, and then let the recipients guess what you mean. If it does not touch the heart, you can say that it was only a card. But if it affects and stirs the recipient's mind, there are always ways to retreat, for I said nothing and put no meaning into those pictures; I merely shared something I liked.

But when I clothe my thoughts in words, they begin to accomplish amazing things in the listener's heart. My mind begins to reshape itself according to what has been spoken. My thoughts are formed within the framework of the words I have uttered. My feelings begin to create within me the image of what was said, and my will begins to act according to what came out of my mouth.

My thinking influences my words, and the words I speak begin to shape my thinking. This is a law, and it works.

Can you say how often you hear words of love addressed to you—words that come from the heart, that carry truth within them, and that kindle an answering flame? If these words are spoken by a loving husband or wife, they become a beautiful rule that builds the family. But this phrase is often given no importance, and people try to replace it by fulfilling family responsibilities and duties.

Sometimes, in response to a declaration of love, you are asked instead to wash the dishes or put something away. And that little flame of love goes out in the routine of duties, rules, and obligations before it ever begins to burn brightly. Although it is

possible that, for some, deeds are the language of love that their heart understands.

Nevertheless, the power of a word should not be diminished. Even the most practical person, for whom words are an empty sound, will correctly understand the expression 'I hate you!' when it is addressed to him in any tone. He will not argue that it is an empty, meaningless phrase that requires proof through deeds. Words of hatred, malice, and indignation leave us in no doubt, and we understand whom we are dealing with. After such expressions, words of love from the same source are simply not accepted. Even if the person has repented, it is very difficult to believe the good in him. But time heals.

And the question is: 'Why am I so ready to believe evil and so doubtful of good?'

Building something beautiful requires a great deal of time, talent, resources, and energy. It may be built over many years and delight your heart with what has been achieved. But how much time is needed to destroy it? Mere seconds, and all your achievements and your whole life are turned into a heap of rubbish. Of course, a reinforced-concrete structure cannot easily be demolished with bare hands in a couple of seconds, but there are very fragile things that must not be handled roughly. They must be carefully protected from accidental or deliberate damage.

Our relationships are that fragile vase, fashioned by our joint efforts and passing through every process of treatment, polishing, and firing so that afterward it may delight our hearts and serve us throughout our lives and even throughout Eternal life. How quickly can this vase be broken? One stumble, and everything is shattered; then you sit and try to glue it back together.

Agape love has one very remarkable quality. It contains no evil and is constant in its inward goodness. It always loves, for it cannot be otherwise. In every relationship, it is unconditional and seeketh not her own.

For example, if I begin a friendship with someone and we even decide to love one another in a human, brotherly way, this desire brings us joy and draws us closer. But it has one condition: you give to me and I give to you, until you stumble or reach a crossroads of opinions. Then each person goes his own way. It is painful and sad, but such is life: the conditions of love were broken, and the relationship ended. When this same approach enters the formation of a family, divorce becomes a simple solution to complex problems.

Love is distinguished by its stability. It has a firm foundation and receives it from God. If this were not so, our world would long ago have been destroyed and laid waste by the Most High. But He is constant in His love toward people and gives blessings, warmth, and light to the good and to the evil. On this foundation, I can confidently plan my life. I know that the sun will shine tomorrow and that summer will not suddenly become winter, even if I become a bad person.

God's love creates within me a firm foundation for building relationships. On my side, I construct a structure of reinforced concrete. And even if my counterpart stumbles or changes his attitude toward me, I will remain faithful on my side and will act not according to circumstances or feelings, but according to the principle established in love—to be constant in it.

An attitude of love may change its form, but it will remain. For example, if I delight in giving flowers to someone I love, but that person begins to strike me in the face with them and throw them into the rubbish bin, I simply stop giving flowers and seek another way to express love. When another bouquet is expected as a gift, I modestly remain silent and do nothing, taking care of my face and considering that we already have enough rubbish in the house without buying more.

'I love you' are very good words. They give God an opportunity to place His love within me. And one day, having made this decision, I step onto the rails of the path that Jesus has already laid. I begin to know and explore for myself a new world of discoveries and opportunities. My words form beautiful feelings within me. By these words, I show the unseen world my plan for

my life and the lofty goals I have set for myself and will now pursue with God's help. This is not merely a beautiful phrase, but a goal toward which I have decided to go. God is pleased to hear of such lofty goals, and He understands how much work He will have to do in my life so that I may understand what I have released from within myself and where such a decision has led me. The Lord knows that a large part of His boundless ocean of love will now be directed into my life to sustain me in difficult hours of trial and to build my relationships. The joy of attaining the goal will be so great that every cost will seem insignificant. And God begins to act.

Now imagine what Heaven experiences when it hears my words of love, concentrates upon bringing them to fulfilment in my life, and sees that they were spoken only to satisfy my fleshly desires or selfish interests. What sorrow! God's love has been brought into reproach. It has been thrown onto the rubbish heap of my passions! Those who trusted are disappointed. God is dishonoured.

And my words of love influence not only me, but also those to whom they are spoken. This influence is immense. For God Himself conveys their true meaning to the listeners' minds and brings the declaration of my lips to fulfilment, accomplishing the purpose for which the words were spoken. The fact that they are still only in the process of growing does not diminish their power.

Homework 116

1. What did you understand from this lesson? It would be interesting to know.
2. Do you often hear words of love addressed to you?
3. Are there people in your life whom you love and tell that you love them?
4. How do words of love spoken personally to you affect you?
5. What does the expression 'I love you' mean to you?
6. Can a declaration of love be spoken without understanding the meaning of the words?
7. What kind of love do you put into a declaration of love to someone close to you?

8. Please read Isaiah 44:26; James 1:19; Matthew 12:37; Luke 22:47-48; and Romans 12:9-10 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 117. Love for Oneself

I do not think there is anyone who does not know the words from Matthew 22:39: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.' When I first heard this rule, I understood that I needed to love my neighbour. When I decided to understand what this commandment meant, I saw that it contained the explanation 'as thyself.' I liked this very much. But I could not understand what it meant. I do not think I am alone in this.

The very first conclusion I drew was that I should consider myself very good and righteous and love myself for it. My love for my neighbours would then be a consequence of this very love for myself. I am ashamed to admit it, but I lost my neighbours very quickly and could not understand what was wrong.

Self-love is not a very good character trait. It drives all a person's friends away without adding new ones. But as I studied the Bible and the spiritual works of other writers, I began to understand the plan of salvation and God's expectations of me more clearly. The Lord did not leave me in the darkness of my own ideas, but led me along His path. I simply understood that I did not know what it meant to love myself, so I stopped thinking about it and began thinking about Christ.

By beholding Jesus, I began to change under the influence of God's grace. And my love for the Lord grew together with me. The book *The Desire of Ages*, which tells of the life of Jesus and reveals the beautiful image of God in my Saviour, helped me greatly. I have already read this book eighteen times, and I intend to continue reading it. Studying God's character is so interesting! Through this comes a special knowledge of His love. I began comparing myself with Him and understood that I had a great deal to learn.

After many years, when God revealed to me the mystery of His love and began teaching me to abide in it, I returned once more

to the question of loving myself. This time, I found the answer in the life of Jesus.

Without Christ, all my love for myself will turn into self-admiration, self-love, and the pride of life. At the same time, I will believe that I love myself and, on that basis, will show my attitude toward my neighbour. But it does not work that way.

The life of Jesus is the very best example of love for oneself. Jesus is the unsurpassed standard to imitate, and through His example I began to understand so clearly what it means to love oneself. Jesus loves Himself more than anything in the world. And this love is so great that He understood that He simply could not live without us. His heart cannot find rest as long as even one sinner exists in the Universe. Jesus desires to save that soul deceived by sin so that the joy of salvation may once again fill His heart.

The Lord decided to perform the boldest deed and pay the highest price for my sins in order to give me an opportunity to accept this Salvation and live eternally with Him.

While living in a human body, Jesus understood that care for His personal godliness was very important, for in this the highest love for Himself as a human being is manifested. The true image designed by the Creator is restored through respectful attention to one's spiritual and physical needs.

Jesus' love for Himself moved Him to pray very much and to remain in constant communion with the Father. He did not allow Himself to interrupt this connection, for in it lay His special strength. Love for Himself moved the Saviour to care continually for His neighbours and share with them what He received from the Father. It brought Him such joy to pass on the many blessings He possessed in abundance. Seeing the embodiment of all God's laws within Himself, Jesus knew how to present them correctly to others as well. By His own example, He showed the whole world what it means to love one's neighbour as oneself. This was not a dry theory about something abstract, but truth in its pure form, passing through the spotless heart of our Lord and revealed to us in His life.

Love for Himself moved Christ to teach His disciples the knowledge of the Father and the law that He possessed in an undistorted form. And He simply transferred this love for Himself to them. He taught them also to love their neighbours as they loved themselves, and afterward He added that they should love as He had loved them.

It was love for Himself that moved Christ to go to the cross, for He understood that He alone could save fallen people from the sentence of eternal death. He imagined Himself in the place of a hopeless sinner who knew no way out of the prison of sin, and how good He would feel if someone led Him out of it. Then He applied this picture to Himself and decided to do good for me, imagining how it would gladden His heart if He were in my place. This is exactly how love acts.

The Golden Rule, that I should do to others as I would have them do to me, flows so naturally from a loving heart that it requires no special effort. My love for myself, taken from the example of Jesus' love, shows me very clearly what may be pleasant to my neighbour, because it is pleasant to me as well.

I would very much like someone to pray for me, and therefore I gladly pray for my neighbours, knowing that the thought that someone cares for them in this way will be very pleasant to them.

I would very much like someone to support me and share his abundance, or something I lack, when I am in physical need. And as I recognize this desire of mine, I become such a person for those in need.

When my soul is heavily burdened and darkness envelops my mind, I would very much like one of my neighbours to notice this and support me in a difficult moment of life. Understanding this, I go and find people in such a condition and begin to comfort and support them as I would want to be supported.

I dream of being needed and useful to someone, and how good it would be if someone told me so. But one can dream this way throughout life and never receive anything. Therefore, I go and become such a person for my neighbour. I try to convince him

that he is dear to me and that I need him, and perhaps in this way I give him great pleasure, because I desire the same myself.

Having God's love and seeing its influence upon me and those around me, I would so like to meet a person led by the same love, become his friend, and hear from him words of love that come from a pure heart. This would probably be so joyful. Anticipating this joy in other people, I become such a person for them. I speak words of love to them, make them my lifelong friends, and think about how I might bring still greater joy to their hearts so that their lives may become even more beautiful. And my love for myself moves me to treat them exactly as I would want them to treat me.

And this is not a one-sided game. Very many people respond to my actions and allow me to do them good, and then they themselves begin to respond in the same way.

My joy is no longer that my dream has come true and someone has loved me, but that I understand what happiness a person experiences when he allows God's love to pass through his heart and pour into his life. The awareness of my neighbour's happiness also fills my heart with special joy and gratitude for his happiness in loving me.

For this is the essence of the commandment of love: by loving, I become happy, and when I see my friend's love toward me, I imagine how happy he is. His happiness brings me great joy, and my happiness brings joy to him.

Homework 117

1. What did you learn from this lesson today?
2. Why does love for one's neighbour begin with love for oneself?
3. How do you understand the expression 'love yourself'? What does it mean?
4. Can you love your neighbour without loving yourself?
5. How does self-love differ from love for oneself?
6. Why is it so important to love your neighbour as yourself?
7. Does Jesus love Himself? How is this manifested?

8. Please read Leviticus 19:18; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8-10; and Ephesians 5:28-30 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 118. How Do I Love Myself?

Love for one's neighbour begins with love for oneself. Both kinds of love have the same name and come from the same Source of grace. In either case, I need strength from above to overcome the inclinations of the flesh and unite my will with God's will.

Please do not confuse the expression 'love for oneself' with 'self-love.' These are two different concepts, and their qualities are completely opposite. They differ from each other as light differs from darkness.

I must understand what is taking place in my heart and keep my feelings, desires, and instincts under the control of my will, reason, and intellect. Without constant communion with God, this is impossible.

When I ask for love, the cleansing of my heart from sin begins—from the power that tried to control my thoughts and feelings, turning me into a hardened, self-loving egoist. But God's love has its own plans for my mind: it inscribes the laws of Heaven upon my heart. Through my prayers for a changed heart and the gift of love, God receives from me the authority to inscribe His law upon the tables of my heart. And when this law lives within me, it becomes a great joy for me to keep it. Love for oneself is manifested in obedience to God. I begin to love myself as God's son, born for Eternal life, so that here on Earth I may allow God's Spirit to make of me what the Lord Himself intended. I see how dangerous sin is to my soul and how it cools my love for myself and plants seeds of selfishness in my heart; therefore, with all my strength I fight every manifestation of evil in my life.

The very first step in loving myself is faith in Jesus as my personal Saviour and accepting Him into my heart as my Lord. The process of restoring God's design for me begins. After this step, I begin learning in the school of Christ the truths set forth in Holy Scripture. The formation of my character proceeds according to God's plan.

I begin to grow like a child, learning the spiritual advantages of life with Christ. My love and respect for myself grow together with me.

But then the moment comes when I have already learned much and have become like all my brothers and sisters. Together we do works, conduct programs, and carry out various ministries, and I could stop growing and simply do what everyone else does. But God leads me into the dark forest of the soul in order to cleanse me further and, after leading me through the darkness of the heart, to teach me new truths hidden from everyone. They are called love, happiness, and friendship.

All these treasures of God are available to those who desire to possess them. They are offered to me by the Lord Himself so that my love may become perfect. But they do not lie on the surface. This is a hidden treasure which, like a mineral deposit, must be sought and found; the whole field must be bought, and all the riches taken from the depths of God's love and wisdom must be made one's own.

The love prepared for me by God from the beginning of creation becomes mine when I begin to thirst for it, ask for it, and seek it. God reveals to me this great mystery of godliness and the regeneration of my heart. Love heals all my wounds, makes my soul pure, and reveals within me the beauty of God's character.

I am learning to love myself and my neighbour as myself. I understand that my soul is very precious to God and that I must care first of all for its purity and beauty. It must be spotless, cheerful, happy, and friendly, for this is what God desires to see. Then He will be able to regard it as holy, a peculiar possession, dedicated to conveying God's love to this world. For what shall it profit me if I gain the whole world and lose my own soul? Or what shall I give in exchange for my soul? But when it is hidden in God's love and represents that love to this world, then even small victories and gains become very weighty and significant.

Loving myself, I will never stoop to hating someone for his evil attitude or conduct toward me. My love for myself will never

allow me to take up a reproach against my neighbour or say anything about him that would demean him in the eyes of other people. I will never take such a risk with my soul as to begin a new day without prayer and without committing my plans to God.

My love for my soul teaches me to care for my personal salvation, my spiritual transformation, and my growth in Jesus. It does not even permit the thought that God's Law need not be kept, or that one may live according to human commandments, following worldly traditions and rules that have no biblical foundation.

God's love teaches me to love myself and my soul. And the best and most successful education in this school is to cleave to Christ with all my soul, mind, and understanding, becoming so closely united with Him in friendship that we become one. And love knows how to accomplish this.

But my love for myself does not stop with me. It draws me into service to my neighbours. It cannot hide God's blessings and make them mine alone. The higher it raises me in the sight of Heaven, the more opportunities for serving my neighbours open before me. I understand that other people need my service to them, and I seek opportunities to render it.

As I study the laws of happiness and experience their power in my life, I understand that they also operate in the lives of my neighbours. And I want to give those around me what gladdens my own heart. But I cannot do good for others if they do not desire it. God does not permit me to force His blessings upon people against their will.

I remember an occasion when I met a homeless man who walked the streets laden with bags containing his possessions. I had breakfast with me and offered him my sandwich, which he gladly ate at once. I asked whether he had any food for later, and he said he did not. I took out a banknote to give him, but he recoiled from me in horror, shouting, 'I don't want any money!' and clutched his bags in his arms. I tried to explain that it was

for food, but he would not agree under any circumstances. We parted.

Not everyone wants to live with God. Not everyone will accept salvation. It is especially painful to understand that these 'not everyone' are members of your own family. And although you possess all the treasures of Heaven, you can give them nothing from these treasures except a small sandwich to meet a momentary need. And the souls of your loved ones become established in sin and pass from this life forever without ever receiving salvation.

But love teaches me to conduct myself properly and to love my neighbours as myself. And I decide that if they have chosen the right to die, I will pray for their conversion and make their lives as happy as lies within my power. But we understand happiness differently. My happiness rests upon Christ and His values; theirs is in this world. And I am not always accepted with my joy. What can I give those who live according to the flesh? Nevertheless, I try to make their lives more interesting, for this is the only thing they have in this world, since they desire to live here for their own pleasure. They do not need Eternity; love does not bring them joy. How can they be helped? At times imagination fails me. All that remains is to perform my duty, but to perform it with love while dreaming of a miracle. Sometimes miracles happen.

Love thinketh no evil and has no evil in its heart.

Homework 118

1. What interesting things did you learn from this lesson?
2. Why is constant communion with God necessary in order to preserve love for oneself?
3. What actions must a sinner take in order to receive God's love?
4. What subsequently happens to a person when he accepts Jesus as his Saviour?
5. What qualities are necessary in order to unearth the 'mineral deposit'?

6. How can my love for myself be manifested in my relationships with other people? And what is important to remember when showing love to my neighbours?
7. Please read Jeremiah 31:33-34; Ezekiel 36:27; Exodus 20:1-17; John 15:10-12; 1 John 2:9-10; 3:14-15; 3:23-24; Romans 7:4-6; and 2 Corinthians 3:6 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 119. Do I Love Myself in the Way I Treat Myself?

When I buy a car, I also receive an owner's manual that states very clearly what fuel should be put into the tank, what oil is suitable for the engine and how often it should be changed, and what fluids are used in the braking and cooling systems. I am given recommendations about how often and after how many kilometres I should have the car serviced. And the law of every country requires me to have the car inspected at specified times in order to identify existing defects and make my driving safer.

I personally am expected to keep the car clean and in good order, following all the instructions. Very often, one can tell at a glance how tidy the owner of a vehicle is. This is easily seen from the car's appearance. And the better it is cared for, the higher its value and the greater the demand for that vehicle.

But if someone decides that it does not matter what kind of fuel is put in, or what kind of oil goes into the engine, as long as something is there, or decides to put nothing in at all, I think such an approach will cause the car to break down very quickly. Hardly anyone would entrust his car to such a person even temporarily. He would be considered unreasonable, and people would try to keep him away from their vehicles.

I think this example of a car is not devoid of common sense. But although a car is valuable, it is still an inanimate object that can remain motionless for a long time.

There was a time when horses, donkeys, and oxen were regarded as ordinary means of transportation. I think they also required special care in order to serve their owners. But unlike a car, they could make it known that what they were being fed did not suit them or was not to their liking. Their owners took the needs of those who served them into account. Even concerning these creatures, the Creator Himself gave instructions for their care and provided for their rest, speaking of it in one of His commandments.

But when we apply a similar attitude to a human being—or, better still, to ourselves—for some reason many people's common sense ceases to work, and they suddenly believe that anything they can put into their mouths is good for them. I remember that, as a child, adults even taught me this because they wanted me to eat more of everything.

God gave me a body which He called the temple of the Holy Ghost and in which He Himself desires to dwell. As my Creator, He made my body so wise and perfect that, independently of me, it knows what it must do in any given situation, how to respond to particular factors, and how to fight various viruses, bacteria, and diseases. All this takes place without my participation. Even when I sleep, my body knows how to restore my strength and repair what is not working properly, without my advice or recommendations. And God entrusted such an exceedingly complex and amazing mechanism to my care! He expects me to exercise common sense in caring for my body and to observe the laws of health and nutrition, considering what I put into and fill my body with, and how often I should do so. My love for myself begins with what is on my plate.

Although in childhood I depended on my parents in matters of nutrition, at a certain time I began deciding for myself what to put into my 'fuel tank.' In this respect, my wisdom and love for myself are manifested.

But the Lord did not create me merely to eat. Within my body He united feelings, thoughts, character, will, reason, intellect, and instincts, and made all of them living and harmonious in their interweaving. He breathed into me His breath of life and gave me His Spirit for guidance from above. I was created for communion with the Creator within myself. He gave me His moral and physical law so that I could live happily within its boundaries. He granted me authority over my body and complete freedom to govern it. And I alone decide what I will do with all of this.

And what do I do? Love from God teaches me to love this temple of the soul, study its laws, and care properly for my body. It is love for myself that moves me to find the time and

means to care for myself properly. If I have no love for myself, all my care for my temple of the Holy Ghost will turn into abuse of the body. Then it will begin to suffer illness and quickly fall into disrepair.

My plate for eating and my glass for drinking, the books in my hands, and the programs on my smartphone and television speak very clearly to the visible and invisible world about my love for myself. And if, in the sight of Heaven, I am unreasonable in my attitude toward myself and in my love for myself, who will entrust the bodies and souls of others to me?

But Satan came into our world as an uninvited guest and perverted and destroyed everything. He brought humanity to such a condition that every kind of abuse of oneself has become a way of life, while true love for oneself is ridiculed.

‘Be foolish like everyone else!’

‘Why do you need Eternity?’

‘You can be happy without God!’

These and other slogans and mottos pursue us everywhere, imposing their rules upon us. Under this influence, I begin to love my car more than myself. Where is reason? What foolishness!

The Bible gives me instructions about what I may and may not eat, what I may drink and what I should abstain from, and what I should read and watch. God expects me to obey these laws out of love for myself and for Him. I am required to exercise common sense in studying such ordinances. But there are those who begin teaching me the commandments of men, which nullify God’s commandments. And instead of obeying God, I choose the opinion of this world; instead of loving myself, I begin to love the world itself and the things that are in it.

There are also those who disguise their arguments more skilfully, finding biblical support for their sins and offering prayers to God for a blessing. But they all have one purpose: to destroy my love for myself and my body and, through my sin, to separate me from God.

What do I feed my body and my mind? Is it wholesome food approved by God?

For example, I know parents who, without knowing God's will, care for the nutrition and upbringing of their children in accordance with God's requirements and strictly ensure that these rules are observed, yet give no thought at all to themselves and ruin their bodies and souls with things they would never permit their children to have. I remember when my father brought home a bottle of vodka and, as he put it in the refrigerator, told me that I would die immediately if I drank the contents. I agreed, but at the same time I understood that it had not been purchased for a collection, but for other purposes.

'Love is the fulfilling of the law.' This is what is written, and this is how it is. Jesus gave me an example of obedience to the law while remaining happy and joyful. As I study His life, I see the beauty of God's commandments, which were also given to me for happiness and health. And I understand that God establishes prohibitions for the sole purpose of preserving my life, protecting me from physical and spiritual suffering, and drawing me to Jesus and, through Him, to Himself. God loves me very much and desires that I also love myself and manifest this love by understanding and following His instructions concerning me.

Love is the source of life and happiness. It is an understanding of God's will in its true light. Do I love myself?

Homework 119

1. Did you learn anything useful for yourself from this lesson?
2. How can I learn God's will for me amid such an abundance of information?
3. Why does the Bible call my body the temple of the Holy Ghost? See 1 Corinthians 3:17.
4. Does God expect me to care for my body? What does this care involve?
5. What does it mean to defile the temple? Why will God destroy me for this, and how will He punish me?
6. Can I love others without having love for myself?

7. Can my love for myself be called agape love?
8. Please read Psalm 139:13-14; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Leviticus 11:1-47; Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 10:31; and Isaiah 59:2 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 120. But Do You Love Me?

When I begin telling others about God's love, sharing with them the secrets of its influence upon me in my life, and explaining how wonderful it is to possess this love and live by it, those who listen to me have the right to ask me the following question: 'But do you love me?' And I must give an answer to this question.

If a person sees a negative answer toward himself in my life, it no longer matters to him what has been revealed to me. He begins to regard me as a mere talker and loses interest in me and in the truth I present.

This reality must always be understood when sharing with my neighbours what has been revealed to me. People have hearts and feelings, and they are very sensitive concerning themselves. They see perfectly well who is standing before them and what that person is truly like.

If the person speaking about love cannot be seen, then the imagination begins to draw an image, and the mind pictures the character I am able to discern for myself from the information received.

For example, who among you knows exactly what Jesus or even one of the apostles looked like? Perhaps we immediately picture the painting *The Last Supper*, in which the artist tried to express a person's character through colour. I heard a story that an artist used a young man as the model for the image of Jesus and then, many years later, found a vagrant in the street who was very suitable for the image of Judas. While the artist was painting the portrait, the man who was posing told him that he was the very person whose face had once been used to portray Christ. I do not know how true this story is, but I like it as an illustration.

Through our lives and our attitude, we show people who we truly are. My words are good and have power only when my deeds confirm what I have said.

How, then, can I determine how sincere I am toward my neighbour? I will say plainly that hardly anyone will admit to you that he is a hypocrite or an actor playing the role of a good person. Many internet preachers take advantage of being inaccessible and at times abuse the trust of their viewers by speaking to them about their love.

But there is a God Who hates sin and approves of no playacting connected with the truth. He knows how to humble the proud, calm the irritated, and reprove the hypocritical. He desires me to be honest with myself, with Him, and with people.

And woe unto me if I try to deceive the Creator by playing the role of someone I am not. Unfortunately, there are people who succeed in doing this. And because God's judgments are not executed speedily, the heart of man is not afraid to do evil.

Interestingly, I myself listen to someone's declarations of love and try to understand how much they apply to me. Words of love have the strength and power to change a person's mind; and if they are spoken directly into a neighbour's ears, they also touch his feelings and greatly stir his thoughts.

I also confess to you that if I tell someone of my love for him, I understand what I am doing and recognize my full responsibility for what I have said, being prepared to bear the consequences of what I have resolved in my heart. I consider it dishonest to tell someone of my love without having such a resolve in my heart. It is better to say nothing than to deceive. Love is not given for one-time use, but forever.

For example, if my neighbour has done me good, my heart rejoices with happiness, and I tell him that I love him, then both of us are happy. But then clouds and trials come, and only memories remain of my love, and I tell my neighbour what I truly feel toward him. Where, then, is love? It will appear again when someone does me another good deed. And on such a swing we try to build lasting relationships. But this approach does not work.

Knowing this pattern, every person initially sees an actor in me, because the world has accustomed us to conditional love. As

soon as I begin to speak, I immediately fall into the category of hypocrites. But agape love is unique in its very essence. It goes on the offensive to take the position of a victor and conquer a person's heart forever, keeping it in that state throughout his life.

I often hear how people see their own sins in me and try to accuse me of being what they themselves are. At times it is even interesting to listen and learn whom you are dealing with. Nevertheless, every criticism and accusation makes me examine all my motives, purposes, and words again and again, while my soul turns to God with the question, 'Is this true of me, Lord?' Then Jesus shows me His hands and comforts me, asking me to continue loving these people truly. And once again my soul yearns for victories in love.

There is a certain sequence and pattern. When a person first hears about my love or the revelations I share, his interest is kindled. Something new enters his ears. But love judges the thoughts of the heart and begins to cause discomfort. Then the person hardens himself and sets limits upon his interest in the subject. He simply watches from a distance, and sometimes he leaves forever. But the one who remains continues watching, passing all the information through a filter of prejudice. Yet constancy in love itself shows him that these words are worth hearing, for they are full of meaning and life. The person begins cautiously to look into the essence of what he has heard. Seeing no contradiction with God's word and no playacting in the speaker's conduct, he decides to trust more and more. Then insight comes, and the soul dares to take the risk of opening itself. And the most unexpected thing happens. The light of the new relationship begins to illuminate every secret thought, and the person becomes ashamed of the doubts that once arose. If someone now apologizes for his evil thoughts and feelings, this is nothing new to love, but a joy in gaining a new friend forever.

I hear and see this question about love for me, and I have a positive answer for everyone. It is simply not always possible to prove something to everyone by deeds, for there are many of you and only one of me, and I am not wealthy enough to help

everyone materially. But I encounter understanding in this matter as well.

It is very easy to speak about love with those who love as you do. At times, words are not even necessary for us to understand that we love one another. The Spirit of God gives this, and you cannot act otherwise. No proof is needed, and there are no unreasonable expectations. I simply know that in my life there is someone who is connected with God and who gladdens my heart by his attitude toward me. But sometimes these people also want to hear how I feel about them—not because they doubt, but because they need it as those who fight against the world and overcome while hearing only curses and accusations directed at them. And here you are, with love and blessing. What joy!

People's expectations should be answered, and it is best to be honest. If I do not know a person, he expects nothing from me, but in his soul he tries to understand whether my love will be enough for him too. And if he sees that I have much love, he asks no unnecessary questions but simply rejoices that in this world there is someone who receives from God what he can give away.

Do not be afraid of this question, but be prepared to give an honest answer. If the answer is negative, that too is an answer, but in that case something must be changed in life with God's help. For if I have no love, then . . . it is worth learning it.

Homework 120

1. What did you understand from this lesson?
2. How often do you hear the question of whether you love someone?
3. Are there people in your life who love you and tell you so?
4. Do you know people who speak about love but do not live in it?
5. Do you know how to tell people of your love for them? How do you do this?
6. Why is it so important for deeds to follow words?
7. Are you afraid to ask your neighbours this question?

8. Please read Ecclesiastes 5:4; Isaiah 44:26; 55:10-11; John 13:1; 17:26; Proverbs 17:17; 18:24; 24:26; Song of Solomon 5:16; James 2:8-9, 15-17; and 1 John 3:18-21 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 121. Dare to Speak of Love

One day my friend met a young woman and decided to share the good news with her. As he communicated with his new acquaintance and her mother, he asked God for wisdom from above so that he might reveal the beauty of God's character and the plan of salvation. As a result, these people decided to enter into a covenant with God. My friend became so attached to the young woman that he began showing her special attention. He helped her in every way he could without expressing his feelings aloud. But he told us how captivated he was by the inner beauty of his new acquaintance, shared her songs with us, and spoke of how much he loved her. As a result of this friendship, the whole church was preparing for a wedding and already anticipating the creation of a new family. Everyone except the young woman herself understood perfectly well where this friendship was leading. When my friend introduced us, I asked her whether she knew that my friend loved her. She replied in surprise that he said nothing about it and that much in his behaviour was very unclear to her.

A short time later, a young man who had trained to be a pastor learned that there was an interesting sister in this church who possessed the gift of singing and could assist him in his ministry. He bought a bouquet of flowers, came to the city, and went to this very young woman, asking her to become his wife. She was delighted that he valued her so highly and gave her consent. My friend was not prepared for this turn of events and tried to clarify their relationship in a conversation with his friend. She told him that she had known nothing of his plans, and that she had now made her choice and could not change it. A couple of weeks later, the new friend and the young woman celebrated their wedding and became a new family. And my acquaintance preached at their wedding, giving them counsel and good wishes.

God has endowed human beings with a special gift—intuition. This quality of the soul helps us foresee certain situations that

logically follow from the available facts. Women are especially developed in this respect.

But our world is very diverse, and human foolishness can be highly unpredictable. Sometimes, as you observe a person's behaviour, you understand his motive and see what should happen, yet in the end everything turns out quite differently.

Conjectures are sometimes useful, but they can misrepresent a person and his motives. And if I put these assumptions into words according to my understanding, they will probably become gossip that destroys a person's reputation before he reveals himself in his true light.

Love is not at all opposed to being expressed aloud. Doing this for the first time can be very difficult. I even know families in which spouses never speak to one another of love and live that way all their lives, believing that deeds are better than words.

A word of love that has not left my lips cannot become a seed that bears good fruit. It will remain stored in my heart, and no one will ever know my true feelings and the motives that move me. My words reveal my inner world to those who hear and give me the opportunity to express aloud that which abides abundantly in my heart.

Let us consider this example. A multimillionaire decided to conduct an experiment by observing me and my behaviour. Every day he gave me 50,000 dollars, expecting me to invest it wisely in something. If I did not do so, the millionaire would take everything back. At first I was bewildered, and then I began to think. The money was arriving in my account every morning. Because of my modesty, I did not dare take the first step. What if something went wrong, since such wealth had been entrusted to me? Meanwhile, the capital was multiplying each day. There were two paths: to save it or to begin investing it. And so I dared to make a purchase. The first thing I needed was, of course, a car—and the finest one. Then came an apartment in an exclusive neighbourhood, followed by a house with every convenience; next, I needed to acquire a yacht. And

soon there were not enough funds to satisfy my greed. It is difficult to keep such capital secret.

But I could have taken the path of charity and begun helping poor people. As a result, the money would likewise have become insufficient, while the number of poor people would not have diminished.

I decided to save. A week, a month, and a year passed. I rejoiced that I had gone from being wealthy to being very wealthy. I was already planning projects worth millions. But one fine morning, I received a letter from the bank stating that all my funds had been recalled by their giver and that people would come to take an inventory of my property. I understood that I had missed something and had failed to act in time, but I could no longer change anything. The conditions had been violated, and I lost even what I had possessed.

The Lord has prepared for me a treasure more valuable than the riches of this world. With the heavenly currency called 'love,' I can purchase trust, love in return, happy faces, and open hearts. I become the owner of the finest relationships in the world. But there is only one condition: I must spend this capital. Every morning a large sum of love comes into my account, and I need wisdom to invest it properly. The Multi-love-ionaire carefully watches how I manage this treasure. He records all my expenditures. He is willing to increase this deposit according to my needs. He also gives wisdom and teaches me which investments are best to make. I am learning to spend love. It turns out that this is not so simple. Not everyone wants to accept it as payment, and it makes many people very angry.

But what I can do freely and without hindrance is speak about how rich I am and let people understand that I can share these treasures with them throughout their lives.

Words of love possess a special power whose magnitude is unknown to me. Several times I have personally experienced the influence of these words coming from pure lips. It was something incredibly beautiful. Such a 'brain explosion' took

place that nothing could ever be restored to the way it had been. The very awareness that someone loved me and told me so changed my entire life and my views. I began to understand that I was so precious to someone that he was willing to love me throughout his life. This is probably the most pleasant incurable wound.

But I immediately began thinking that if this affects me in such a way, it can also affect others through me. I decided to try. But I would not merely say it; first I would prepare myself for a lifelong benevolent attitude, and then declare it. I took the step. It worked. Everything I experienced, my friends now experience. Not everyone wants to believe that it is so simple and forever, but in time they resign themselves to this lot and begin making use of what they have. What else can they do?

Words of love are like good seed. Thorny cacti do not grow from them. They produce in people that of which they themselves consist. And if this seed falls into good and proper soil, it will bear very much fruit. The seed of love is transformed into a tree that brings forth its fruit in its season.

But at first courage is needed to take the first step, and then wisdom is needed to care for what has been sown.

I am always gladdened by the beautiful fruits I can gather from what I have sown. Other people receive something as well. What a miracle it is to love and to say so in words. It is so joyful and beneficial! And it must certainly be done, or people will not understand.

Homework 121

1. What interesting things did you take from this lesson for yourself?
2. Why do you think we must express our good feelings aloud?
3. What will happen if I hide this gift bestowed by Heaven?
4. Why do we so greatly need courage and wisdom?
5. How can we avoid falling into a trap by misinterpreting the words and actions of other people?
6. What will we reap if we sow love?

7. Please read Colossians 3:12, 17; Galatians 6:7-9; 1 John 3:18; Romans 10:9-10; Matthew 7:1-2; 12:34; John 3:11-13; and Luke 6:44-45 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 122. The World Needs Love

We live in a world that will never become different. It will never repent and will never turn away from its sins. However sincerely we may desire to change this world, it will not become better.

Satan and his angels will likewise never repent or become different.

The world is rushing toward its destruction. It has already made its choice, and nothing can change that decision. We must remember this so that we will not be naive, thinking that someday everything will change for the better. However wonderful the benefits of this world may be made to appear to us, its fate is already known, and we should never forget it.

But we have still been given time to live here and make important decisions: to choose whose side I will be on and which master I will worship. I must make this choice myself. No one has the right to decide these questions for me. Nevertheless, the forces of good and evil can offer their help in making the decision and assist in confirming my choice. And this subtle boundary passes very close by within my mind.

I live near the border with France. When I travel to that country on business, I turn on the navigation system, which shows me the best route to my destination. The national border is marked on it in an interesting way: it is a very thin black line that clearly shows where each section belongs to one country or the other. Sometimes I drive along a road that belongs to Germany, while the roadside and the field already belong to France. Nothing marks this—there are no signs and no fences—but when I cross that line, the navigation system immediately tells me that I am already in another country, although I cannot see it. Every time I cross the border, I think about the fact that I am now under the jurisdiction of another state with different laws, and its authorities have the right to do with me what they consider necessary if I have entered their territory. But while it

is a time of peace, no one is interested in me as long as I violate nothing.

The kingdoms of darkness and light have their own rules and territories with their own laws. Although God is over all, He nevertheless allows the prince of this world to establish his own statutes in his state and to live by them, having authority over all his citizens. But there are exceptions connected with the fact that God is the Master of life and the Originator of the plan of Salvation from this kingdom of sin, and the final word in this matter belongs to Him.

For the sake of His children, God still protects and preserves this world, sending light, rain, warmth, and many blessings. Although our planet is doomed, it still lives and flourishes. Amazing things surround us on every side. New inventions astonish us with their fantastic possibilities. And at the same time, people live in sin without any punishment from above. It even seems that no one is troubled by conscience. Peace and safety are everywhere. There are crises and problems, but a way out is found, and life continues toward a bright future. People hope that everything will be well; they believe this and strive to attain this 'well-being' in their sins. The wine of Babylon is available to everyone and is offered in beautiful packaging embossed with gold, captivating the mind with its exquisite taste and appearance. This wine is pleasing to human beings.

But right beside it lies the territory of an entirely different state, where its own laws and rules operate, where there is much Light and love, and where everyone lives together in happiness while looking to his Saviour Jesus. For the sake of these people, God still shows His mercy to the rest of the world, desiring all to be saved and to come to repentance.

But the boundary between these worlds exists, and the laws operate. This boundary is invisible to my ordinary eye; there are no fences and no signs. But if the biblical navigation system is turned on in my mind, it shows very clearly where foreign territory lies and warns me of danger.

I may visit the enemy's territory only with the access granted by God, in order to do what He commissions and to win what needs to be liberated. But if I enter merely out of curiosity, I fall under the enchantments of the prince of darkness and risk losing the purity of my mind and becoming a victim of the wicked one's schemes. It is impossible to be safe in the enemy's territory.

But God places in my hands a light that draws attention to itself, and then the most interesting part begins.

Fishermen know that if lamps are lit at night, certain fish will swim toward the light and become easy prey. In the same way, very many people are drawn to God's light, but there are no nets and fishing rods to catch these seeking souls. And even when they exist, they often remain unused.

As a result, thirsty souls begin asking us to show them Jesus, the beauty of His love, the power of His grace and patience, and to give them hope of acceptance. But they do not know how to ask for this, and therefore they ask in the only way they know—with mockery, shouting, insults, accusations, intimidation, and pleading. I must understand that this is a request and show them Jesus in my response, so that they may be convinced that He exists and has not changed, and that He still loves and saves.

The awareness that death is inevitable moves many people to seek a way out; they try to understand what will come afterward. Christ has the answers and communicates them through me.

The human soul seeks words of love. It drinks the wine of this world, but does not quench the soul's thirst with it. It performs good deeds, but finds no rest. It lives in sin, but does not possess the peace that love alone gives. The human soul was created for love, and when it hears this voice, it rushes to meet it. It desires freedom but does not understand this. The will has submitted to the power of darkness and accepted citizenship in Satan's kingdom, taking the surname of its husband. Although the soul thirsts for freedom, it no longer understands what to

do with it. And the enemy of souls teaches: you may do evil to everyone but expect good toward yourself, and you will fare well with me. If you are caught and punished, ask for mercy and continue living in your sins. How can one escape from this whirlpool?

There is a way out! Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And everyone who believes in Him shall live—and live happily.

Although the world is beautiful in outward appearance, like the Titanic it is sailing on its final voyage, never again to return to a quiet harbour. Is it worth buying a cabin on this ship and making it comfortable? Yet I do this, thinking that my Lord delayeth His coming.

Happiness, love, joy, and friendship are very near. They can be touched, embraced, and even tasted. But to possess them, one must take them and begin using them, studying from within the design, power, and beauty of what has been received.

A tank is a very good means of breaking through defences and capturing new territories. But if a new recruit is placed in it without being taught anything, how much will he accomplish in battle? Yet for some reason, in regard to love it is commonly believed that it is easy to operate and that even children can fight with it. But when an urgent need for it arises, the engine stalls, and you stand there full of love but without the power to act.

The world needs love. It awaits love's influence so that at least those who are still thinking may be saved. And these people need fishers who will catch them in their nets, draw them to Jesus, show them love and friendship, and teach them to live in love.

Homework 122

1. What precious thoughts did you gain for yourself from this lesson?
2. What choice will confront a person living on earth in the last days?

3. What does the enemy offer people so that they may attain their 'well-being'? And what way does Jesus offer?
4. Is it worth spending time making our lives comfortable now? If so, how?
5. How can we learn to use the gift of love wisely?
6. What do God and the souls thirsting for love expect from us?
7. Please read Isaiah 44:3; Matthew 5:3; John 7:37; Revelation 21:6; 18:2, 4-5; 1 Thessalonians 5:3, 7-9; 2 Thessalonians 2:7-8; and Matthew 28:19-20 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 123. People Need Words of Love

Whatever deeds of love I may expect and desire to see, words of love nevertheless have a special place and a special influence.

For example, let us try to imagine the God of the Bible without words of love. Let us remove from Scripture every statement about God's agape and read it, trying to understand what God is like. I think the first thing that will come to mind is justice, and sometimes mercy. We will also see the Lord's greatness and His inaccessibility. The only thing expected of me will be deeds by which I can justify myself or which will condemn me. The problem of sin will be resolved by appeasing the Most High through pilgrimages, sacrifices, alms, offerings, virtues, good behaviour, and memorized prayers. As a result, I will obtain one of the religions in which I decide for myself how to please the Creator. His deeds of love toward me and the world will remain veiled in mystery, because I do not know His true motives. I am afraid to think about God—perhaps even that is forbidden. And if I ascribe love to Him, this will bring the Most High down to the level of human beings and endow Him with the sentimentality of human nature.

It is difficult even to imagine the result of such an example, with love absent from God's character. Unfortunately, we can see that this is exactly how those who do not read the Bible imagine Him: a stern, cruel, bloodthirsty, beautiful, and intelligent God.

And some openly serve Satan, regarding him as the ruler of this world and the supreme governor of the human conscience.

In essence, Satan very much desires to hide from people the truth that God is Love. If he succeeds, people have no choice but to invent a god and ways of salvation for themselves, which in reality lead to worship of the prince of this world.

It is love that presents the true God to people in the true light. It is the union of mercy and justice that creates a correct image of our Creator. And Calvary reveals to me the attitude this love has toward sin and the sinner.

From the pages of Holy Scripture, God Himself tells me of His love for me. He desires me to understand it correctly. And blessed am I if I suddenly realize that God loves me, that He loves me in particular, and that He addresses these words of love specifically to me.

I will tell you honestly, friends: if I were given the opportunity to ask God something personally, and I knew that I would immediately receive an answer directly from His lips, I would ask whether He loves me. I know this and believe it, but it is so important for me to hear these words personally from Him. Even in Eternity, I plan to learn this when I can be near Him face to face. It is very important to me how God's love acts specifically toward me.

At present I comprehend everything by faith, having many confirmations of His love. I do not even doubt that God loves me. And I will not believe those who try to distort this understanding of Him. But I very much want to hear about it. Sometimes my friends tell me that Jesus loves me. At that moment, I want to know whether you love me. Can you tell me so yourself?

I am simply expressing these thoughts aloud, knowing that I am not the only one who thinks this way and has such expectations. Every person needs words of love—words in particular—because we were created as intelligent beings capable of understanding human speech, which conveys information about relationships.

At the same time, one wants these words to come from the heart, revealing the person's inner intentions toward me, rather than being merely a collection of fleeting phrases taken from thin air. The heart always hears what is being spoken about. And deeds follow afterward.

Strange as it may seem, there is now an enormous shortage of sincere, heartfelt words of love in the world. The world thirsts to hear them in families, at work, in every community, and even in the church. As a result, everything is reduced to deeds, which everyone interprets in his own way. People have even

coined the expression, 'They are only words . . .' And not without reason. For the carnal heart does not know how to love, and every attempt to express human love is doomed to earthbound relationships, which the thirsty heart does not accept.

This is why Jesus Himself offers us His very own Agape in these days, so that we may become living witnesses of His love to this world—so that where love is not expected and where it is impossible, it may kindle a light and plant its banner. No matter how repulsive a person who loves me may be to me, his genuine love exerts its influence upon me. Somewhere subconsciously, I understand that this person is genuine and that a relationship can be built with him; but he does not love sin, he is very boring, and there is nothing to talk about with him. If these words were spoken by some famous actor or well-known person, I think it would be more pleasant to me.

God has given me friends who sometimes, and at times very often, tell me of their love for me—simply and from a pure heart. This always brings such indescribable joy. And these are people who believe in God. I reflect on this and understand that in this very way the Lord Himself is telling me of His love and answering my question. In Eternity Jesus will tell me this openly, but now He desires to become the Witness of my hope, so that without seeing I may believe, and without hearing I may understand.

Through my friends, the Lord assures me of His love, establishes me in it, binds us with the strongest bonds, and keeps me from evil. The commandment that we love one another was not given by Jesus without purpose, but with meaning and expectation. He called it a commandment three times and did so before His death. It entered into the Covenant of His Blood, becoming an integral part of the law of life and the plan of salvation. Obedience to this commandment is not only necessary, but also mutually pleasant. It carries happiness, joy, and peace to the heart.

But everything begins with words. Until I have explained my actions aloud, everyone will interpret them in his own way. But

words of love form in a person a correct perception of my true attitude toward him.

It is not difficult for us to speak these words to our little children, especially when they are obedient. But when they grow up, for some reason we stop reminding them of this. Yet the need for love is implanted within them and remains, while the words are gone; and the children go into the world in search of love, finding anything at all except love.

Try this: choose someone close to you with whom you enjoy friendly fellowship, decide to love him throughout your life, and tell him of your love. Then watch what begins to happen in his heart. It will begin to come alive; his speech will change; he will begin watching you with special attention, start testing you, and be drawn toward you. In short, expect interesting problems.

Words of love have the power to create something new, to make a masterpiece out of nothing. They are spiritual and touch the invisible sphere of life, but they also touch the human mind and shape its consciousness. Every word of love is like a driven nail. It enters the human mind very firmly, penetrates the deepest parts of the soul, and remains there forever, leaving an indelible mark. But we are surrounded by people into whose heads this simple truth has never yet been 'driven,' and the place remains empty. They try to fill it with all kinds of rubbish and counterfeits, but these are not genuine.

People want to hear words of love, and these words must be given to them. This is an enormous shortage that must be made up.

Love knows how to do this and does it with joy. We should not be afraid to speak of love.

Homework 123

1. What new things did you learn for yourself from this lesson?
2. What place do words of love have in your life?
3. How did you imagine God before, and how do you imagine Him now?

4. How did you learn that God loves you?
5. Can you openly declare your love not only to those close to you, but also to those who are more distant? What restrains you?
6. Do you often hear declarations of love, and from whom, if it is not a secret?
7. Please read 1 John 4:10; Romans 5:8; Hosea 11:9; Lamentations 3:22-23; Hebrews 10:24; Proverbs 27:17; Jeremiah 31:3; and Romans 12:10 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 124. How Long Should We Love?

We are surrounded by people who have different characteristics, mentalities, character types, religious beliefs, and interests in life. From among them, we choose those with whom we desire closer relationships, business relationships with some, and no communication with others. Some arouse our sympathy, our soul is drawn to some, and we want to keep away from others.

Along this path of life, I come to know God and turn my attention to God's agape love, understanding that it must somehow become mine and manifest itself through my human nature. I accept God's plan for learning about and receiving this gift, and I begin to love. As I study the laws of agape, I immerse myself in its practical application and try to understand how fully it can be manifested through me.

I myself am a living person, with a heart capable of feeling and a mind capable of choosing. I am learning to make my choice correspond to God's principles.

I dared to love my neighbours, chose specific people for this, told God of my desire to love them, and realized that this decision gives me courage to ask for strength from above to manifest agape. I began to act according to this gift, asking for it and living in harmony with it. At the same time, however, I observe my beloved neighbours and analyse our relationships. And within my mind, the mechanism of time is triggered, telling me that the period of love for this person has ended: he is far away, I have no contact with him, or he is not moving with me toward a friendly relationship. It is easy to love those who return your love, but what should be done with those who continually test or hate you? How long should I love these people? How should I treat them from now on?

These questions are not simple, for I understand that any wrong answer will make me a hypocrite in my own eyes or in the eyes of my neighbours, some of whom are only waiting for

me to make a mistake so that they can point it out and accuse me.

Here it is very important to distinguish love as a principle from relationships as a choice. In love I have freedom from the power of sin, but this freedom does not make me a slave to love, deprived of the right to choose when, with whom, and how I will build relationships.

All the qualities of love are best found in Jesus—in His earthly life and in His attitude toward His neighbours. He is the living embodiment of perfect love.

Did He always love? Yes, it was a profound principle of His Divine nature. Did He love everyone? Yes, Jesus showed no partiality and respected every person's choice, every level of society, and every type of person. He came to serve the world in order to save it. Only perfect love is capable of this. Was our Lord friends with everyone? Here we see that He refused friendship to no one, but neither did He keep beside Himself those who did not want to be with Him or walk with Him. Moreover, He sometimes asked even His disciples whether they too wished to leave Him, giving them freedom in their decision. He did not try to bring back those who left Him, although in the parable of the prodigal son He made it clear that the Father waits for all His wandering sons and is the first to run toward those who decide to return. Did Christ continue to love those who left Him? Yes, He could not treat people otherwise. And how was this love for enemies and betrayers expressed? Perhaps He prayed for them. But it is also true that He suffered very deeply when He saw people turn away from the Source of life and light and depart into darkness.

All Holy Scripture speaks of how God suffers because of people who are perishing, especially those whom He has chosen. The Lord desires their repentance and return to Him.

But in choosing His disciples, Jesus was very selective. Even from among the twelve chosen ones, He sometimes singled out three to receive special revelations and blessings. Did He love the others at the same time? Yes, His love was constant, but

with His friends He shared special mysteries and revelations of His that we will never even learn. An example of this is that not all the apostles left us their accounts of Christ's life, and those we do have are rather brief, although profound in content.

The life of Jesus also teaches me to be selective in relationships while maintaining the deep principle of treating people rightly in love.

It is written in 1 Corinthians 13:8: 'Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.' This means that once love begins in my life, it never ends. It may not have existed in the past, but having become part of me, it has replaced what is temporary and human and has become a component of my life forever. God does not give me this gift for a short time or for a trial period. Love is given once and forever. Yet if my freedom of choice directs my soul toward other sources of influence and other ways of solving problems, iniquity can cause my love to grow cold in this world of sin.

With all the constancy of love as a power from God, we must also take into account the existence of the persuasive power of humanity's enemy, who tries to impose his views and values. And woe unto me if I begin listening to him.

For example, there is a science of the soul—psychology—which has discovered patterns of human behaviour and reactions under various influences upon the psyche. And these patterns work. But even the boldest professionals in this field can tell you that God's love has its own laws and power, which neutralize many psychological processes known to them and operate independently of their ideas. The realm of miracles does not belong to science, which requires sound laws and explanations. But a miracle takes place, and love resurrects what ought to be dead and never live again. And no one can explain what happened. What law of this world can give us an understanding of how Lazarus or Christ Himself was resurrected? The world is powerless to explain it. Or consider

an instantaneous healing from a disease or a harmful habit. To what rule does this correspond?

Love is a great mystery revealed by God to the seeking soul.

How long should we love? I think the correct answer is: 'As long as you intend to live.' Life with God, in the knowledge of Him and with faith in Jesus, is called Eternal life and is given by the Most High when one is born again of the Holy Ghost. It is bestowed forever, never to end. In this earthly life it is conditional, depending upon my choice; but when Eternity comes, it will become unconditional, for there will no longer be temptations to lose it. Now we are proving to the whole Universe that we are prepared to die rather than sin, and would rather suffer than lose God from our lives. On the new Earth there will be no tree of the knowledge of good and evil; even now we choose to keep far away from it.

As I study the laws of love, I learn the rules of Eternal life so that I may live by them and make decisions according to them at the present time.

If I have chosen to love someone and have declared it aloud, Heaven records this in its books and grants me strength for such an undertaking. It is expected of me that this love will never pass away, but that I will ask for strength and wisdom in applying it. Humanly speaking, I may become tired and weary, but God has promised to strengthen me and give me power. In close relationships and friendship I may choose, but in love I make a choice forever—and therein lies its strength.

Homework 124

1. What interesting things did you notice for yourself in this lesson?
2. What decision does God expect from you concerning those close to you?
3. How do you treat those who do not accept you? If you love them, how is this manifested?
4. How does love as a principle differ from love expressed through relationships?

5. Does Jesus have 'favourites'? How long should we love those who do not love us? Is there a time limit?
6. What does Heaven expect from me when I have expressed aloud my desire to love people?
7. Please read Matthew 5:44-46; 18:21-22; Luke 15:11-24; 22:48; John 13:1; 6:66-68; Mark 14:27-28; and 9:2-3 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 125. He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not, He Loves Me . . .

Let us imagine a God Who loves us today, but the next day, when we sin, no longer loves us and expresses His disgust toward us. Then we repent and begin behaving well, and He loves us again. This is exactly how I imagined God, because I myself was like this. Such an attitude is determined by my human conditionality and my heightened sense of justice.

Very many people live with this understanding. Where does it come from? It begins in early childhood, when parents make it clear that they love you only when you are obedient and well behaved, but if you break the established rules, you should expect retribution and righteous anger. When I become a teenager, everything within me rebels, and I am prepared deliberately to do everything badly in order to express my protest against the violence done to my conscience, which thirsts for unconditional love and freedom.

I have already been taught to live this way. Everything around me is conditional. If you do something good for me, then perhaps I will do something kind for you, or I will think about how to respond. When I start my own family, I bring into it all the conditions I was taught from childhood. And when searching for a candidate to be my life companion, I go to a daisy for advice. As trite as it may sound, it is the daisy that tells me the truth about the person. Trembling, I begin plucking its petals and listening to its answer: 'He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me, he loves me not, he loves me!!!' What happiness!!! I am going to propose. But if the answer is 'He loves me not,' we will have to part, for there is no point in joining your life to someone who does not need you. Does this sound foolish? Yet for some reason this foolishness has become part of our culture. I am prepared to believe any madness if everyone acts that way. Groupthink gives me the right to a normal life in society. The fact that I am unhappy is not so

terrible; the main thing is not to stand out from the crowd and to be part of the team.

With this understanding, I begin to think about God, form His image in my mind, and serve Him. I defend my god against different interpretations and worship him in my soul according to common tradition. Even when I learn that He is Love, I understand this in my own conditional way. I simply cannot comprehend what it means to love unconditionally. How can this be? It cannot exist, because I have never encountered it.

But I try to understand it. I take the Bible and begin reading from the very beginning: the Flood, sacrifices, judgments, plagues, blood, the expulsion of nations, slavery. And where is love in all this? I proceed to read the New Testament, where everything is different. A Man was born Who did good to everyone and spoke the truth, and for this He was killed. I try to understand, but I cannot.

Then the Spirit of God begins revealing to me the truth that God is Love. He did not once become Love, nor did He later turn into Love; He always is Love.

What does this mean? Does He always love me? Even when I make a mistake or sin? Even when I am bad? I begin asking: 'What if I am like this? What if something here is wrong? Does He love me even when I rebel against Him? And what if . . .?' Each time, I hear words of love toward me in response. How interesting! It is difficult to believe. It cannot be. It must be earned. What if I become weary? What if I stumble? What if I destroy something? Does He still love me?

What kind of love is this? Yet there is something to it. Many interesting things can be built upon such a relationship without being afraid to be oneself.

What if I am not dressed properly? What if I looked at something I should not have seen? He still loves me. But at the same time, He also punishes me. How can this be? Does He punish with love? And still not reject me? And continue loving me? Oh, with such an attitude I can learn much and not fear punishment. For if I have justly deserved it, I will have to

endure it—but from a loving hand, for He will not maim or kill me or cease to love me.

How interesting and unusual!

What a wonderful God! May I be Your friend? Yes? Do You truly want this? To be friends with a sinner like me? I only asked, thinking that You would laugh at my foolishness and boldness and refuse, but You consent without any conditions? I do not understand anything. Is this really possible? And are You always like this? I thought You loved only good boys and girls, and I tried to become one of them so that I could earn something and be accepted. I cannot do it by myself? But I will prove that I know how to do good. I do not know how? Are You sure? I agree. Please forgive me.

This dialogue was also part of my learning. It was difficult for me to understand with my mind, but I accepted it with my heart.

It is God's unconditional love that gives me hope for something better and for changes in my life. When I begin to understand the greatness and stability of this love, I begin building our relationship upon this foundation. This foundation will withstand everything. I want to have the same feelings and the same foundation in my life. I also greatly desire to become like my God and to love unconditionally, as He does, always. And I learn that this is available to me as well. God's will is even expressed in this. God dreams of it and has even given a special commandment that we should love one another—not merely love for some reason, but always love unconditionally, as He loved us. Here I understand that I must take the first step toward my neighbour and remain this way always. The Lord will bless this decision, give strength and love for it, and teach me to live this way. But who will believe that I love like this? Humanly speaking, it is impossible because it is not within us, and I will be regarded as a liar. But Jesus assures me that He Himself, abiding in me, will love my neighbours together with me and will place this spirit in my heart. He will show how it looks in my life. And it is possible. This is His plan and dream for me, and it is being fulfilled.

Then every attempt to divine my feelings will sound like this: 'He loves me, he loves me, he loves me . . .' I become constant in love, like Jesus. This is God's plan for the last days. He counsels me to buy it, recommends that I possess it, and leads me along this path toward this goal. He warns of mortal danger for those who do not possess it. He loves me and teaches me likewise to love my neighbours. And it works.

I experience attacks, but Jesus helps me understand that He endured the same thing, and this strengthens me. I can read about every accusation directed against me in the life of Christ. In my love, I am simply experiencing what He experienced while living among people. This is a wonderful example and support for me. There is no need to devise something new or invent something unique. Love always exists and is suitable for every time and situation.

But now it is mine, and I must do something with it. I begin to live in it. I begin to speak about it. And I see miracles in my heart. I see changes in my thinking.

I catch myself thinking that in my love I am planning the happiness of other people. Oh, if only they understood this, how easy it would be for us to be friends and communicate, loving one another simply and from a pure heart. But they regard me as an actor. I look into my heart, and the love is there; it has not disappeared, yet they do not believe me. After all, it is impossible. Why judge me by themselves? I am who I am, and God is my Teacher. If He has given this to me, how can I say it is not there? Then He will not understand me, and there will certainly be problems. I would rather love; it is more peaceful and joyful that way.

I love. And there is something to it. And this 'something' is very beautiful.

I suggest that you too, friends, try it. It will work.

Homework 125

1. It is interesting to consider: how do you imagine God? Does He love you?

2. Have you ever been caught on the hook of groupthink?
3. What kind of worship and service does God expect from you, and how long should you continue in it?
4. Why do we sinful human beings need unconditional love toward us?
5. Do you know God's plan for you in the last days? What role does love play in this plan?
6. What should you do if people do not believe in the sincerity of your love?
7. Please read Exodus 20:4-5; 34:6-7; John 15:17-21; 16:1-3; 17:23, 26; 4:23-24; 1 Corinthians 13:4, 7; Galatians 3:20; 1 John 4:13, 15-16; 3:3, 23; 1 Corinthians 2:10-11; and Jeremiah 31:33-34 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 126. Made with Love

And now we have moved on to action. At last the theory is over, and practice begins. What is most interesting is that any deed in itself is neutral. And then the question arises: 'What does "the work of God" mean?'

Jesus once gave the answer to this question. We read in John 6:29: 'Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.'

We have been given an answer for all time. I think it will perplex very many lovers of works if they do not understand what is being spoken of here.

But the Bible tells us about another work that may confidently be called God's. We read in Exodus 32:16: 'And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables.'

But what, in fact, is the work of God? How can I determine whether I am doing something for God or merely going about ordinary affairs while first ascribing Christian meaning to them? And it is still more interesting to understand whether good and generally approved deeds are the deeds that God considers His own.

I can share my experience and opinion with you, without claiming anything by doing so. Yet for me this means a great deal and helps me tremendously to 'stay on track,' because I rejoice in what fills every deed of mine.

One day I saw a jar of jam with the words 'Made with Love' written on it. It was not particularly different from other jars, except that it was decorated with pink flowers intermingled with pink hearts. The list of ingredients showed that the jam was as standard as its competitors' and had been produced on a soulless assembly line according to the company's recipe. I did not call the manufacturer to clarify precisely what kind of love it had been made with, but the inscription made me wonder:

what kind of love is present in my deeds? And how can I put it into them?

And this question turned all my thoughts upside down. I simply did not know what it was and could not understand what it looked like.

Time passed, and I understood that I truly had no love at all. And if I do not possess this gift, how can I put it into anything? And what did all my good deeds look like without love in my heart?

And I realized that there are generally accepted deeds that may be called good and even God's. For example, visiting a sick person, helping an elderly person, feeding a homeless person, giving something to an orphanage, making a donation to a poor person, giving someone a spiritual book, and much more. Yet my heart is not inclined toward this. And I do not want to be a hypocrite. You begin doing it, but you want to run away. Yet after doing it, you receive a blessing from having taken part in something great, although without any results.

And is this a loving person speaking to you? Do not run away; I have not finished yet.

Then one day I found myself in an interesting situation. A client paid me an advance and asked me to perform certain kinds of work, which I did. Then he asked me, at my own expense, to do something else that we had not agreed upon. This angered me. But the client said that he would not pay me anything more. As a result, I understood that the situation was not in my favour, and I did not know what to do. I began to pray and seek counsel from friends at church. The Lord resolved this problem in an unusual way. And so, while I was finishing all the remaining details and grumbling in my heart about the blatant injustice, the thought came to me: 'Why not do this work with love?' There was no way out, and I decided to try. I took a shovel and began to do my work with love. Then something interesting happened within me. I suddenly understood how beautifully such matters can be resolved with love. I began working joyfully and praising God. I began to sing and to speak words of

love with every movement. This was something new and amazing for me. A couple of years later, I visited that place, and I was surprised that I remembered and saw in that work my deeds of love. It gave me such joy to look at what I had done with love. It positively shone in my eyes. After this experience, I did all kinds of things with love many times, and each time I experienced special blessings.

It is most interesting to have such an experience in communication with people. We may simply be talking, but at some point, before or during the conversation, I suddenly decide to speak with love, and everything in my perception changes at once. I see before me not merely a person with whom I am speaking, but someone to whom I can also give love through my words and deeds, even without speaking about it. And afterward it is so pleasant to remember these conversations. I do not always remember what we spoke about, but I remember well what I felt at the time.

And any deed of mine can, according to my choice, be done with love or with simple skill. And it is very easy to put love into it when love is present and when there is much of it.

But what I see need not necessarily be noticed by others. At times, someone sees in my deeds of love an embodiment of evil or a waste of time. It is very difficult for me to explain such an understanding on people's part, and this is sometimes discouraging, but Jesus shows me His wounds and lets me know that things will become even more interesting ahead. And I keep going and put all my love into what I do, trying to treat people and every kind of work in precisely this way. And all these little deeds do not look so bad in my eyes, because they remind me of the love that was put into them.

Even when I write these lessons, I also do it with love, hoping that they will benefit someone or help someone sort out his thoughts and feelings, so that everything may be brought into harmony with God.

And I know for certain that in the Lord's eyes, what matters and has value is not so much how great the deeds I perform are, but

how much love I put into them. This is what interests Him. And God accepts every deed of love that I perform as something right and very precious.

Of course, we should not pervert what must originally be pure and in harmony with God's will. If I, as a married person, decide to have a relationship outside my marriage and put all my love into it, thereby breaking the seventh commandment, this will be called a sin worthy of death and will arouse disgust in the sight of Heaven. Nor should anyone steal, even with the best motive—for example, the desire to distribute what was stolen to the poor with love. That is not what we are speaking about. We should not ennoble sin or pervert the meaning of love.

Love lives in harmony with God's law. And I imagine how much love God put into His law when He proclaimed it to people and then lovingly wrote it upon the tables. This is truly the finest reflection of the character of God, Who loves the sinner and hates sin.

It is written: 'Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God' (1 Corinthians 10:31). And this must be done with love in my life.

And all this is my personal experience, which gladdens my heart. But I told very few people about it because I thought it was one of my peculiarities. Recently, however, I shared it with friends simply as one of my bright experiences. Later, one sister shared with me the joy and blessings that filled her life when she began putting all her love into all her little deeds. And it is so pleasant to hear this. Therefore, I hope to learn that such an approach to life will change more than my life alone. And yet it is so simple. One right decision, and everything becomes right and bears the imprint of my love and the approval of Heaven.

I think this experience will help many lovers of works.

Homework 126

1. Did this lesson reveal anything new to you?
2. Would you like to try this in your life?

3. How do you imagine love expressed in deeds?
4. In your opinion, what deed is the work of God?
5. Does everything done with love reflect true love?
6. How do you understand the practical application of the subject of this lesson?
7. Must other people properly appreciate your love?
8. Please read Matthew 16:27; Deuteronomy 1:17; Romans 8:28; 12:9-10, 14, 21; Revelation 2:19; 1 Corinthians 10:31; 3:13; Galatians 6:4; and Ephesians 6:8 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 127. Become a Friend

Friendship is a special heartfelt attachment between two or more people. It is a relationship of trust between people, based on unselfishness. It is a personal emotional and spiritual fellowship. It is mutual affection, respect, and love in a relationship.

Friendship may include common interests, or it may have none. In that case, the choice and taste of the other person are taken into account.

Friendship is a very familiar concept concerning personal relationships among people.

Many stereotypes imposed by society have created a certain image of friendship in the mind. They dictate rules for it and shape their own tendencies and laws.

There will be as many opinions about friendship as there are people, because each person has his own personal experience of such relationships and, on the basis of it, forms his own idea of who is a friend, who cannot be one, who fits this definition, and who has no chance at all.

Friendship, like love, may be either one-sided or mutual.

In any case, however friendship may be characterized, it is generally acknowledged to be something positive and necessary in communication between people.

But the distinctive feature of my personal friendship is that I will be a friend to the extent that I understand and see such relationships in my life. If I am convinced that friendship is confined within certain boundaries, I will not be able to cross those boundaries. And I can broaden my understanding of friendship only by studying this question and accepting truths that are new to me and that convince me they can be embodied in my life.

If I characterize friendship as a conditional relationship within the limits of certain actions, I will regard going beyond those

limits as insolence or betrayal and will subsequently break off such a connection.

Conditionality in friendship is probably the most destructive mechanism, ready to destroy everything when it is set in motion.

I know very many such examples from my own life and from the stories of those close to me. I see how often this happens. And as a result, a person remains alone with his memories of how many friends he once had. But were they truly friends?

Loneliness comes, and longing with it. And memories of my former life among friends brighten my grey weekdays. I leaf through photographs and grieve over the past. But what changed? Why did I lose everyone? I changed, and I can do nothing about the fact that my situation has become so depressing. Yet I cannot allow myself to destroy my idea of friendship, because then I will cease to be myself.

And when your close friend dies, a part of you dies with him. And I understand that a tragedy has occurred in my life that I cannot change. The pain of the soul pierces my heart, and I have to go on living with it.

But life continues, and it is necessary to do something, build something, and learn something.

I have often attended funerals, and I am always surprised by how many people come to the service to accompany someone close to them on his final journey, to speak kind words beside a closed coffin, and to remember all the good things that connected them with that person. Every time, I wonder why, while he was alive, so few people spoke these kind words to him, visited him, or spent time with him. Then he could have appreciated it all, and these words would not have been spoken into the air. But during his lifetime, there is no time to spend on those who do not mean very much to you.

And each of us has to live with such a store of knowledge and ideas, without understanding how to break free from these bonds. We have mastered many sciences, learned how to earn

and spend money, become able to distinguish evil from good, and discovered much for ourselves, but in the end we have remained alone with our knowledge. And if exceptions do exist, they are determined by certain circumstances and rules that I am still willing to observe.

The world lies in sin, and sin has destroyed every good thing God gave us. And in order somehow to survive and preserve a more or less joyful life for myself, I begin inventing things for myself or seeking communities based on common interests.

When I first read the book of Ecclesiastes, I was amazed by the wisdom and insight of its author. Then I decided that this man was suffering from severe depression. Only later did I understand that Solomon was giving instruction to people who would wish to experience what he himself had already experienced. The wise man summed up his life and called it vanity, or emptiness of emptiness. Such is the conclusion of the richest man. It is worth heeding.

And so, understanding all these lessons and problems, I decided to find something better and opposite to them. I wanted to obtain it now, while I am alive, while I am able to think and analyse.

I began asking God for an understanding of true love, happiness, and friendship. The conditional ideas of my mind did not satisfy me; I wanted stability in these matters. I desired to discover what I did not understand. After all, I had no idea of the true picture of what our relationships should be. I began earnestly asking God to reveal this mystery of love and friendship, and He began to answer and teach me.

Friendship, it turns out, is a whole science in which its own laws and interconnections operate. It is very closely connected with love and truth. It is impossible to speak of friendship apart from love or from Christ and to present it as something independent and whole. That would be like cutting off a head and saying that it is the person, that it is the centre of influence and does not depend on the rest of the body.

Jesus is the Author and Architect of every right relationship. If Christ is not in it, it will be wrong from the outset, because where Jesus is absent, sin lives, and sin destroys or presents a counterfeit.

If I say that true friendship does not exist and must be conditional, I will present God in a false light, restricted by subjective boundaries. And if I consider something impossible, I will never want to do it, not even wishing to try.

For example, I consider it physically impossible for me to overturn a loaded truck, and I will not even try to do it. The same thing may happen in my understanding of friendship. For instance, when I hear that friendship between a man and a woman is impossible and believe it, I do not even attempt to do anything in that direction. Why should I? It is impossible. But when I study the Bible, I do not find such an understanding there. This means that someone succeeded in convincing me of something that has no biblical foundation.

I know of many experiences in which this is exactly what happened, when the entire friendship ended in the breaking of the seventh commandment. But this does not mean that friendship is impossible; it means only one thing: concepts and knowledge of friendship have either been perverted or simply do not exist. In that case, the flesh writes its own rules, and I begin to live by them. Then it certainly becomes impossible to fulfil God's will while living by the laws of sin.

The enemy of souls has a rule. He perverts everything God has said and presents it in a distorted light. He has distorted the concept of love, turning it into sexual promiscuity; he has substituted the concept of friendship, making it conditional and sentimental; he has perverted the concept of happiness, replacing it with consumerism. But God has Love, Happiness, and Friendship, and He desires to teach me these things and, having taught me, to teach me to share them.

Homework 127

1. What new things did you learn from this lesson?
2. Is friendship a normal part of life for you?

3. Do you understand the difference between conditional and unconditional friendship?
4. Give a couple of examples of friendship described in the Bible.
5. Do you have friends whom you love at all times?
6. Do you have friends who love you at all times?
7. Are you interested in learning the secrets of true friendship?
8. Please read Proverbs 17:17; 18:24; Colossians 3:15; 1 Peter 3:8; and 2 Timothy 3:2 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 128. Friendliness

There was a time in my life when I read the verse in Proverbs 18:24: 'A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly: and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother,' and tried to understand what it meant to be friendly.

I knew how to be cheerful and funny, how to perform, and how to achieve certain personal goals. I could even quickly become acquainted with people and gain their trust, and then lose it all because of my ambitious character or religious intolerance. As a result, many of my friends kept their distance from me and tactfully avoided communicating with me.

I read many books about friendship and saw it portrayed in films. And I always dreamed of having many true friends who would be with me throughout my life.

But something was always wrong. For some I was too young, for others too old; some had no time for me, while others simply found me uninteresting. I saw all this, so I did not wish to impose myself upon those who did not need me.

The residents of western Germany have a distinctive trait. They build their lives and circle of communication within their families. And they let no one into this circle. Each person lives independently, in his own little world, without interfering with the lives of others or taking an interest in them. The influence of such an attitude is noticeable even in the church.

At one period in my Christian life, I became acquainted with people who, in my view, were doing something for God, and I wanted to be friends with them. I began supporting them, communicating with them, and taking part in their missionary work. We spent time talking about how much sin surrounded us and how repulsive it was to God. And our group was quite united within the bounds of our ministry. But somewhere in my soul, I understood that it was conditional. As long as you are with us, you are our friend. At one point, I decided not to support this movement with my funds, and as a result a breach occurred in our relationship, after which it ended completely.

And I understood that I had simply been left alone in this large Christian world. Those who knew me considered me divisive and were afraid to be friends with me. And I did not know where to look for new friends.

But I had read that God has a faithful remnant, that there are those who live in obedience and love one another. This was very interesting. I understood that friendship ought to exist, but I did not see it around me. What benefit was it to me that some people were friends with one another but had no interest in me? All of this was foreign to me. By that time, I had already been in the church for fourteen years and had come to complete loneliness. And I did not know where to go next. I understood the truth and understood the teaching, but I did not see in my life the beauty of relationships about which so much is written.

And during this crisis in relationships, in 2009, I began asking God for love. He answered my request and began teaching me this science. It was as though I had been born anew. It was so interesting to compare my knowledge with these new feelings and to see absolute harmony and beauty in them. I discovered a new Friend—Jesus—with Whom I began spending much time in fellowship, and He began teaching and changing me. I longed so much to have many friends with whom I could share my new discoveries, but I did not know where to find them.

Then, through some people, the Lord gave me a disc containing lectures by medical missionaries on the subject 'The Beautiful Way.' I listened and could not believe my ears. I had read much about how God has people who live in the light of His reforms and at the same time love one another, and I wanted so much to see such a people. And here, it turned out, were such people. But they were far away, in Ukraine, and I decided to go there. I learned that they would hold a camp meeting in 2010, registered, and began preparing. I had a goal: to reach the 'Our Home' sanatorium and see true Christians with my own eyes. I began gathering information about these people. I was warned that they were very closed and let no one into their community.

But I thought that even if they did not accept me, I would at least look at them.

I invited a friend to come with me, and we set out. The bus dropped us off at the turn toward Novi Obikhody and drove away. At that time, two sisters from the sanatorium arrived and were supposed to receive something from someone, but they did not receive it. They were upset and did not even look at us. The first impression was interesting. Then a car came for us, and I arrived at a special place where I began observing everything very carefully. I started meeting people, and my love was with me, but I did not yet know how it worked, nor did I try to apply it in all its strength; indeed, I did not know how. It was already doing its work, but I was not yet aware of it. As a result, I became acquainted with everyone I possibly could and studied this entire structure. I was very happy to have come to such a wonderful place.

Missionaries from Russia and throughout Ukraine came to the camp meeting and shared their experiences and needs. This also made an impression on my mind. I received great inspiration from that journey.

The Lord gave me many new friends, and I rejoiced that such changes had taken place in my life.

And the 'closed community' opened itself to me, and I became one of them, which was a joy to realize.

But love draws me toward new discoveries, and I decided to go further.

The Lord revealed a new page in my life, and I began reflecting on friendship, its depth, its influence, what it is for me, and what it means to be friendly. And the love of Jesus gave me all these qualities; only certain conditions were needed for them to unfold before my eyes.

Limitless possibilities opened before me, and the further I advanced in this science of love and friendship, the more interesting it became to try something and receive amazing results.

At one point, I decided to become a friend to all my friends and always to remain one. But I wanted to conduct an experiment, which I will describe in the next lesson. This experiment helped me discover and understand the laws of friendship and see the beauty of this phenomenon.

The Lord began revealing to me the depth of friendly relationships, and I saw how closely love and friendship must be intertwined in the Christian family of the last days. This is so important.

If my love finds a response in the heart of my brother or sister but does not lead us to friendship, then this is not entirely right, and something in such a relationship needs to be reconsidered.

If our friendship is conditional, sooner or later it will end. For conditionality has no foundation; it has only boundaries that should not be violated.

Unconditional friendship is a decision of my heart that depends on no one, but only on how ready I am to be such a friend. Yet I have no strength to love and befriend unconditionally; Christ has this strength, and therefore I must always ask for it. And the Lord gives, and gives far more than I can imagine.

The gift of friendliness includes the influence of the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit. Without Him, it is simply impossible to convince a stranger that you are his friend who loves at all times. But my friendship toward those who are my family in the faith is part of God's plan, and therefore I can always count on help from above in this matter.

Jesus is the Best Friend. And He desires to see His image in me as I interact with my neighbours. I will not disappoint Him; I will love and become a friend—and, if possible, the best one.

Homework 128

1. What special thought did you like in this lesson?
2. What prevents people from being friends?
3. Do you believe in true friendship? What is it in your understanding?
4. What role do you think Jesus plays in our relationships?

5. What is necessary for unconditional friendship, and how can it be obtained?
6. What is God's plan for you in the light of this lesson?
7. Please read John 15:14; 17:21; Daniel 9:23; 1 Samuel 19:1, 4; Zephaniah 2:3; 1 John 3:16; and Acts 2:45-47 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 129. Friendship

Friendship has always seemed to me something very right and good. I did not have the courage simply to call someone a friend, because I understood that an appropriate relationship must stand behind this name.

For example, a companion, acquaintance, associate, colleague, neighbour, or fellow worker—all these are good people, but they cannot be called friends. I may communicate with some of them more often and have a closer relationship with them than with friends, but they do not have the status that signifies that a person occupies a special place in the heart.

When I attended the camp meeting in Novi Obikhody in 2010, I noticed that during meals I sat at a table with the same people. When we eat, we have a very good opportunity to become better acquainted and talk about any subject. During my first trip, I had no plans for this gathering, but I noticed that the atmosphere of the meeting and the presence of the Holy Spirit disposed our hearts and opened them to closer relationships. Because of this, it was possible very quickly to become close to strangers and have relationships of trust. And the common table made us like family simply because for an hour and a half each day we had the opportunity to talk about various subjects. It was such a blessing! This interaction united us into a kind of group of like-minded people, and we became friends because it was pleasing to God. He took part in our fellowship. I registered for the following year, planning to visit this place again.

When I returned home, I began reflecting on what I had seen and experienced. I liked such gatherings very much and decided to conduct an experiment in purposefully gaining friends. I knew that next time I would once again sit at a table with strangers, and I intended to become their friend. I understood that this should not be merely a name, but a decision of my heart, my choice, and a definite status that would open my heart to a special relationship with those whose friend I had decided to become, forever joining my life to theirs in this capacity. In my understanding, friendship is something

unconditional and stable, and it was precisely upon this understanding that I decided to build relationships with those whom the Lord would send to my dining table.

And I began praying for these people. A struggle began in my heart. How many fears and doubts came crashing down upon me! What if; suppose; why is this necessary? Live peacefully! These and other thoughts crowded very agreeably into my mind. But I decided to move toward the goal and see what would happen. I asked for love and friendship toward people whom I did not yet know and could not even picture.

Then the day came. I arrived again at the 'Our Home' sanatorium, registered for table thirteen, and decided to press on to victory. I came to the meal. My future friends were sitting there. I greeted them and began my speech: 'You are the answer to my prayer for you. I have decided to become your friend, and you have no chance of escaping this fate. This is my decision, and it is firm and unchanging. It does not depend on what you decide . . .' And I continued speaking in the same spirit and direction.

If only you could have seen those faces. They displayed a mixture of surprise, outrage, indignation, bewilderment, and alienation. I understood that I had begun another foolish venture, but there was no turning back. It is not my way to change my decisions and retreat. During those days, I heard and saw all kinds of things directed at me. The Lord sent me not merely soft and fluffy friends, but the prickliest hedgehogs in the world. It is true that one sister, Veronika, shone like a sunflower from the very beginning of our acquaintance and listened to me with pleasure. Yet she remained silent. And thus began a seminar on friendship. During every meal, I spoke about how wonderful it was to have such a friend and how our relationship would bring us joy throughout Eternity. In response, I heard smirks, requests to be quiet, and declarations that I would not succeed. But every evening I prayed and asked Jesus to give me these people forever and to open their hearts to our friendship. A severe struggle was taking place in my soul, but I decided to go all the way and not surrender my

position. One day passed, then a second and a third. I preached about love and friendship, but nothing changed. I felt like a strange person, but I continued giving myself. Then, on the fourth day, my friends from the sanatorium invited me to have lunch with them. It was as though I had entered another world: smiles, joy, friendliness, and pleasant fellowship. But in the evening, I went to war at my own table to continue the battle. I sat down, ate, remained silent, and thought about how to advance further. Then they asked me, 'Where did you disappear to, our friend? We were lonely without you.' And then something unusual began. My friends began opening up one after another. It was as though a dam had burst. Smiles appeared on their faces, and we began to become better acquainted. And I began occupying the conquered territories and planting upon them the banner of love and friendship, because I knew that we would soon part, but the banners of the victor would leave together with my friends.

How wonderful it was to experience the birth of new close relationships, to enter open hearts, and to bring these people the joy of my love and friendship while respecting their freedom and taking their wishes into account. I had never imagined that such a thing was possible or how many blessings this friendship would bring to us all.

I will say that to this day we remain close friends, that this relationship has not fallen apart but remains strong. My heart is set on constancy in this matter, although it is not always possible to remain in continuous communication, and we do not meet often. But Eternity lies ahead of us, where we will continue our friendship and come to know one another still more closely, and nothing will ever separate us again.

It was also interesting that before this trip, the sister Veronika, who had smiled at me from the very beginning, had prayed that the Lord would send friends to her husband, Oleg. And the Lord answered our prayers and brought us together.

This experience opened a new page in my life and revealed that interesting path to people's hearts of which I had not known before. Now I understand perfectly what it means 'to shew

oneself friendly' and how many friends appear in my life. And every time I begin this war to capture new people, it always ends with new friends in my heart. It is so interesting! It is so wonderful! And these people will bring me joy throughout Eternity. For there, the eternal seal of God's love will already rest upon our relationships. It is already present here, but freedom gives a friend the right unilaterally to destroy this connection. In Eternity, however, this will not happen.

Being a friend is God's plan for each of us. And it is worth learning. For unconditional love toward people brings me to understand that our relationships must be made lawful and given lifelong status. And friendship makes them right forever.

Friendship in Christ differs from worldly friendship, although it has much in common with it and is even called by the same name. But it is better and stronger because it is unconditional and filled with love and deep heartfelt affection. It does not appear by itself. It must be earnestly requested, studied, and tenderly preserved in the heart, because unconditionality requires no small amount of spiritual effort and victories over oneself.

And the life of Jesus is the very best example of friendship. He is the best and faithful Friend, Who knows how to love and be a friend without any conditions. And the Lord desires to teach each of us this.

Homework 129

1. What new things did you learn from this lesson?
2. What is friendship in your understanding? Why is it needed?
3. Should we pray to Jesus and ask Him for friends?
4. Do you have any experience of 'capturing friends'? Please share it.
5. What is necessary in order to learn how to be a friend?
6. How does worldly friendship differ from friendship in Christ?
7. Please read John 15:5; Proverbs 18:24; 19:11; 22:11; 25:17; 27:10, 17; Ecclesiastes 3:1, 6, 8; and 4:9-10 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 130. A Friend

If you ask any person who a friend is and how he imagines one, each will have his own personal understanding, which will differ in part from mine and yours. And if you ask people to think very carefully and describe more fully the character of the friend they desire, absolutely everyone will describe the character of Jesus, even if they know nothing about Him. Try it: ask those close to you about this, and you will become convinced that people need a loving God Who understands their needs. The world is weary of conditions and deception. We live in a great theatre where everyone plays his own role, while God has been portrayed as One Who has no concern for my needs and requires only obedience, appeasement, and worship.

Of course, there will also be those whose concept of friendship reflects the measure of their corruption, who imagine a friend as a kindly millionaire uncle whose only dream is to support you and your entire family while caring solely for your needs.

But who is a friend? What should he be like? And what is friendship?

If I do not have a correct understanding of this, I will invent one for myself on the basis of what I have heard in songs, seen in films, and read in books. And this image will satisfy my selfish impulses until I meet a true friend who destroys all my stereotypes, yet, while remaining himself, simply loves me and accepts me as I am.

But what is a true friend really like? Have you thought about this? After all, each of us has had or still has special emotional attachments to certain people. Sometimes this bond comes from our childhood or school years. Someone found a friend in church, while someone else has one among his neighbours or within his family. And there are those who have no friends; or if they do, death takes them away, leaving the person completely alone.

Friend, where are you?! You must exist! Where can I find you?!

And someone has reached the point where he no longer needs anyone, and even the truest friend will weary his soul and irritate his sin-corrupted mind.

But what is a true friend like? Why must he be genuine?

I often hear such appeals: 'Be a friend and do this.' 'If you are a friend, act this way.' 'Friends do not behave like that.' 'Friend, buy this item from me.' 'Good morning, friends.'

We are all accustomed to such forms of address. Even in our school, I call you nothing other than friends. But I can say for myself that I do this consciously and truly regard you as such, understanding what I am saying, although I will never come to know many of you personally. This form of address is customary in our society. And people do not think about what it means.

On social media, I have always been disconcerted by the 'Add Friend' or 'Friends' feature, under which anyone who adds me to his contacts may appear. I simply do not know many of them. And when strangers from Africa who do not even speak my language send friend requests, it becomes altogether amusing. I cannot change this, however, and I have already become accustomed to it.

Society has shaped its idea of a person's friend and spread it across the sandwich of my understanding. Friends surround me everywhere, many of whom I do not even know personally.

And when a person hears of my desire to become his friend, he simply does not understand where to add me so that I will be stored somewhere and not interfere with his life. For the mind is accustomed to sending everyone to the archive and rejoicing in bare statistics. Better still is to open one's own YouTube channel, gather subscribers, call them friends, and delight them with one's videos.

I do not want to boast and wish to remain humble, but I will nevertheless say that I consider myself a true friend to those to whom I declare my attitude. I do not want merely to define this phrase, but to show by my personal example what it means to be genuine.

I understand that if I have made a promise or given my word of friendship, I must keep it. Even if my feelings say otherwise, I have already placed this status in my heart as the principle of my attitude toward people. I will not tell every person that I am his friend, but if I have said it, I already bear responsibility for it. I understand what I am doing.

Being a friend is not so difficult. It means that I respect a person's freedom of choice and am ready to participate in his life in whatever way and as closely as he allows me. I respect his opinion, take his interests and family situation into account, understand his needs, and look for opportunities to take part in his life. I will be able to become a close friend only when the friend himself makes me one, but we will discuss this in another lesson.

To be a true friend means to be oneself while loving the one whom I have chosen as a friend. No one can force or beg me to become someone's friend. I too am free in my choice and know how to make it. For these are not merely decisions, but also my responsibility before my friend and before God. For I always ask Him to bless every friendship I have with people, so that it may also bear the seal of God's approval.

I will say at once that I have different kinds of friends. There are even some who hate me and wish me harm. But I cannot reject them, because I remember the good days when we were friends and understood one another. This sometimes makes life difficult, but I cannot change my attitude. I would rather err on the side of love and friendship than remove a person from my life. I am not saying that this is right or that everyone should act this way, but it is my decision, and it is easier for me to live this way. And I can be honest with everyone, even when I do not have enough time and strength for all.

A friend occupies a special place in my heart, a place not limited by the number of shelves or by capacity, into which I place the living souls of those people whom I have chosen as friends, so that I may be genuine toward them throughout my life. And I plan to remain so throughout Eternity. I cannot imagine friendship with conditions. What would that be? It is

not friendship, but merely a business relationship that ends when the business ends. For me, friendship is something eternal.

Conditions can exist only within relationships. For example, I am a married man and have a wife. And I have a new friend—a sister in Jesus. I begin being her friend, but within the bounds of my status, remaining faithful to my wife even in my thoughts. This is my condition, which I have no intention of violating. But if this sister permits herself something more, thereby sins before God in her heart, and wants to cross this boundary, then I will have to explain to her in detail that I fear God, do not approve of such an approach, and will not commit such evil, while still remaining her friend.

Feelings will pass, but the principle will remain.

Very often, my friendship toward people helps support them when everything in their lives is collapsing, but they understand that I am the only one who has not abandoned them, and they open up to me. And I can help with whatever is within my power. This happens often.

There are also friends who simply do not need me. I see this, and it is painful, but I decide to continue loving them and to wait for the moment when perhaps something in their attitude will change.

I took the example of friendship from Jesus' attitude toward me and decided to treat my friends in the same way. I rejoice in the constancy with which He loves me. He understands, and I learn from Him. I want His image to be reflected in me and consider this right. Friendship is forever.

Homework 130

1. What new things did you learn in this lesson?
2. Describe the characteristic traits of a true friend.
3. In your view, what prevents you from becoming a true friend?
4. What is important to take into account in relationships with others?

5. Why is it important to be yourself in friendship?
6. What can we learn from Jesus?
7. Do you have true friends?
8. Please read Proverbs 17:17; Psalm 91:14–16; 46:1; 62:11; Luke 15:20; 1 John 4:10–11; Psalm 126:5–6; and Isaiah 54:2–3 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 131. A Close Friend

As I study the laws of friendship and receive this gift from God, I understand that ultimately everything comes down to the fact that I must make a choice and do something in this regard. If I have withdrawn from the whole world and do nothing, then nothing will happen. The talent must be put to work and produce the influence placed within it.

When I invest my strength and my heart in my friends, I do not know what I will receive in return, but the law of sowing and reaping tells me that cacti do not grow from seeds of love, and friends will spring from seeds of friendship. I am surrounded by living people who thirst for love, and one simply needs to find the little key to the heart. Then it will open to you forever. And in that case, you can place as much love and happiness as you wish into these treasuries of the soul.

But among all these friends are those who are especially close to you. How can I understand who my close friend is? How can I distinguish him from others? Why did he become close? Why cannot everyone be close?

We know that God has no favourites, and I often hear this phrase. But what does it mean? Does it correspond to the truth? How are we to understand this verse from Romans 9:13: 'As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated'? What kind of partiality is this?

It is not for me to judge God or decide how He sees us. But I know that the Saviour's attitude toward the righteous differs from His attitude toward sinners. He loves both, but He is friends only with the righteous. And among the righteous, there are those who are closer to Him because they desire to know His will, and there are those who have believed but have not understood in Whom they believed, do not know what to do next, and have no desire to do anything.

Love and friendship are two sisters from the same family who look very much alike but have different tasks and influences upon hearts. We are told to love our enemies, pray for those

who mistreat us, and bless those who curse us, but we are not told to be friends with them. Love acts in the same way toward friends and enemies: it loves these people and responds to them only in the right spirit, receiving strength from Christ.

Friendship implies my heartfelt attachment to my neighbour. It singles a friend out from a million other people and makes him one.

One day, a colleague at work asked me to drive him to a car lot so that he could choose something to buy. The salesman immediately declared that we were friends and called us that the entire time we were there. His heart was open to something more, and he was so sincerely glad to see us. But when my colleague made it clear that he would buy nothing, I was surprised by how our new friend began to behave. In the end, he did not even say good-bye to us. I think that even if we had bought something, our newly made friend would immediately have forgotten us. But he himself called us that, and I understand these words precisely in this way when they are spoken. There are many other forms of address that express respect for a stranger, but for some reason people call everyone friends, diminishing the meaning of this word.

Jesus said in John 15:14: 'Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you.' The Lord made it clear that Heaven does not call everyone indiscriminately a friend. But if a person has received this status, it no longer changes. And further we can read what Judas was called during his betrayal. Matthew 26:49-50: 'And forthwith he came to Jesus, and said, Hail, master; and kissed him. And Jesus said unto him, Friend, wherefore art thou come? Then came they, and laid hands on Jesus, and took him.'

But if a friend can become a betrayer, whom can I call a close friend? Close means right beside me, somewhere nearby. It is a person very dear to me in spirit and personal affection. And how is this determined? Perhaps it is the one who tells me most often of his friendship and love? But I may listen to him out of respect without reciprocating. I may even simply tolerate him, because he is a friend; and it would be wonderful if he would simply keep quiet, but let him speak. I differ from my friend in

my own peculiarities, but I accept him as he is and have no intention of changing him. But when I understand the law of closeness, I look at all this differently.

A close friend is someone to whom I can tell everything that is in my heart, knowing that he will simply listen. It is someone to whom I can entrust my secrets, knowing that he will not reveal them to others but will help resolve whatever is within his power. It is someone who always finds time for me and never condemns me. It is someone who respects my freedom and loves me.

Please notice how I have reversed all my definitions of a friend. If a friend is someone whom I treat as described earlier, then a close friend is someone who treats me as I have just described.

A close friend is not someone who has revealed his secrets to me while I am not ready to entrust mine to him, but the reverse. Closeness in friendship is determined not by the length of communication but by the trust that we express toward one another in our relationship.

In our school, we can see how many students open up in their answers. They do this daily and from a pure heart, and then allow other people to look inside them.

I can say with confidence that I have become a close friend to many of them, although I do not tell them as much in return, but I accept what they reveal to me. You do not hear every answer, and not every secret of our communication is made publicly available. But knowing this law of closeness, I rejoice that the Lord gives such friends, and I believe that this carries a mutual blessing. And how easy it is to communicate with a close friend and help him. He is already open to you. He has no one else in whom he could confide. Therefore, such friends should be valued and tenderly kept in the heart.

The School of Love teaches us love, and if this spirit descends upon us in our attitude toward one another, we should not resist it. It is a gift from the Lord.

But the very closest Friend is, of course, Jesus. He is the One Who is ready to listen to all my secrets, problems, needs, and anxieties. He will never cast me out or say that He has no time. He will listen to everything very attentively, embrace me, comfort me, stroke me, hold me close to Himself, and carry me in His arms. Although this is invisible, it is felt by the heart.

He is the One Who showed me such closeness. And when I applied this kind of attitude toward friends, I saw that it works. But a friend may refuse this closeness. He may make it clear that he is not interested in entering into my problems and secrets, and although this is painful, it does not disturb me. I understand that he is free in his decision, and I see that we are simply friends, but not close friends. Then I take all this to Jesus and rejoice that He is the closest Friend.

During my life, I have learned so well to resolve every problem with Jesus that I do not burden my friends with them. They cannot help as He helps in any case. But the Lord is not opposed to our bearing one another's burdens.

We have been given to one another for love and close relationships, because through these God can very easily convey His truths to us and reveal His loving character. And everyone will know that we are His disciples if we have love among ourselves.

It is good to have close friends, but it is especially wonderful also to be a close friend oneself.

Homework 131

1. What did you understand from this lesson?
2. Why does God become a very close Friend to us, although we do not hear His voice?
3. Am I a close friend to Jesus? Is it interesting to me to listen to Him? How does this happen?
4. Why do not all those to whom I open my heart consider me a close friend?
5. Is the decision of my heart important when choosing a close friend?

6. Do you have friends with whom you would like to be close, while they are indifferent toward you?
7. Should you tell a friend of your love for him, or should he discover it for himself?
8. Please read Luke 12:4; John 15:15; 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7; 11:5; Mark 10:21; and John 13:1 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 132. The Best Friend

My understanding of friendship and love will always differ from how others see and imagine them. And this is right. After all, God Himself created us very different, and herein lies the special beauty of the human race. If I begin to declare that there are only two opinions—mine and the wrong one—then I will have serious problems communicating with people.

There is a distinctive feature in the human worldview. It lies in the diversity of views and tastes, which, when combined into an overall picture, helps us see many things comprehensively and from many sides.

Each of us perceives closeness differently, and when I think about who my close friend is, I need to consider which love language I use in communicating with him and how much love I invest in my friendship.

Love is the strongest glue that can bind the most different hearts into one whole. Even if our tastes and views are absolutely alike, I will still have my own opinion, different from the opinions of others.

If a million people were given the task of describing water to me without naming the word itself, I can say with confidence that they would all write correctly about the same thing, but among all these answers there would not be even two that were identical word for word.

There is a concept in the world: 'Against whom shall we be friends?' The world will always impose its own definition upon every blessing of God.

'Tell me who your friend is, and I will tell you who you are.' Can I be defined by my friend? There are patterns and influences for good or evil that my friends can exert upon me and I upon them. If I bring happiness, love, and friendship into a friend's life, and he accepts this, then it is likely that I will have a stronger influence on him than he has on me.

It is written that evil communications corrupt good manners, and we are warned to avoid those who can spoil our character and teach us to do evil while calling it good. Such influence does take place, and the enemy of souls uses it. God does not call me to rebuild Babylon or construct a church on the Titanic. But God has a plan to save perishing people, and He desires that I actively participate in it.

For all time, God gave the world the very Best Friend to save it from the power of sin. The example of how Jesus loves and how kindly He treats those who hate and persecute Him will always be a model for me to follow. As I test His principles and the gift of agape in my life, I see how this influences me first of all and changes my character. When I become someone's friend, I change. A transformation takes place in my life, and I understand that I need special new wisdom to communicate and build a relationship with a new person. And God gives it.

Love is amazing in that, like water, it completely fills the form of another person's perception, without trying to change him but taking into account every feature of his character. It finds those elements in a friend's soul which, through prolonged contact with it, soften, absorb its essence, and dissolve in it. They are transformed into something new. Water wears away stone. And love shapes the soul.

I am always amazed by Jesus' love for us, for different people. He approaches a person and begins to communicate with him at the level of his intellect and perception. He respects the opinions of others so much that He never enters into an argument, but listens very attentively and then gently offers His point of view, observing the person's reaction.

Jesus' example in His attitude toward people always is and will be an ideal model for admiration and imitation. But my experiences and discoveries in love and friendship do not mean that they are the ultimate truth. I am a limited person who is completely dependent on God's mercy and power, but who desires with all his might to participate in transforming the lives of other people for God's glory.

If I dream of becoming someone's most dependable friend and most loving brother and ask God for strength to do this, it does not mean that everyone must think and act in the same way. 'Most' in my understanding does not mean the only one, but one who differs from others. And I invest in this word the meaning of genuine and authentic. Perhaps I idealize many things, but I try to compare everything with Christ's example. By loving as He loves, I grow, and my understanding grows as well.

Communion with Jesus transforms me. He shows me an example of how the best Friend in the world loves. And I try to act in the same way. Then I am able to see what God's love accomplishes.

But without love, my friendship and attitude toward people will become a stumbling block to me, and my motive will reflect my human interests.

Love without friendship is possible. Love is the most proper attitude toward any person. But friendship without love is an entirely different product, unlike friendship with love. For example, if a person who lives according to the flesh studies the lesson about a close friend and decides to apply it in his life, this law will operate, and he will see a result. But where will it lead?

If I am driving a tank to capture enemy territory and know how to operate this machine, what will happen if my enemy gets into this tank? I do not think he will act according to my understanding, although the tank's mechanism will obey the enemy as well.

Friendship is a very powerful offensive means in loving hands, but in a carnal understanding it is a very complex mechanism that continues to work, only in another direction. And afterward everyone, including God, is blamed for the irreparable destruction and grave consequences that have occurred.

Without love, my friendship is very dangerous. It has no firm foundation and can crack and collapse under any trial, burying trusting souls beneath it.

In this sense, Jesus is the very Best Friend. He will not fall, turn His weapon against His friends, betray, or disappoint. One can be friends with Him. He is strong and steadfast at all times and will withstand any trial, remaining just as tender and loving.

I can always compare myself with Jesus and bring my views into harmony with His standards. I can even repeat absolutely everything after Him without fear, but it is better to do all of this with love.

The enemy of souls desired to be like the Most High, but not in character—in strength and power. And he failed.

To be like Jesus does not mean having the same hairstyle and clothing, but studying His character and embodying these discoveries in my life.

For me, the example of true love and friendship is Christ's attitude toward me. I discovered these principles, tried them in the lives of friends and different people, and saw that they work and carry blessings within them. And this is so amazing.

The greatest miracle in the entire universe is that I love. At times I do not believe that such a thing is possible, but I see all the strength and influence that are not mine; yet by right of the new birth I claim this strength for myself and make myself an instrument of God to convey this treasure to thirsty people in the world.

The Best Friend is Jesus Himself—the very best and most dependable Friend there can ever be. Therefore, forgive me, friends, but Jesus is better than you, and I am not ashamed to say so and do not intend to offend you by it. For it is He Who gives me friendship and love for you, so that you may be happy from such a touch.

Homework 132

1. What did you understand from this lesson?
2. What would friendship without love for a friend look like? Is it possible?
3. Is the question of friendship important with regard to my salvation?

4. How can I understand that Jesus is the very Best Friend?
5. Does Jesus consider me His friend?
6. How can I determine whether I am a friend of Heaven?
7. Please read Psalm 62:6-10; Matthew 18:11; 11:19; John 8:10-11, 15-16; 11:11, 43; 12:7; 20:27; 21:17; Luke 19:5; and Matthew 26:32 in the light of this lesson.

Lesson 133. Characteristics of Friendship

In the Russian translation of the New Testament, God's new commandment reads: 'Love one another.' The Russian words for 'one another' literally mean one the other, but I would like to deepen this expression by understanding these words as 'a faithful friend of a faithful friend.' A feature of the Russian language makes this possible. This definition contains the true principle of agape love, by which we have deep relationships with one another that lead us to mutual friendship forever.

Love for one's neighbour carries an element of happiness, though at times only on one side; but love for a friend—especially one who reciprocates from his own principle—gladdens the heart in a special way.

Friends are different, and they have different characters. If I have several close friends who reciprocate my friendship, this does not mean that they also have warm relationships with one another. They may not even know one another, and after meeting, they may not establish a close bond.

The commandment of love tells me that I should have agape for my friend and he should have agape for me; then these relationships will testify to the whole world that we are Christ's disciples. Unconditional friendship within this unconditional love is precisely the relationship that Jesus desires to see among us.

And He is ready to teach this to everyone. I am not born with such knowledge, nor do I come to such an understanding automatically. If I allow the Holy Spirit to change my heart so that I can love my friend, my mind automatically places a limitation upon such relationships by the principle of 'if.' I am ready to love you with agape if you are as you should be according to my understanding. And this condition will appear in all my relationships. But when I ask God to teach me to be a friend and to love rightly, I see in Jesus' example unconditional love and heartfelt attachment to those who allowed Him to know them. And I decide to apply the same principle in my own

life. I see how God reveals to me boundless possibilities and the indescribable love of His ocean of love. The seal of God's approval holds very well upon a firm surface that does not change with mood or circumstances.

A friend is not my property, given to me by God as a gift of life in Jesus. He is a free person with his own distinctive qualities and rights. The status of friend speaks of the relationship between us, but not of our property and money becoming common. Friendship does not even imply that the members of our families have now become friends. A friend is you and I, connected by a one-sided or mutual decision to be friends. At the same time, we respect the boundaries of friendship to which each of us has a right.

For example, one day I was working near my friend's home and, without thinking, said that I would now come to his house for lunch, although I was not actually planning to do so. He responded very sharply that in his absence I had no right to cross the threshold of his home. I was surprised by such sharpness, took note of the warning, and afterward never even hinted again that I might communicate in some way with members of his household. I observe this distance to this day. Another friend, however, earnestly asks me to communicate with his wife, because after such conversations peace, love, and mutual respect come into their home. And I gladly do this if there are no obstacles. Having had such different experiences, I cannot give a general rule for relationships with friends, but I understand that they must remain within the boundaries of personal freedom established between us.

If I board the train of trust, I do not check my reason as baggage. I have friends who once decided that all my possessions were our common property, while their possessions were their private property. And since I live in Germany, I must take care of their well-being. Such an approach to friendship tells me that I am regarded as a free filling station, and I have to explain tenderly to my friends that even in Germany there are different people who live in different ways, and even if I do

possess something, I myself have the right to decide to whom and what I can give or present as a gift.

Likewise, in spiritual matters I have my own personal understanding and order for arranging my life—how, when, and for how long I should do one thing or another. My personal relationship with Jesus belongs only to Him and me, and no one else can be there except in prayer. Yet in all of this, I also listen to what my friends say, desire, expect, or advise.

We influence one another, and this sometimes helps us do very good deeds that would never have been accomplished alone. But not all friends are competent in every matter. If my friend wishes to help me with electrical work without understanding it, I would rather turn to an unbelieving specialist who can solve the problem professionally. In the spiritual sphere, however, I can ask for help or offer help myself even without being a specialist, while learning from Jesus to do what I have never done before. And the Lord will teach me. Even learning friendship has to begin sometime. In this process, it is very important to be honest with one another.

For example, my friends sometimes tell me that they know I am constantly praying for them, and they thank me for it. I did pray when there was a need, but I do not do so continually. Yet I do not want to disappoint them, so I simply remain silent, burning with shame that I have betrayed their confidence in me and dreaming that I will certainly do better. But when I am honest, I tell everything as it is and try not to bind myself with long-term obligations, which sometimes grieves my friends and disappoints their expectations of me.

I do not want to play the role of a super-friend, understanding that I am a weak person with my own views on life and relationships. At the same time, I very often have to examine my heart and ask God to remove dangerous shortcomings and flaws. And I am learning. Even the principles of faithfulness, unconditionality, and constancy did not come to me without a struggle. At times I wanted to break everything off with someone and forget him forever, but the Lord showed me that He does not treat me that way. The learning process in the

School of Love does not always bring me joy and pleasure. Sometimes I complain to Jesus about the difficulties I encounter, because they are too much for me, and He holds out His hands to me as if asking whether I want to receive such a reward for my love and friendship. And I humble myself and understand that I still have much to learn.

Close friends are people who have a trusting relationship, but this does not make me another person's shadow. Even Jesus respects my freedom and the desires of every person. How modestly He offers the riches of Heaven, and how joyfully He shares them with those who thirst to receive them.

Friendship and friendliness are gifts of Heaven. They are worth asking for and worth learning; and once we have learned them, we should pass them on to people, making them our friends. It is a miracle when a stranger enters your life as a friend and takes his place in your heart for the rest of your life. What could be better? Only mutual love for one another according to the commandment.

Homework 133

1. What new things did you learn in this lesson?
2. How do you understand God's command, 'Love one another'?
3. What is the difference between love for one's neighbour and love for a friend?
4. Why does agape love destroy all conditions in friendship? What should we ask God for when we decide to become friends with someone?
5. What kinds of relationships are approved by God? And what is important to consider when learning friendship?
6. Do you give this gift to others? Please share.
7. Please read Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, 12; Revelation 3:20; John 15:17; 17:26; Philippians 2:3; 1 John 1:7; Proverbs 8:33-35; Isaiah 58:7-11; Luke 16:9-10; and 1 John 3:23 in the light of this lesson.

Lesson 134. Don't Be Afraid to Be Truthful

Perhaps the most difficult thing I experience in my Christian life is deciding to tell the whole truth about myself that I know. And I always tense up when I realize that another person is voicing my problem.

The most interesting part of all this happens when I begin public ministry and teach other people what I myself do not yet have or know. Yet the essence of learning often lies in the fact that, if a person wishes to understand something better, he needs to begin teaching it to others.

Those close to me understand very well who I am. Even if I have very skillfully disguised my true nature, it will still reveal itself.

But when I begin personal communion with God, the same habit of appearing better than I really am also manifests itself in our relationship. I want to prove to God that I am good, that He should rejoice in my good deeds and carefully take note of them. I even try to imagine that I am becoming a special favourite because everything about me is right and better than it is with others.

But when God begins to reprove me and places me in situations in which my foolishness comes out and becomes evident to everyone, including me, then instead of admitting my weakness or guilt, I seek to justify myself or, even worse, shift my guilt onto others, making them accomplices or the chief culprits in my sins.

And when circumstances have backed me into a corner, I finally decide to be honest and admit my mistakes. It seems to me that I have disclosed something new about myself and therefore deserve special mercy or respect, because I admitted my guilt and declared it openly. But if I am asked to bear the consequences of my violations, my indignation knows no bounds. How can they treat me this way?! I confessed sincerely and repented, so they should simply forgive me and forget my failures. Yet I am required to compensate for the damage, pay a

fine, or bear the consequences of sin for the rest of my life. What outrageous injustice! I repented and confessed! Is that not enough?! How inhumanly they treat me!

To be a true friend, one should learn to be honest with other people. For we tend to idealize those who possess special talents, gifts, attractive appearance, or spirituality. And if such a person is famous, everything is forgivable for him, and he simply cannot be bad because society recognizes him as a unique person—and such people do not make mistakes.

So I am maintaining a friendship, and at some point I realize that everything is coming apart at the seams. I am giving up my positions, and my stability is suffering serious damage. Instead of admitting it and asking for a respite, explaining that I have personal problems, I begin seeking many excuses, trying to preserve my image and not lose face. My friends believe me, trying in their love to understand me and overlooking my failures and mistakes. And I take advantage of their trust and throw dust in their eyes in order to establish myself in their respect.

Hypocrisy sometimes helps me escape unscathed and preserve my status. A friend knows how to love and forgive, and therefore I may abuse his trust while expecting his mercy.

Jesus always loves me, and He knows everything. I soothe my conscience by asking Him to forgive me, a sinner, without trying to identify my sins specifically or examine them more deeply in the light of God's disapproval. Then I wonder why there are no blessings in my life, and I have to invent them in order to impress others and maintain my status at the proper level.

And so I am forced to live this way. The most interesting thing is that I am surrounded by performers just like me, with the same ideas, ambitions, and worldview as mine. Together we act in a great theatre, waiting for applause and accepting the respect we believe we deserve. Then we go home, lock ourselves in our rooms, and suffer from loneliness.

To cease being deceitful is a heroic feat in our time. To accomplish it, we need power from above, the gift of repentance, and an understanding of our true condition in the light of God's will.

When I become a friend to my neighbour, openness and honesty are expected of me in our relationship. But this does not mean that I must disclose to my friend all the secrets and details of my life or enter into every sphere of his existence. There will always be restricted places that must remain forever closed to outsiders. Even if someone wishes to enter them, I can politely make it clear that in this territory I wish to be as I am and that no one has the right to intrude. For example, the spiritual atmosphere of my bedroom and my intimate relationship with my wife are precisely such a place, where none of my friends will ever enter under any circumstances. There are many such areas into which even close friends should not simply be invited.

But Jesus may be everywhere. He is omnipresent already, yet His omniscience does not oppress me with condemnation. On the contrary, the Lord very tenderly points out those details of my imperfection that He would like to correct in me.

When I decide to be honest with those close to me, I must not insult them or harm them in the process. For example, if someone irritates me while I smile pleasantly at him and wish him abundant blessings, honesty toward that person does not consist in telling him to his face everything I think about him and pouring all my disgust and indignation upon him. I will not tell him who he really is and add that I am being absolutely honest and am right besides. Such an understanding of honesty is called foolishness and idiocy. I think all my friends would quickly run away from me, and in their own way they would be right.

True honesty means that I first begin with Jesus to discover why my friend irritates me. I try to see what I need to change in this regard, and then I admit to my friend that I do not understand his behaviour and consequently have difficulties in our relationship. I tell him that I would like to correct them, but I

need outside help and more reliable information about what I consider wrong or irritating. Tact and respect for another person are integral parts of Christian ethics and love. Every negative attitude toward one's neighbour comes from an impure source. But if a person's deeds are evil, that is another matter and deserves attention if there is an opportunity to help or correct something.

To be truthful does not mean calling myself names and hurling curses at my mistakes and sins, but loving myself as a person redeemed by the blood of Christ. Truthfulness is the admission that I am a sinner who needs a Saviour and is learning to be kind and loving.

Without Christ, I will not be able to correct my habits and will continue in my hypocrisy, if it exists, because it is like the colour of my skin, which I am unable—and do not even want—to change.

And if those close to me have exalted me in their eyes, courage is needed to acknowledge myself as God shows me to be. Love knows how to correct this and does so without harming my friends or me, opening new paths to renewal in the truth.

Homework 134

1. What new things did you gain from this lesson?
2. Describe what being honest means to you.
3. How do you think honesty can be acquired, since we are deceitful by nature?
4. Why is life easier for an honest person than for a hypocrite? Or do you think differently?
5. How can you act wisely if someone irritates you?
6. Should we ask God to help us become truthful?
7. Please read Jeremiah 17:9; Psalm 139:23-24; 1 Timothy 4:16; Acts 5:31-32; James 5:16; 4:10; Proverbs 15:33; Psalm 138:6; Proverbs 2:5-11; and Matthew 26:31-35 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 135. Choosing a Friend

One can never have too many friends. A friendly heart is like the sun. Beautiful flowers from God's garden reach toward it, and weeds also need sunlight. If God has endowed me with this gift, I am destined to gain friends whenever I come into contact with them.

We are all actors at times and want to present our best side. But when one is kind and friendly, it is impossible to play an evil and unsociable person. It is like trying to hide a burning candle inside one's clothing or failing to notice a city standing on top of a hill. Even with all my desire to be left in peace among friends, there will always be those who greatly desire fellowship with you, who rejoice in you and seek your presence.

I began to notice that among many people there are always special individuals. One can confidently say of them that they bring happiness when they stand or remain nearby. Even when they simply pass by, one feels very good. Yet they do not know this and will never guess it. I cannot explain this phenomenon, but there are people who bring blessings into my life by their mere presence. I cannot abuse this or ask them to stand beside me. I accept what God gives me through chance encounters or through these people's decisions to be nearby. I never tell them about my feelings, so as not to embarrass anyone. Perhaps this is merely a feature of my perception, and therefore I learn to wait patiently for the next unplanned meeting or personal presence beside me.

But I know that we resemble one another in some ways, and others probably experience the same thing toward me. It is very interesting to observe those whom you love—how they react to you when you meet, what expressions they have, and how they show their feelings.

The commandment to love one another is beautiful because, if we mutually keep it, it blesses all of us in the fullness of its beauty, opening vast prospects for happiness in fellowship and mutual love for one another. This is precisely what the Lord

planned when He gave me this command. It is an order to be happy and to make my friend happy. This is how it is, and this is how it works in the life of everyone who sets out upon such a beautiful path. And the path of love and friendship is magnificent.

Those who gladden your heart belong to the category of welcome people with whom it simply feels good to be. Time spent in the company of such individuals can be considered full, beautiful, and profitably spent for the soul.

Friends are a reward from the Lord for the love you ask for on their behalf; they are a part of your heart in another person's life.

Have any of you experienced taking a small child by his tiny hand so that you could walk somewhere together? At that moment you experience amazing feelings. This little being has entrusted his life to you; he has placed his little hands in yours, believes in you, and has allowed you to hold him and spend time with him. You walk along and receive indescribable pleasure simply from holding this child's hand. Then suddenly he decides to walk by himself, pulls away, and begins inventing something to do. Friends sometimes behave in the same way, filling your heart with special, inexplicable feelings. Without even noticing it, we rejoice in these little celebrations of love.

If you have a friend who constantly tells you of his love and brings pleasure to your heart, also rejoicing in you, then thank God for such a gift. Be happy that you have such a friend.

Have you noticed how quickly flowers open toward the sun? How they reach toward the light and how beautiful they look under the influence of those life-giving rays? Human hearts open in exactly the same way when your love and friendship touch them, in order always to warm them with their light and warmth.

You should not play the part of a bad and unsociable person if you are kind by nature. It will not work. And why would you? Let your God-given gift of friendliness find new hearts upon which to pour special blessings.

But people are different, and I have not been deprived of freedom of choice. If I see that a person is deliberately distancing himself from me, I do not tear down those walls but remain polite and patient. If even my friend has no need of me, that too is visible, and I must respect his choice.

If a person has sinful intentions and wishes to draw me into his intrigues by using my trust and friendliness, then, with all my love for him, I make it clear that our interests and principles are incompatible and that we should not spend time together.

The request 'Be a friend' tells me that I am not a friend but must become one for a short time in order to perform some task, and then return to the category of distant neighbours.

By endowing me with the gift of friendliness, God does not deprive me of the freedom to choose friends or oblige me from now on to maintain some special relationship with them. I simply begin to treat people as Jesus does—unpredictably well and rightly.

Evil companies and associations can corrupt my good character. When I see that such influence exists and is directed against me, I take measures to remain faithful to God.

For example, I decided that my friend's status is lifelong. Then the friend suddenly became hostile toward me or God. I still continue to consider him my friend and cannot simply take him and cast him out of my heart, but I build the relationship in such a way that, while remaining a friend, I do not damage my soul or allow him to abuse my trust.

Jesus assured us that we are His friends if we do what He has commanded us. This condition is not partiality on His part; it exists so that we do not abuse this friendship and so that we see the clear boundaries of what is expected and permitted.

For example, if my friend suddenly decides to create his own family with my wife, I think this would not be a very friendly act on his part. Afterward I would be very cautious and attentive in communicating with him, giving him no occasion or support for his plans.

And, of course, the members of my family are the first people whom I would like to be my friends for all time. If fate separates us, our friendship will help us maintain relationships in the right spirit throughout our lives.

And if, while single, I decide to start a family, I should seek not merely a wife but a lifelong friend who loves God, with whom I can then walk through all of life while remaining a friend. Not every friend is suited to the role of a close female companion, but the Lord opens these paths to those who seek such a solution in God and in obedience to His will.

If my children consider me a friend, it is easier to influence them and teach them obedience and faithfulness to God's principles. Here one should employ the full talent of friendliness in order to gain faithful friends in them. And this is possible if one is honest and loving.

Like attracts like. Anyone who does not want friendship with me will quickly make this clear. Even if such people have already entered my heart and become friends, their unwillingness to be friends will be taken into account and acknowledged.

Loving friends should be loved and gladdened by our love. And this is from the Lord.

Homework 135

1. What did you understand from this lesson?
2. Does friendship affect feelings, or is it only a principle of life?
3. Are there friends in your life who gladden your heart?
4. Should you offer your friendship to those who are completely indifferent to you? If so, why and how?
5. What should you do with friends who gladden your heart but do not notice you?
6. How can you find a way to the heart of an indifferent person?
7. Please read Philippians 1:9; 2:5; Hebrews 5:14; Proverbs 25:17; 26:18-19; 27:14; 18:24; Matthew 5:45-48; 1 Corinthians 5:8-11; 15:33; John 15:14; James 4:4-5; Romans

12:15-16; Proverbs 12:26; and Job 6:14 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 136. The Family—The Centre of Friendship

This lesson, like all the others, is one of the most important and necessary to understand and assimilate.

If you simply read it and notice nothing, perhaps the time has not yet come for you to receive this material.

I want to pose the lesson's main question at the beginning, so that you can try to answer it before I voice the answer.

What is the purpose of creating a family?

I very often ask this question of those who are planning to marry, those who are already married, and those who are planning to divorce. Almost always I understand that people have no goal; they simply live without knowing where they are going, or they live as society customarily does. Every person has his own ideas about family. For some, it is associated with joy and happiness; for others, with bitter experiences; and for still others, with disappointment. Before the wedding, however, things were different and everything was wonderful for everyone. Sin destroys even the strongest relationships. Once you set out on this deadly path, you can no longer stop and do not know how to end it, and therefore your whole life rapidly plunges toward the very bottom of something unknown.

What should you do? Do you want a happy family? I know what a family should not be, and I gladly help those who have become confused and disappointed.

I believe that divorce is the worst solution to family problems, and it is better not to let matters reach that point. Why dissolve a marriage? Was there a common goal toward which you walked together, gladdening each other with your discoveries?

Why do you need a family? The usual answers sound like this: I am tired of living alone. I want something new. Two are better than one. I want a child. I want my own house or apartment. I want lawful sex. I am afraid of being alone in old age. We will engage in ministry together. We will come to know God together and establish a family altar. I need a cook so I do not

have to cook for myself. I want a woman. A man is needed in the house. I am tired of living in poverty. I want to buy many things and travel, but I need someone to pay for it. We will believe in God together. I do not know what a family is for; everyone lives this way, so I need to as well.

These answers are not invented but taken from life, and the list could continue. Such expectations and desires arise both before marriage and during married life, and there is nothing wrong with them. Yet we should still understand the very essence of creating a family. Why is it needed? What is it? What purpose did God pursue when He created the first married couple? There is an ultimate outcome in God's plan for the family: through it, to reveal His character and love to the entire universe.

But what is necessary for this? Which path should we choose? How can we reach it without a goal or an understanding of what it means to reveal God's character?

And we begin trying everything we consider right. We gain extensive experience in everyday family life, traditions, unfulfilled expectations, and bitter disappointments. Sometimes there are happy families that live peacefully and carry out their little affairs.

But so that we do not continue guessing, let us state the correct answer.

The purpose of creating a family is to know one another more closely.

I did not invent this. It is God's plan for humanity.

As simple as this task may sound, its meaning is very deep. The more one thinks about it, the more deeply one understands it.

What do you hear in the expression 'the knowledge of Christ'? This very expression contains the whole essence of Christianity and the mystery of eternal life. We read in John 17:3: 'And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.' These are the words of

Jesus Himself, Who revealed the purpose of my Christian journey and established the direction that should be followed.

Let us apply this rule to the family: to know one another, discovering new abilities and talents, new traits of character and distinctive qualities within ourselves. The heart of my life companion is a treasury of endless discoveries and possibilities. This process has a beginning but never ends. Even if death separates us, an endless eternity opens ahead, and we continue to comprehend one another. This is a small illustration of true knowledge—the knowledge of God Himself and of Jesus Christ Whom He sent. Every other goal will eventually be reached, and I will be disappointed in my expectations. I will be sad because there is nothing more toward which to strive.

God designed the family as the centre and demonstration of true friendship in deep cooperation in knowing one another. Everything is taken into account here, and in one form or another we encounter the trials that we will also face from outside. God has given me for life a person whom I do not know at all, and my task is throughout my life to discover in my companion a friend, wife, helper, opponent, independent personality, and much more, using the knowledge gained for the good of our family and common work. Along this path of life, children appear, grow up, and leave; we buy some things and discard others; we travel somewhere and return; we build houses and buy apartments; we minister, believe and disbelieve, fall and rise, bury one another, and grieve while awaiting a wonderful meeting in Heaven, there to continue our discoveries and know even as I am known.

Our mutual, voluntary study of one another leads us to unconditional friendship. For it is impossible not to be friends with someone whom you know very well. Friendship has its true beginning in the family. At least, this is how God designed it.

But what do we see in our families? I live with a person whom I do not know at all and for whom I have neither interest nor time, and he responds to me in the same way. All our lives we raise one another and defend our rights while knowing the other's duties; we establish rules and break them ourselves.

Then, exhausted by this whole family nightmare, we dream of things better left unspoken.

Yet the little key to happiness is very near. Both must take it and open one another's hearts. If only I open mine, I will expose myself to even greater attacks. But this step is worth taking.

Of course, someone may already have found this goal and be moving confidently toward it. Still, it is worth stating it once again and understanding it with heart and mind. If I am guided in this direction only by intuition, I will most likely stray from the path someday and reach a dead end. But a clear understanding and vision of the goal will help me hold the right course and always return to it if deviations occur.

Friendship in the family is an entire science that should be studied together: comprehending its depth, discovering its mysteries, and seeing its advantages. Friendship should be the starting point of acquaintance as we strengthen our position as friends, and it should continue to be cultivated after the wedding.

A wedding is not the end of friendship or the beginning of dreary family routine, but a path of great discoveries in the heart of the person who has decided to walk through life beside you, becoming one with you.

Love for oneself also includes the person closest to us, with whom we are one flesh. How can one fail to love oneself and be friends with oneself? If the head hurts, it should not be cut off; it is better to heal it and continue living with it.

The honeymoon is an interesting invention, but it has no biblical foundation in God's plans. The time of getting to know one another should continue throughout life. Deep acquaintance with a friend has a lawful beginning but no end. And how can one fail to be friends with someone whom one knows so wonderfully?

Homework 136

1. What new thing was revealed to you in this lesson?

2. How do you understand the purpose of creating a family? How does your understanding differ from God's? Please share.
3. How can we come to know God through knowing one another in the family?
4. What should you do in order to know your present or future spouse?
5. What does friendship in the family involve? Is friendship possible without humility?
6. Do you desire to comprehend the science of friendship in the family—to discover its mysteries and advantages?
7. Please read John 17:3; Genesis 2:24; Song of Solomon 1:5, 8, 14-15; 2:2, 16; 5:16; Ephesians 4:15-16; 5:28, 33; 1 Peter 3:5, 7; Colossians 1:9; and Hebrews 13:20-21 in the light of this lesson.

Lesson 137. A Loving Friend

And so I love and understand what this means. I do not seek my own, I am not proud or envious, and I always love. This is a very good condition of the soul. It fills life with meaning, happiness, and constant delight; it heals the soul and produces a spirit of gratitude for everything that happens.

Your love never fails. And how greatly you desire those whom you love at least to believe this, to believe in you, and to begin making use of and enjoying it.

And how wonderful it is to meet a person who has such love for you—a love that can be called agape.

Let us imagine what this is like.

Your friend says that he loves you. He says it simply, expecting nothing in return. He has made this decision for himself and lives by his choice. He demands nothing in exchange but looks for opportunities to embody his love in actions and somehow make you happy. As usually happens, you do not believe that it is sincere, but just in case, you test it and want to make sure how deep and genuine this love is. Your response may take many forms: mockery, insults, indifference, aggression, interest, a request for help, questions, observation, trust, and attempts to understand the loving person's true motive. Yet he loves and endures everything. It is very difficult to believe that someone loves you. You have already experienced so much betrayal and disappointment in life that you have grown accustomed to closing yourself off from everyone; and if you allow anyone into your life, it is only on certain conditions. But this person loves without any conditions, and always. What if it is true? It is almost frightening to imagine. It means that forever I have become someone very precious and close to this person. It means that throughout his life he will seek advantages and positive qualities in me and admire them. It means that he will never become a betrayer and will never harm me. Yet through all of this he modestly lives while awaiting my decision and joyfully accepts everything I do and

decide. He knows how to wait and can do so for a lifetime. Unfortunately, sometimes the love of such a person can be truly appreciated only after his death. Life is so short and fleeting. How we wish to bring its moments back, but it is no longer possible.

How we wish to become a child simply to accept a friend's love and enjoy it. But life experience and a damaged, closed heart interfere greatly.

Rejoice if there is such a person, such a friend, in your life. His value exceeds all the riches of this world. His presence brings peace and rest, joy and blessing upon everything. With him, much can be planned and much can be achieved.

It is so wonderful when someone who loves you with agape appears in your life. It is especially joyful when you notice and accept it. Such people bring only happiness, love, and friendship into your life. Where they are, blessings and steady spiritual gain appear, and there are no losses. They are a kind of victor who moves unshakably toward the goal and knows what he is doing, and this confidence inspires you as well.

The question is: where can such a person, such a friend, be found? There is an answer: become one yourself. If you want to have many friends, become friendly yourself. This spirit, like a magnet, will draw everything best toward you. It will make you more beautiful and interesting as well.

And yet how wonderful it is when a person appears in your life who simply loves you. You cannot produce this within him; it is his choice, and he must arrive at it himself, making the decision and becoming established in it. With all your friendliness, you cannot force him to do this, but you can help him by giving him your love and friendship. So sow love. What you sow, you will also reap.

Therefore, if you have a friend who loves you, value him and accept his modest offer to love you. This will greatly gladden his heart, and then he will be able to do much good for you. If necessary, he will give all the best that he possesses in his soul, if only you may be well.

If you do not yet have such a friend, or have not yet noticed him, I want to assure you that this is not so. There are earthly friends who may disappear or may not exist, but there are Heavenly Friends Who always exist and Who love you greatly. The very Best Friend has already come. He is very near, right beside you, only the distance of your closed door and your weary heart away. He is waiting only for your decision to open this heart to Him. He will enter and heal, teach you something very good, answer all your requests, fulfil all your desires, and show you great and inaccessible things that you do not know. His Name is Jesus, the Son of God, the Son of Man. He has already decided to become your Friend; He is already your Friend, and He will give you many friends.

There is also an entire army of kind Angels who have cared for you from childhood and borne you in their arms. They love you even if you do not believe it, and they await meeting you in eternity. They are your loving friends forever. There are very many of them; they know you very well, and they are very kind.

If you have a friend in this world who constantly tells or writes to you about his love and friendship, rejoice that you have him. What to do with him is your decision.

There is a proverb: 'Water does not flow beneath a lying stone.' In my dreams I can reach the highest summits and gain the whole world, but the reality is that I must rise, leave my personal space, and begin to act.

Searching for friends in this world's rubbish heap is not a very rewarding occupation. You do not know what will come of it; perhaps you will be unlucky. But God already has proven places where dependable people gather. They probably do not know that someone is seeking them for friendship, but they are waiting for the real you. In God's family there are very many of your friends who have lacked you for a very long time. They are ready for true friendship, but they do not know how such relationships are built and therefore do not dare take this step.

And now we have met. We are family in Christ but strangers in relationship, still unacquainted. I take a step of faith and enter

your life forever. What should you do with me? That is your choice. It is not all so difficult. But this approach gives me an advantage: I begin first so that I may never retreat. I know the laws of friendship and live by them. I begin applying them to my neighbour and see their action and power. They enter your life and change everything. You have nowhere to go; you are destined for eternal friendship if you desire it and make that decision.

In every relationship there is a choice. Even God takes our desires into account and does not establish me in something I have not decided upon. But He has given a commandment that must come into action and accomplish God's will in our lives.

Right friendship is the response and agreement of two hearts. One can build upon such a foundation. But what exactly should be built? We decide that. It may be merely polite greetings or kind words, friendly fellowship, shared activities, common prospects for growth, or something more. It is for us to decide. But perhaps we have not yet met. For this, one must simply rise, go, and find one another. Besides, we have the Lord, Who loves to give us to one another forever. And you look and marvel: you were not here, but now you are.

Homework 137

1. What did you find interesting in this lesson?
2. Have you had true friends from birth, or did they appear later?
3. Is Jesus a true example of a Friend to you? If so, how?
4. What decision about friendship does God expect from you?
5. Does someone give us friends, or is it our personal choice?
6. Does your understanding of friendship differ from God's commandment?
7. Please read John 15:4; Colossians 2:2-3; 3:10, 12-14; Psalm 91:11; 34:8; Philippians 4:4-7; Ephesians 3:3-20; Revelation 3:21; 2 Corinthians 5:14; 6:11-13; 11:29; 12:15; 13:11-13; and Isaiah 60:1-4 in the light of this lesson.

Lesson 138. Agape Friendship

I will reveal a little secret that I am now ashamed to admit. At the very beginning of my Christian life, some of my new friends in the faith taught me by their example that, while possessing a true understanding of God and faith, one could remain an ordinary person with ordinary worldly traits of character. I became so accustomed to this that I did not even try to change anything. I believed that, having accepted the truth, I simply had to live until death and preserve my faith. For this, I needed to do something good, share my knowledge with other people, and continue learning from books. In communicating with those close to me, we were to love one another within our boundaries, smiling sweetly and speaking in quiet, calm voices.

When eternity came, that happy life about which so much is written in books would begin. New faithful friends would appear, the fullness of love would descend upon me, and we would hold hands, rejoice in our salvation, and fulfil God's commandment to love one another. I would begin to think about the happiness of those close to me, and they would respond in the same way. We would never sin, and quarrels would cease. Every disputed question would be resolved immediately and fade away in the spirit of friendship. But for now, one had to immerse oneself in the land of keeping to oneself and try with all one's heart to remain faithful to the principles we had discovered, building the foundation of one's faith upon a firm footing. I lived this way for many years and did not know that anything could be changed in this familiar cycle of activities and discoveries.

I always believed that eternal life began at the Second Coming of Christ, and I was very surprised when I was shown in the Bible that it had already begun when I believed in Jesus and accepted Him as my Saviour.

Then many questions arose. If I am already living eternally, why should I wait for the Coming in order to change something? I must begin right now to live by the laws of eternity and treat others as it will be there. I began to try. It works. It turns out

that one can love unconditionally here as well, find friends, and rejoice in their salvation and presence already now, today. And every service can be paid for with love. This works too. How interesting!

I also made another discovery. There is agape love, and there is agape friendship. We have already written a little about love, but agape friendship is something new. I will say at once that this phrase is not found in the Bible, but the principle and meaning of such relationships are visible to those who seek and love.

Love does not stand still. It thirsts for new discoveries and studies every possibility, seeking to understand how the lives of those close to us can be made better and friendship more joyful. When love is in the heart and is given at the first request and need, then it is very easy to love where this was impossible and to love those toward whom one was indifferent. Friendship with people who are especially dear to you moves toward a deeper awareness of the unconditional nature of these relationships. Only agape love is capable of friendship like this. Jesus gives an eternal example of how He loves His friends. Why should I act differently? It is God's love that brings clarity to the question of friendship.

The touch of agape love makes my friendship unconditional, for it is impossible to show unconditional love while making it clear that I will be your friend only if you behave as I expect. Love sees everything, yet believes all things and endures all things. I believe that unconditional love is possible. I believe that unconditional mutual friendship exists.

Of course, there is one condition that greatly helps keep friendship on the right course. It is good when this love in the relationship is mutual and my friend understands that he is loved unconditionally. It is good when he responds in the same way.

According to Jesus' words in Matthew 5:46, loving those who love you is a useless occupation if you do not also have love for enemies and offenders. The distinctive quality of agape love is

that it treats everyone alike. If you see its genuine manifestation toward an enemy, you know that it will also be genuine toward a friend.

Why did Jesus not give the commandment to love one another to all the people during the Sermon on the Mount, but spoke it at the very end, before His death? By His life the Saviour showed an example of such love, and then asked His disciples to show the same attitude toward one another. This was necessary. They could not attain it without power from above.

If I suddenly decide to love my enemy without understanding what love is or where it comes from, how long will I love? It will last only a very short time.

Once I heard the story of a believer who decided to love someone. But when his enemy began behaving completely shamelessly, this believer became an unbeliever for five minutes, immediately settled every misunderstanding, and then turned back into a believer. The matter was resolved, and the enemy quieted down in his hatred. I was perplexed. Love does not behave this way. It does not use Satan's services to achieve its goals. It is ready to die while remaining true to its principles.

I cannot imagine responding to carnal people according to their nature. It is like trying to put a wolfskin on a sheep and send it in that guise into a pack of wolves. They will immediately realize that there is a stranger among them and will take action.

When Christ was led to judgment, two disciples, John and Peter, followed Him. John did not conceal that he was Christ's disciple and kept away from the rabble. He had no problems with anyone. Peter decided to blend into the crowd and remain unnoticed, but it did not work, and he denied the Lord three times. I experienced something similar when I tried to love without possessing this gift. I wanted to prove to Jesus that I could reproduce something in this direction within myself. And He waited sadly for me to begin asking for more, so that I would allow Him to love within me.

To love eternally and unconditionally without Christ's personal presence in the heart is impossible. To have unconditional friendship without possessing unconditional love is likewise impossible. One may call such relationships unconditional without even understanding their essence, and also add that they are Christian; but Christianity begins where Christ reigns in the heart. Understanding this, I give Him that authority.

Friendship should be agape, but I cannot achieve this by myself. I write about it to show that there are goals that are very high yet attainable. When I realize what is expected of me and what I must do, I begin to live that way, and Jesus blesses me on this path, teaching me to use and correctly understand His gifts.

It is so interesting to have agape friendship in one's heart. But for it to be applied mutually, someone should be taught agape love so that these relationships are not one-sided and distorted.

Will we have agape friendship in eternity? Yes; it cannot be otherwise, for there will be no conditions there. Has eternal life already begun for you? If so, these laws of eternity are already operating in your life, and they should be observed.

To look athletic, one can put on sportswear, and everyone will see an athlete in you.

I once believed that I was a believer, and so that everyone would see it, I made myself a little cross of gold and wore it constantly. People respected me for this and considered me one of their own.

But friendship has no special clothing or little crosses of friendship. There is, however, the white raiment of Christ, which He counsels us to buy, put on, and wear—even now.

Homework 138

1. What new thing did you learn from this lesson?
2. Do you enjoy dwelling in the land of keeping to yourself?
3. Can one truly love friends without loving enemies?
4. Do you believe in agape friendship here on earth already? If not, why not?

5. Why is it so important to deny oneself in order to learn agape love?
6. What does Jesus counsel us to do in order to obtain white raiment?
7. Please read Romans 2:20-21, 29; Revelation 16:15; 3:18, 20; Hebrews 12:3-4; Colossians 2:9-10; Romans 6:13-14; 5:5, 10; Ephesians 2:4-6; Matthew 5:44-48; Luke 22:34; 14:27; and John 15:8 in the light of this lesson.

Lesson 139. The Purpose of Friendship

I simply love, and this is a simple, natural state of mind and way of thinking for me.

No one will ever be able to see with their eyes and understand with their mind what I am writing about. It can only be felt with the heart when one soul comes into direct contact with another. From the outside, however, everything looks ordinary, without appearance or grandeur.

But God knows what He is endowing me with and watches very carefully how I spend the heavenly treasure and how much of it I invest in one undertaking or another. He greatly desires to be magnified in my life, and I understand this and ask for wisdom as to how best to do it.

God's dream for me is that He desires to reveal His love to me and to see in me His reflection, His character.

Will I bring joy to my Creator? I desire this very much.

Do you know what the greatest longing of one who loves is? It is the absence of an open heart in a person close to you—a heart that you can enter and fill with all the heavenly blessings of love, happiness, and friendship. It is so sad when you remain alone with all these heavenly treasures, needed by no one, wanted by no one, lonely among friends, brothers, and sisters.

But Jesus comforts you, reminding you that He too experienced all this and understands your struggle and your joys.

Sometimes you so greatly desire someone to be near who will receive your love and friendship with joy and great eagerness, thirst for it, inspire you to greater love, thank God for you, and repay you in kind. Although love seeketh not her own, it deeply values people like this and greatly longs to have them, so that it may give itself and give from a pure heart. There is good news: in eternity everyone will be like this, but we must learn it here.

It is so wonderful when you love a friend, observe him, sense his spirit, read his thoughts, see the expression on his face and

the emotions that arise through your influence; when you immerse yourself completely in friendship and open your heart in order to give it to the person close to you; and when you watch how you are received, how your love is valued and accepted, and how the soul of that dear person opens to let you in and never let you go. You see this and are in no hurry to leave, nor do you intend to—why would you? Sincerity, kindness, tenderness, peace, and indescribable joy overflow the heart, although you are simply talking about ordinary things, while soul unites with soul and heart with heart. The Spirit of God reveals to you the most beautiful things that can be found in your friend, and you heed these revelations and quietly rejoice in the beautiful moments of loving fellowship.

If you have such a friend, value him, cherish him, and love him with all your heart, and he will always bring you joy by his presence, a kind word, or a helpful deed, even if he is very far away.

For love there are no boundaries, no time, no nationality, sex, or age. It seeks opportunities to give itself, to give itself for ever, so that next time it may give even more. It remembers very well every place and heart where it was received and loves returning there to give itself again and make that place even more beautiful.

Will you say that nothing like this exists in the world? You are mistaken. It does. Take little children, for example: their sincere embraces, simple and pure words, absolute trust, and acceptance of you as their friend.

This can also be found among adults, though less often. Everyone has already been hurt once and does not want pain, yet your sincere love opens the soul.

I have described the desires of love in human terms, and perhaps each of you can relate to the dream of being needed by someone, or even by a particular person with whom you live in the same home. But reality is not so romantic, and one can only dream. Sometimes people are ready to destroy you simply because you are kind to others.

Now imagine how the One Who is Love dreams about each of us. What is His dream for every person, and with what attention does He watch every process in my heart—my response and my behaviour? How He longs to give Himself to me! My acceptance of His love inspires Him so greatly that He is even ready to seat me beside Himself upon the throne, so that we will never be separated again.

Jesus loves you, my friend. These true words contain the best truth about you. And Christ's greatest dream is to be needed by you, to be received by you, and to be valued by your whole being.

The loneliest place for love is a circle of those close to you who do not need you. Sometimes they need your strength, your money, your knowledge, your experience, or your help, but you yourself, as a loving friend, are not wanted.

Perhaps for Christ the loneliest place on earth is also the Church, where people come to sing songs about Him, preach a sermon, and ask Him for something, yet keep Jesus Himself at a distance behind the closed door of their heart and make it clear by all their behaviour that they do not need Him.

But love does not grow cold. It seeks an outlet. And who will receive it?

If you have a friend who joyfully receives you and makes it unmistakably clear that you are dear to him, needed by him, and welcome at any time, then rejoice that you have such a friend.

When you receive into your heart a person who loves you, you accomplish two very important things. You inspire him to greater love and greater change, to greater discoveries and greater joy; you make him needed by you. The second point is that you yourself become loving toward others. Irreversible processes take place in your mind; you begin to discover the laws of love, which are as eternal as God, and together with the person who loves you, you welcome into your life the One Who is Love. For he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God. It is such a beautiful state when we love one another, and everyone who

abides in it benefits. There is no sin in love; it is pure and perfect. It is the foundation of holiness and true wisdom. Whoever obtains it, tastes its true essence and depth, and learns the laws of its being obtains an eternal and true treasure for the soul and is destined for eternal happiness, peace, and joy in the Lord.

And I have decided to love and am ready to follow this path until the final victory. Sometimes it takes years to win someone's heart, while at other times someone surrenders without a fight.

It is so interesting to experience this constant tension, because you think only about whom you might love, how you might bring joy to someone's heart, and whom you might help. Love gives you commands that you carry out, opens new prospects to you, and teaches you many good things. And it never ends. Love has a divine nature, yet it is considered human, because it acts among us, and without reflecting on its nature, we regard it as our own—our possession and creation. Love, however, comes from Heaven to bless what is earthly. It comes to remain for ever and give us a portion of eternity.

And in order to carry out this plan more effectively, love takes its own sister, Friendship, as an ally. Together they seek a person whom they can teach, so that through that person they may pour themselves out into this world, bringing love, friendship, and happiness. And this purpose will be achieved.

Homework 139

1. What 'pearl' did you find in this lesson?
2. What does our Lord dream about?
3. Have you welcomed Jesus into your heart? If not, what is preventing you?
4. What happens when we welcome a friend into our life?
5. What does the Lord expect from us?
6. What is the purpose of agape friendship?
7. Please read James 1:25, 16–17; 2:12; 2 Peter 1:3–8; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 4:16, 21; 3:16; Ephesians 3:9–10; 4:13, 15; John

17:21-23; Zephaniah 2:3; and Hebrews 13:1 in the light of this lesson.

Lesson 140. Who Is My Friend to Me?

If I decide to master some field of knowledge, what is required for this? Suppose, for example, that I decide to become a doctor. I go and buy an anatomy textbook, read it, try to memorize some terms, and study the illustrations carefully. Now I am already an expert—or at least this is better than nothing. I can consider myself a doctor. And in order to become a professor of medicine, I must read a couple more books about the structure of certain organs, memorize all the definitions, and then I can teach others. Practice itself will then show what is located where in the human body. And thanks to YouTube, I can also see everything firsthand, then open my own channel and share my knowledge with other people.

In this way one can study everything useful and necessary, as long as there is a desire.

I think this approach brought a smile to your face. In one word: an amateur.

Yet when I approach the study of love and friendship with a similar attitude, for some reason I begin to consider myself someone special and my knowledge in this area to be higher mathematics. I enjoy hearing myself called a teacher, but I assume the appearance of a modest person and ask not to be called that, while inwardly agreeing that this is exactly what I am. For if all my knowledge were taken into account, in God's eyes I would look like a three-year-old child who has managed to learn something but has imagined that he knows everything. Of course, such behaviour in children does not irritate their parents but brings a tender smile to their faces, because they know what a path of growth their children still have to travel. Parents gently take their children in their arms and assure them of their love, telling them that they are the very best.

Certainly, the conditions of our learning differ from a child's growth. We are in a real war, where souls are perishing all around us. Our lives are in constant mortal danger. Yet through

God's protection and the continual ministry of angels, we are still alive and have peace in our hearts.

When I gain a friend, what do I desire to discover in him for myself? Who is my friend to me? And if this is the person with whom I intend to start a family, what should I know about that person? It is very important to understand what my friend or life companion is like, because my attitude toward that person depends on it.

Let us take the example of a family. If I am attracted only to my wife's body, then once it becomes mine, it will please my flesh and delight my senses, and this attitude will dominate. As a reward for this gift, I will earn money to invest in the source of my sensual pleasures, adorning it with clothing, cosmetics, and garlands. But this is a person, not a Christmas tree. And this body has a soul that also needs to be discovered and longs to be wanted. In order to study it, I must change my priorities.

If I decide also to discover a master chef in my wife, my knowledge in this area will increase noticeably, and I will marvel at the wonders of her cooking and praise her for this labour. But one day I will understand that the cook has a soul that languishes with the desire to be discovered and understood. So I decide to know her as the mother of our children. Oh, how much new knowledge awaits me, and how much happiness these little people bring into the home! Yet they too have souls that thirst to be explored and personally known. Meanwhile, my wife has grown weary in the routines of daily life as a body, a cook, and a nanny. Her heart longs for more; it desires to open, but it can do so only in response to my request and interest. If I stop in this process of knowing her, family disputes and fault-finding begin. All the unused inner potential is spent on resolving family problems. Against this background, my wife's body grows older, while so many beautiful, smiling bodies appear all around that the temptation to choose one of them becomes very great.

I choose faithfulness and decide to discover a creative personality in my wife. How much new knowledge I have gained about this person! And this is only the beginning. I begin to

wonder: who is before me? A woman, a mother, a cook, a database, a decorated house, a city with its attractions, or an entire planet that longs for new discoveries? Who is this friend of mine to me? And who am I to my wife? A body, a taxi driver, a cash machine, a porter, a handyman? I too have a soul that longs to open. Within me too lies the unlimited potential of an entire planet that remains to be explored. Yet I do not even understand who I am. I fulfil the role of a doormat for wiping feet and serve as a means of life support. Life passes, and we fly onward. And when we lose each other along the way, we begin to understand how little we came to know and how little we allowed ourselves to be known.

And if I have gained a friend, who is he to me? How should I perceive him? My interest in him will develop within the boundaries of communication that I establish for him and for myself, yet it is possible to go further.

To help me answer all these difficult questions, love is offered to me. It knows how to break through the surface of a person's soul and find the useful minerals and inexhaustible resources in the depths of the heart. I discover a new microcosmic world of my friend's possibilities and marvel at the discoveries of his personality. I am captivated by this world of limitless possibilities and by the way love finds new and fascinating treasures of the soul and presents them in their true light.

God created us for one another as unexplored planets, so that in our love for one another we may rejoice in new discoveries and achievements. Love makes all this real and beautiful. Only eternity will be able to contain the fullness of our endless revelations about one another, so that after many, many millions of years I may say of one of my friends that I know him even as also I am known. And all these revelations will resemble playing in a sandbox compared with the true knowledge of God, Who throughout endless eternity will reveal Himself to us in all His love and beauty, showing the amazing mysteries of His Soul, which I have already begun to know by faith while living on a sinful earth in a perishable body.

All this is embedded in each of us, and at times we unconsciously seek someone who will begin to uncover it, draw it out, and delight in knowing it. Even if someone finds within me only a little house with decorative flourishes, I already rejoice that at least in this form I have become interesting to someone. The prospect of being a lifelong taxi driver and cash machine does not bring much joy to the soul.

But who will discover a planet within me? I know that there is such a Friend. His name is Jesus. I come to Him and throw my soul open before Him so that I may be discovered and known, and He digs into my heart with interest, astonishing me with what He finds. I had no idea that I could possess such potential for different abilities and useful qualities.

And yet unexplored planets surround me as well, concealing so many fascinating things within them. Only my love will be able to find and uncover them. How wonderfully we are made! And what a beautiful commandment of love has been given to us! We can discover new galaxies and explore one another endlessly without ever reaching the fullness of knowledge and discovery. Yes, we certainly cannot do without eternity here! Eternity is worth entering and living in.

God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, the holy angels, my holy friends, and I myself—this is a very good team for eternal discoveries and achievements.

Homework 140

1. What did you discover for yourself in this lesson?
2. Can a person consider himself an expert after reading lessons about love and friendship? What is required to become one?
3. Who is your friend? In what capacity do you perceive the person close to you?
4. What advantages does love open to us in friendship?
5. What does the Discoverer of the soul expect from us? Does He have a dream for our friendship?
6. Would you like to labour on God's team for eternal discoveries and achievements?

7. Please read Jeremiah 33:3; 32:27, 39-40; 15:19; Proverbs 11:25; 2:4-5; 1 John 3:1-3; Psalm 139:23; 1 Corinthians 13:12; Romans 15:14; and James 1:22 in the light of this lesson.

Lesson 141. Destined to Have Many Friends

Once I said that one can never have too many friends, intending one meaning, but later I saw that this could be understood in two ways. I meant that no matter how many friends there are, it is never too many. But some people understood my words differently. They decided that one should have few friends.

Now let us imagine the following situation. You ask the Lord for the gift of agape love. He answers and gives it to you, beginning to teach you how to use this power. As a result, you grow in favour with God and man and influence those around you. And those around you are not blind. They see in you the answer to their expectations and begin to be drawn to you. They understand that you are genuine and that your love for them is pure. They see that they are destined always to receive your kind treatment. Some are irritated by this, while others are drawn to you. Without even noticing it, you gain lifelong friends by investing your very best feelings and deeds in them. They tell others about you and bring to you people who are weary of lies and pretence. And these souls become attached to you with all their heart.

Wherever you go, your God-given love goes with you, and it cannot be hidden. It will reveal you from your very first word. And if someone's heart is tuned to this wavelength, it will respond immediately to such treatment. At some point you realise that you have acquired a great many friends who like you and also want to be your friends. And some of them begin to love you in return and do so sincerely, from a pure heart.

A process of rethinking begins. You are friendly, and this magnet draws everyone to you. You do not object to such company; you are glad that, possessing God's love, you can speak rightly about God's will for this world. Yet the number of friends keeps growing. They do not leave you; they simply wait until you have time for them too. But some of them understand that friendship means an ongoing personal relationship and expect precisely this approach from you. What should you do? You cannot stop, and the farther you go, the more friends you

gain. Eternity then becomes the solution to this problem. You understand that there you will be able to devote an incredible number of years to each friend, discovering a planet within that person and allowing yourself to be discovered.

And what should you do with those who have become attached to you here with all their heart? I think you should continue loving them and tenderly keep them in your heart as friends. They are greatly needed, and you can always share your happiness, love, and friendliness with them when these things overflow within you and you urgently need someone to relieve your heart of this burden. Friends receive very well that which fills your soul. In fact, there can be so much love that you simply want to give it away to everyone who responds. And if this will not work with strangers, friends will gladly receive it. Giving away that which overflows within you is a serious problem for a loving person. Many friends have only small vessels in their hearts, capable of receiving just a little, while you give them a cold shower. They seem glad, yet they are bewildered by such an abundance of blessings and want to hide away and recover.

Meanwhile, the magnet of your friendliness continues to work, drawing out from every hiding place those who respond to it.

We are given an amazing power of love, and its possibilities are colossal. Imagine a tsunami wave as high as a twenty-storey building rapidly approaching you. Love is far greater in its power to destroy and in its influence. It destroys all empty stereotypes and notions about love; it removes a bad mood; it washes away melancholy and loneliness; it completely destroys sin; it brings about a colossal restoration of the mind and shapes the human will. Love deals mercilessly with all its enemies, destroying them and driving them away for ever.

Do you need such a life? Imagine constant joy, the smiles of friends, words of love and inspiration, happiness that does not disappear even when your pockets and stomach are empty, inspiration from new victories, the discovery of new horizons—and all of this, watered with love, brings peace to the heart. Could you live with this? Do you need such a life?

And the greatest problem is finding someone whom you can make happy when you are bursting with the desire to do so. How these people resist and refuse to believe that you will succeed! But you do succeed.

Once, when I understood that friendship exists and works together with love, I took this understanding with me to a camp meeting and decided to share it with everyone. I offered my friendship to everyone I met and spoke with. My heart rejoiced in this experience. Then we all went home. Some time passed. One day I called my friends, and they told me that other friends who were visiting them sent me their greetings. I asked their names and could not understand where I had become friends with them. They reminded me of that camp meeting and told me how I had met them, offered myself to them as a friend, and they had responded. I felt so ashamed. I simply could not remember them. I am not against friendship with people, but one should remember those to whom one offers it. At that time, however, I wanted this experience so much that I had no idea what a foolish situation I would get myself into. I learnt something from it. Now I try to remember everyone to whom I offer something, and I ask God to bless my decisions regarding friendship. But over time I gained so many friends that I decided to be a friend to everyone, especially to my fellow believers, so that I would treat each person in precisely this way.

I also plan in Eternity to become a friend to all the redeemed who will be taken from Earth to Heaven, as well as to all God's angels, to know each one personally, and to have very close relationships with them all. I think Eternity will make it possible to accomplish this task. I believe that there we will be given special abilities to carry out these plans.

I understand that since we are all one family, brothers and sisters, the very best relationships among us are love and friendship in obedience to God and faith in Jesus, which bring happiness. If these are absent, then it is some kind of defective Christianity. And if I accept this and choose such an approach in love, who can prevent me from living this way?

Whoever desires to have many friends must himself be friendly. And it works. But this is not merely my decision; it is a gift from Heaven. For it is impossible to act this way while possessing an evil heart filled with sin and deceit.

God desires to be glorified in my life and through my friendliness. He works through this gift, saving friends from many harmful things.

When you have many friends, how can you communicate with them all? They are like stars: you cannot always see them, but they are there. Love solves this problem too. Over the years such relationships do not disappear but continue to be just as joyful and friendly. I am open to everyone. Although it would be very difficult to receive them all at once if they came at the same moment, the Lord has resolved this matter as well. And do not be afraid to be my friend; it is a good undertaking, even though it lasts a lifetime. And it is so joyful!

All this is possible only in Jesus. It is He Who unites our hearts and our relationships with His love. Without Him there is emptiness, darkness, and death, but I choose life, happiness, love, and friendship. May the Lord bless me in this choice. And His blessing maketh rich, and He addeth no sorrow with it.

Homework 141

1. What new things did you learn from this lesson?
2. How many friends do you think a person can have?
3. Why do friendly people have more friends than others?
4. How can you gain new friends by being friendly?
5. Where can friends be found so that you may gain them?
6. Do you need new friends?
7. What does it mean to be a friend?
8. Please read Proverbs 18:24; Colossians 3:15; 2 Timothy 3:2; 1 Peter 3:8; Revelation 21:1-3; and Leviticus 19:17-18 in the light of this lesson.

Lesson 142. God's Presence in Friendship and Love

If I view the expression of my love as a human undertaking, then I will perceive it in human terms and will not expect any significant discoveries or revelations. It will be enough for me to learn what psychology textbooks say about it and compare that information with my situation.

But the love we study in our school has a Divine nature. It contains a prophetic prediction that God's people must possess it. This love is embodied in the Lord's commandment given before Christ's death. And since it is so important in these last days, it means that God has a plan to awaken a special interest in those who thirst for revival and transformation. Today, every prediction of God concerning the last days arouses genuine interest throughout the world, especially if it is connected with destruction or disease. The message of love will also attract attention, but its purpose is not to predict that this love must exist. Its purpose is to bring about a profound change in the thinking of God's people, who have tasted the influence of the world and its intoxicating wine and are seeking ways to free the mind from the power of sin and reveal the true beauty of God's character, manifested in the unconditional love of God's children for one another. And this love will lead us to mutual, reciprocal, unconditional friendship. Such a phenomenon will not be a chance coincidence, but the conscious, purposeful action of the soul and will of those who accept this message and embody it in their lives.

In the message to Laodicea, Jesus speaks very clearly about what I need to buy. And in the parable of the ten virgins, He shows the despair and hopeless condition of people who came very late to those who sell these Heavenly goods.

Every field of knowledge is good and beneficial, but apart from love it is useful only for a short time and only here, in this perishing world.

But the science of love begins with learning its laws now and will never end in Eternity. We have begun something very

important, valuable, enduring, firmly founded, unshakable, beautiful, and magnificent. We cannot even imagine where this love will lead us or how amazing the discoveries will be that God has provided for in this process of learning. If we could glimpse, even with one eye, what this knowledge and study will lead to, I think our attitude toward this message would change radically.

Through love and the study of this science, my heart comes into contact with God Himself, the Creator of the Universe, Who condescends to allow Himself to be known directly, allowing us to touch His soul and look within. And the blood of Christ has made such a path possible.

I do not know how believers lived before the Laodicean period. Apparently, they had a knowledge of love to the extent that they needed it. But in our time this is vitally important, for the Lord Himself offers it. And since He offers something, He also blesses it.

I know for certain that each of you has felt or realised that through the lessons of our school something unusual begins to happen in the heart, something changes in the mind, and something new is revealed. And if I see this undertaking as something human, merely the interesting experiences of a strange brother, then I should look more deeply. The very name Agape tells us that this love is a plant of Heavenly origin, and describing and understanding that which is Heavenly requires inspiration from above—and this inspiration is given.

I simply cannot possess agape without God; it is something whole and indivisible. The character of Christ is embedded in such a gift of Heaven. The matter is not the name but the nature of love. When I decide to possess agape love and declare this to God, I am, in essence, asking Him to love with this love within me, revealing His Divine nature through my human nature. And the friendliness that arises as a result of this love also bears God's seal and has a nature of Heavenly origin, for it is born of Eternal love.

And when I decide to love, I give God the authority to act within me through this love, although I may regard it as something of my own, something human. But I have an immensely powerful enemy whom I cannot see, and what is human in me will not be enough to withstand him. He is stronger than I am in every respect, both spiritually and physically, but God stands up for me and wages the battle within me, and the enemy is powerless to resist Him.

I live in a country where the animal and insect world is protected by the state. If I suddenly decide to use my power openly to destroy these creatures, the entire legal and executive system of the country will stand up for them, and it has sufficient means at its disposal to oppose my plans. Knowing this, I do not enter into conflict but try to live in such a way that no claims can be made against me. For example, if I decide to demolish an old house in which a bat lives and the nature conservation authority learns about it, I will be forbidden to do so as long as the bat lives there. Specially trained people will come and check whether I am harming this animal. And that little bat has more rights to my house than I do, although it does not even know it. But someone has enacted laws for its protection, placed it in the Red Data Book, and makes sure that it is well cared for in this country. Any nestling in a nest can stop any construction process if its life is threatened by human activity, for the entire legislative system will rise up to protect it.

In the same way, the enemy of souls knows that I am under God's special protection and cannot act openly against me. Therefore, he tries secretly to lure me into the territory of his authority and destroy my soul there, and through me to affect other people as well.

Love protects me on every side. When I decide to be a friend to my neighbour and to treat him this way throughout my life, God's invisible blessing rests upon this choice, and a strong bond is established between us that unites our hearts into one whole. Even if we have little communication, this bond preserves us in love for one another. Thus, we always love each

other and are ready to live with this continually. And it is well with us when this mutual relationship is established in the family. It is a little piece of Heaven in my home. Unfortunately, not all families come to this, but instead become testing grounds for new kinds of destruction and defence.

Friendship is a product of Heavenly manufacture. I cannot understand or explain everything about this decision, but I see how God preserves me from evil through it. There have been times when my friend betrayed me or treated me very badly, and I wanted simply to break everything off and forget it, but the Lord gently reminded me of my decision to be a friend and seemed to say, 'And what will you gain through such an approach? This is how the world acts.' And I decide to preserve this attitude and remain a friend, although at times it is very painful. But the essence of victory is to pass through the pain and preserve love and friendship for ever. Relationships may change in form, but they must not cease. If a friend forbids me to come to his home, I will not violate that prohibition, but I will continue to love him within the boundaries that remain.

Being a friend is a Heavenly science worth learning. And God will teach us this art.

Homework 142

1. Please share what new things you learned from this lesson.
2. Do you believe that God is present in unconditional love and friendship?
3. Have you experienced betrayal by friends? What did you do in that situation?
4. What is the right way to conduct yourself if a friend is indifferent toward you?
5. Is the constancy of Jesus' love for you an example to follow in your friendship with those around you?
6. Does God expect me to be friendly toward those whom I love?
7. Do you see God in your friendship with those around you?
8. Please read 2 Corinthians 6:16; Matthew 28:18-20; John 17:10-11, 21, 26; and John 15:13 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 143. The Inexplicable Qualities of Friendship

The more deeply you delve into the concept of friendship, trying to describe it in words, the more you realise that it is a great mystery of the soul that cannot always be expressed in this way.

This bond between you and your friend is invisible to the eye, but it joins your hearts with strong threads of love and heartfelt affection.

We are accustomed to children being born into the world. We have studied this process, and some have even managed to record the development of an embryo in its mother's womb. The entire sequence of the child's development has been established day by day, and special smartphone applications have been created to show this process, but no one can explain why a person develops in precisely this way. It is also interesting that this person simply did not exist anywhere before; you did not know that he would ever appear, and you could not imagine how your life would change when he was born. But he appeared, and the world became different. And now all your affairs are planned around the fact that this person is in your life; he is a part of you, your heart is with him, and there is no escaping it. You are attached to him, and this bond changes over the years but does not cease. Such invisible threads of love bind your heart for ever to a little person who had never before been in your life, or even in your plans. And you do not know who he will become or how your relationship will develop in the future, but you decide to love and care for this human being. And no matter how difficult it may be, this child is yours for ever.

My friends were not part of my plans. When I asked God for love, I did not even suspect that together with it He would also give me you, my friends. You were not in my life; I did not know you or plan to have you. I did not even know what agape friendship was or that it existed. But the Lord began to give you to me, and you began to appear in my life and shine like stars.

At first, I found this interesting, and I did not understand what was happening or why my heart was becoming attached to you. Then I decided that these relationships should be permanent and never end, and I began to pray that God would bless us in this. Many of you do not even know that my life is bound to yours by the strongest bonds of love and friendship. But I made this decision and asked for God's blessing and approval upon it, and He answered. How can this be seen? Through deeds? Through words? It is far deeper than that. And I do not know how to explain it. But perhaps these are merely problems of my own heart, perhaps it should not be this way, perhaps I invented it myself and rejoice in it. Yet I read the Bible, study the life of Jesus, and see that my love for my friends does not contradict God's will and that this is precisely how it ought to be. Moreover, it should be mutual. I begin to speak about it, but in response I hear mockery, unbelief, and misunderstanding. And so I have to carry everything within myself and share it only with Jesus. I often ask Him in prayer that this heartfelt affection may be pure and right and have nothing in common with sin. And the Lord listens and answers.

And now I have dared to tell you about it, but I understand that there are no words to explain the joy of realising that you exist, that you have appeared in my life for ever, that a part of my heart is with you, and that this is from God. What you choose to do with me is for you to decide.

And I know that this is not the end but the beginning of new acquaintances and bonds that will never end but will be taken into Eternity so that these relationships may continue there as well.

The only thing that can destroy this bond is my sin, which the enemy of souls persistently offers me. But I do not want to live in sin, and I flee from it, having no desire to live in it. And God sees this longing of mine and preserves me from evil.

I am also glad that many of you are not yet in my life or even in my plans, but you are in God's plans for me. And when He gives you to me, you will appear in my life to take a place in my heart

for ever and to bring me joy throughout my life simply because you exist.

Why am I writing this? I am simply sharing with you what takes place in a loving heart, so that when you notice it within yourself, you will not be afraid but will remember me and accept it as a gift from the Lord.

No one is forcing me to speak about this, and this confession of mine obligates no one to anything. There is no reason to pretend that something exists when it does not. I am simply sharing this in a lesson about love, trying to convey that there are inexplicable things in the human heart and in friendship for which the right words simply do not exist. But they can be experienced.

Sometimes you wonder what will happen with this person if I simply tell him openly and directly about my love for him—within the boundaries of love for my family, of course. How will I be understood? Will he hear me? Will he respond in the same way? Yet this commandment was given to both of us and to all believers. At first, I try to express it cautiously in words or hints. And if I do not encounter a wall, I go further. But if I see misunderstanding or rejection, I accept it, step back, and begin to wait. I may wait a long time—perhaps my whole life.

But if I am accepted, I very gently explore how I should continue being a friend so that I may become established in this relationship and retain this status throughout my life.

Are there people with whom friendship is impossible, with whom one should not even begin to establish this bond? Unfortunately, yes. The next lesson will address this.

Love has its own special language, which my heart understands perfectly and can speak. Sometimes there are no words, yet the bond is established. Another inexplicable quality of friendship is that God's Spirit takes an active part in this event, adorning such relationships and making them right and perfect. Sometimes you have said and done nothing special, yet you and your friend are happy. There are no visible reasons for it, but

you both delight in each other, and there is no explanation for it. And this is how it should be; it is right.

But there is an enemy of souls who desires to pervert everything. One person presenting this relationship in a false light with unclean lips is enough for a red light to come on and for boundaries, walls, and fences to be erected so that this person will not continue to think and speak in this way. How often the envy, lies, and evil speaking of those close to us very quickly destroy what took years to build. This also happens in friendship. Every relationship passes through the fire of testing and reveals how strong and genuine it is.

But love goes boldly into the fire. It is not afraid of further purification; it is already pure, and for me, love itself is the fire. It is love that reveals all my sins and weaknesses of soul.

Just as I cannot understand how a child develops inside its mother, so in friendship it is sometimes difficult to explain how this person appeared in my life for ever and why this brings such joy to my heart, as though he were created to be my friend. And this heartfelt affection binds us so firmly that afterward nothing can separate us if, from the beginning, we have allowed God to make us friends.

Can you imagine how the heart of Jesus becomes attached to us—to those whom He loves so deeply, calls, and waits for? How tenderly He protects this relationship, remaining faithful, tactful, and pure. He gives me an example of true friendship. And the closer I am to Him, the more I marvel at what a wonderful Friend He is and what a wonderful Lord He is. He is not only my Saviour but also the One Who loves me very much.

Homework 143

1. What did you understand from this lesson?
2. Do you have a complete explanation of friendship? If so, please share it.
3. Is the definition of friendship something clear to you? What is it based upon?
4. Do you have friends who are mysteries and difficult to understand?

5. What will you do with a friend who loves you when you do not love him?
6. Is Jesus' friendship toward you understandable to you? Can you call Him your personal Friend?
7. How can you know that Jesus is your Friend? Please explain how this can be determined.
8. Please read 1 John 4:7, 11; Proverbs 17:17; John 17:15-16; Ecclesiastes 5:4; and Song of Solomon 8:7 in the light of our lesson.
9. Which Bible verses came to your mind while studying this lesson?

Lesson 144. Not Understanding One Another

We human beings have been given the gift of communication, and it distinguishes us from the rest of the animal world. We possess a will, reason, and intellect, and these higher powers of the soul are able to govern our actions. We are able to think and choose.

Through speech, I can express aloud everything that is in my heart—what I know and what I understand.

After the Flood, God divided humanity by languages. All people were the children of one father, Noah, but when they united in building the Tower of Babel, they demonstrated their distrust of God, and He had to intervene by causing each person to cease understanding the other. Humanity was completely divided into nations according to language.

As long as you live in a culture where everyone speaks the same language, you have no problems with communication. But if a foreigner appears who does not understand you, and you see that you have no common ground with him, it is very difficult to understand what he wants. In this case, an interpreter is needed. Is friendship with such a person possible? In theory, yes. He is familiar with all the languages of love except your native language and will gladly accept any help from you. However, because of the lack of communication, you will have no emotional contact or bond. I am always surprised by people who build families on such a foundation. But eventually one spouse learns the language of the other, and they are able to communicate.

Brothers and sisters from Romania began coming to our church. I observed how close-knit they were among themselves and decided to become a friend to one of them. I very much wanted to experience a relationship with people who spoke another language. As a result, through my efforts, I succeeded in receiving friendly smiles in return, as one would give to a kind acquaintance, and that was all. I realised that I was of no interest to them as a friend because I could not express my

thoughts and feelings in their language, and they did not know mine. Even those who had learned a little German could not freely express their thoughts or enjoy friendly fellowship in that language. I am not categorically declaring that it is impossible to be friends with people whom you do not understand, but there are certain difficulties in this that separate us. Yet I noticed that spiritually, in our understanding of church teachings, the Bible, and reforms, we had complete unity, and my Jesus is also their Saviour and communicates perfectly with them in their native language.

There is another kind of difference that prevents full friendship—my spiritual affiliation. All my life I have worked with people who do not share my religious convictions. We know one another well, respect one another, are glad to meet, find common ground, joke, communicate, and do various kinds of work together, and what we build looks beautiful and complete. But when we part, we do not feel drawn to one another. Work united us into one team, but it did not make us friends. I would not say that these people are strangers to me; my heart is attached to them, for I know them very well and know details of their lives that perhaps no one else will ever know. I can visit many of them and enjoy friendly fellowship, but Jesus is not between us, and this establishes boundaries that must not be crossed. Our communication is limited to this world and its cares.

But Jesus knows how to unite unfamiliar souls in such a way that sometimes you have known a person only a short while, yet he is so dear to you—and for ever. How can this be explained? Miracles!

In order to win a friend for God, it is desirable to become that person's friend. But friendship is already an emotional bond for life. You do not know whether this soul will turn to God, yet you have already become attached to him. If this person has influence over you and inclines you toward lawlessness, such a friendship may become very dangerous and undesirable, and at times even forbidden. What should you do then? Your heart is with this person. But love helps resolve this dilemma as well.

You simply love him and are ready to serve and help him at any time, but you maintain contact with him within the boundaries he has established and that the Word of God recommends. And God preserves His obedient children from evil.

And what should those do when two different spirits live in one family? Should they be friends? A family is a world of its own, with many exceptions to general rules. Very often, one spouse comes to God and begins to believe. At other times, someone in a believing family becomes an unbeliever, and this has a special effect on relationships. I have both situations in one. My wife and I came to God from the world, and we had a daughter who had known the truth from childhood. But after fifteen years, these two people so dear to me went back into the world, while I began asking for God's love so that I could somehow endure this trial. And now I understand that their fall served my growth. These are two different spirits under one roof, but love teaches me many good things. What advice I have heard, and what I have experienced during these days! My Jesus became so close to me during this period, and I am so grateful to the Lord for every difficulty He allowed. If there had been no such trials in my life, perhaps I would not have needed greater love; and without having it, I could not have shared it, and there would have been no school, and, and, and. How grateful I am to God for everything He allows and for how all of it works together for good.

God taught me not to avoid difficulties and problems but to face and resolve them with His help. I cannot be another person's conscience, but I can be his friend or love him, and no one can forbid me to do so.

Is it possible to be a friend of Satan? One can make such a decision, but relationships of this kind are fraught with sorrowful consequences; it is better not even to try. Yet it is worth showing respect toward this authority so as not to create needless problems.

Should we be friends with those who serve Satan or this world? What matters here is how I understand friendship, what meaning I put into this concept, and how close these people are

to me. I can decide to be a friend while still keeping my distance and remaining cautious. After all, I do not know how my affection may influence these souls. Perhaps someone will be saved and turn to Jesus. Or perhaps after my death the Lord will draw that person to Himself. We should not burn bridges in relationships or sever connections. Love knows how to keep these people at a distance while holding them very close to the heart. Friendship may not exist, but love for these souls must remain, and it must be genuine.

One of my acquaintances has a friend, and once every six months he goes to a restaurant with him and gets completely drunk. I asked him why he did this, and he replied that in this way he preserves their relationship and makes it strong and indestructible. This sounds very strange to me. Not every worldly idea of friendship corresponds to truth. True friendship has a firm foundation—the presence of Christ in at least one friend, though preferably in both, and the essential presence of God’s agape love. And, of course, true friendship does not contradict biblical principles.

I find it interesting to watch how the world tries to unite people in friendship through common interests, hobbies, and ideas, but then a trial comes, and it all collapses. And the world creates new clubs and societies. There is a goal, and there is unity, but there is no love or heartfelt affection.

But love has everything necessary and joins souls very simply and quickly.

Homework 144

1. What did you understand from this lesson?
2. Do you have friends whose language you do not understand?
3. Is friendship possible between people of different religions?
4. Is the presence of Christ important in friendships?
5. How should you treat family members if they are of a different spirit?
6. Does the Bible forbid friendship with people of a different spirit?

7. Please read Proverbs 29:27; 22:24-25; 2 Corinthians 6:14-16; Proverbs 13:20; 1 Corinthians 15:33; and 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 in the light of our lesson.
8. Which Bible verses came to your mind while studying this lesson?

Lesson 145. The Crossroads of Friendship

I remember an occasion when our whole family went out for a walk, and each of us chose a different direction, wanting everyone else to go exactly that way and under no circumstances in any other direction. It sounds foolish now, but at the time it was a major problem. It ended with each person going wherever he wanted, considering his own way the best. After that, we had no friendly fellowship for a long time because each of us considered himself right and deeply offended. At that time, I was not yet asking God for love to resolve such problems and acted as I thought was right. And my understanding that I was the head of the family and therefore decided how everyone should live greatly damaged relationships within the family and provoked resistance from those closest to me. It is very painful and shameful to remember this now. But I see that this kind of understanding is very common in our relationships with people.

Life brings human destinies together in friendly relationships, and we find friends who share our interests, rejoicing that someone thinks as I do. And we call this merging of hearts into one whole, moved by one idea and sharing the same interests, friendship. In the course of such relationships, I understand that my friend is becoming very close to me, that he knows a great deal about me and has access to the secrets of my life and soul, and I do not want to lose him. And considering how much we have shared at the table together, perhaps I will never find another person like him anywhere in life—and there is no need to. This friend meets all my emotional needs, and I need no one else.

When I was a teenager, I had a couple of friends with whom I had much in common. But one of them drowned. My mind could not comprehend it—how could he no longer exist? A year later, my other friend was killed in a fight that he himself had started. My friendship died together with these people. I was seventeen then; I did not know God, the street had been my teacher, and I

had no idea where to seek comfort. But the concept of friendship remained.

After that, life brought new interests and new acquaintances. I lived by the laws of this world and knew no others. All of this shaped my mind, making me unfit for Heaven and, more likely, even an enemy of God. Yet Jesus noticed such a good-for-nothing person and began drawing me to Himself. My sins did not deter Him; He simply wanted to show me His love for me, and He continues to do so to this day. I believed that I had a Friend and responded, but I carried my own ideas about friendship with me into my new life.

However, in my new spiritual growth, I received different laws from the Lord, and I liked them very much. Yet they were very difficult to put into practice, because God's law without God's love was a heavy burden that I had to carry out of duty. But I liked it, because I understood that this path was better than the one I had followed before. My own ideas about many things continued with me, and this trailer loaded with worldly knowledge greatly spoiled my life.

God gave me new friends in the church, but my former ideas about friendship destroyed these relationships, and I did not understand what was happening. Many brothers and sisters lived according to their own ideas, and we marched along in harmony until we reached the first crossroads of opinions, where we had to choose the right direction. If our interests did not coincide, we parted, and our friendship ended there. In the world, something might still have been repaired, but in spiritual life I believed that by yielding to someone I would betray Christ. I could not do that, and my friends thought the same way. So we went our separate ways, each taking his own road, yet all proceeding harmoniously toward the same goal by different paths and trying not to cross one another's paths. Meanwhile, they all seemed to me to be stubborn Pharisees. Of course, I did not consider myself one of them.

Perhaps I am painting the picture too darkly, and in reality not everything was so bleak. We still communicated, but the friendship that was so greatly needed was absent. Some friends

remained in spite of everything, but I had no correct understanding of such relationships.

Fortunately, the Lord did not leave me in that condition, for He loves me very much and wants to teach me something better.

And how painful it always is when you are walking through life with a friend, everything is wonderful between you, and suddenly you see a fork in the road. You choose the one correct and best path and are already directing your steps onto it, for it does not contradict the truth. But your friend confidently chooses another path, and you do not understand why he is so blind. You want to help him, but he resists. And the most commonplace thing is that this crossroads of opinions may be found on my plate, in the way I organise my leisure time, or in my wardrobe. Yet my pride inflates this into such a tremendous problem that taking one step aside is, to me, equal to renouncing the faith and committing the vilest betrayal of Christ, Who revealed these principles to me. Within a family, it can be even more intense and trivial. If one person believes that a banana should be peeled from the stem end and another cannot tolerate this, conflict is unavoidable. As a result, all your foolish relatives are to blame, while you yourself are a failure in life and the living embodiment of evil. This is a general description of the everyday problems that most often cause disagreements.

Unfortunately, I am not the only one like this. The root of this evil is the pride within my heart, which does not allow love to cleanse my mind but dictates its own rules and even uses the Bible to confirm me in my ambitions.

But love is not proud. It is love that drives this evil spirit from the heart and reveals the best solution to the problem with the least loss.

The fiercest war between friends takes place when two lonely egoists meet. He and she fall in love, decide to start a family, and then, within the family, seek to advance their own ambitions and habits as the common rule for everyone. Their love and friendship vanish somewhere, and they sit amid their

shattered plans, weeping over what has befallen them and asking why they have received such a trial. Yet before the wedding, everything was resolved without difficulty, and there were concessions and forbearance toward one another. But the problem is that infatuation took the place of love and, at the first crossroads, died of fear, unable to rise again. Yet life must go on, and then duty and obligation are called upon to help them continue their journey.

Friendship without love is a very difficult undertaking and extremely hard to manage. Every crossroads requires incredible effort to overcome, yet for the sake of friendship it is worth sacrificing oneself. Will anyone appreciate such a sacrifice? I do this and that for him, but he!!! Still, life must go on, so I offer myself as a sacrifice and wait for it to be appreciated—at least after my death.

But love resolves everything very quickly. Is there a crossroads ahead? Which way are you going? May I go with you? I want to understand why you chose this path; perhaps I have missed something. My way is not bad either; shall we walk side by side? Please do not be troubled that I think this way; I simply do not yet know another way and am only learning. Forgive me for acting as I did. I am very sorry that I caused you so much distress. Shall we find a way to put this right together?

Love is inventive in finding the best solutions that are not in its own favour, yet in the end it wins. It knows how to 'peel bananas' from either end and sees the solution to a conflict long before it arrives.

Homework 145

1. What new things did you learn from this lesson?
2. Do you have disagreements with your friends? How do you respond to them?
3. Are you offended by those who hold an opinion different from yours?
4. Why are relationships often destroyed by differing opinions?
5. Do you consider your opinion correct on every issue? If not, how do you treat a friend who holds a different position?

6. What is the cause of disagreements? And who is their author?
7. Please read 1 Corinthians 3:3; 1 Timothy 6:3-5; 1 Peter 3:8-12; 1 Corinthians 11:18-19; 1 Peter 1:22; and 1 Timothy 1:5 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 146. To Lay Down One's Life for One's Friends

I remember an occasion during my military service when I had a conflict with a fellow serviceman from one of the Central Asian republics. To settle the dispute by force, he invited his friend. When they entered the room where I was with my friend, they first decided to resolve the matter through negotiation. When that did not work, they started a fight. If my friend had said even one word in my defence, everything might have been resolved peacefully, but he sat silently and watched everything that was happening with indifference. When the fight began, he continued to sit in silence. Perhaps he was paralysed by fear, while I defended myself as best I could. In the end, my two opponents ran away bleeding. I decided that it was all over and began putting my torn clothing in order. After a while, a commotion arose in our quarters. A crowd of fellow countrymen of the soldiers who had been beaten came for me and called me out to settle the score. My fellow servicemen were all around me, including my comrades-in-arms and the servicemen on duty in the battery, but not one of them stood up for me. As a result, I was left alone against a group of about ten men. Of course, it did not end very well for me, but by God's mercy I remained alive, although I did not know the Lord. By then, my military service was coming to an end and I was preparing to be discharged, but I had to spend the rest of my term of service in the infirmary.

My understanding of friends changed radically; I realised that I had none.

Before His death, Jesus taught: John 15:13: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." What did He mean?

Throughout all ages, God's children have been subjected to persecution and death. It was not difficult to identify them among any group of people. Peter's sad experience of denying Christ taught many that one could deny the Lord very quickly

by uttering a single careless word. And when one person was seized, they tried by persuasion, promises, or torture to learn the names and whereabouts of others who also believed in Jesus. Faithful friends kept this secret until death.

But Christ's definition of love for friends applies not only to such events, but also to peaceful times when there is freedom. Today, upon the first request, we readily provide any authorities with lists of all our church members, understanding that there is nothing frightening about this. And our social-media accounts openly show the whole world all our friends and fellow believers, even those whom we do not know. Any specialist can very quickly determine all my spiritual interests and the particular features of my faith. And it seems that no one intends to kill anyone. But it will not always be so.

In our peaceful time, the church is suffering great losses. Souls are perishing; as children grow up, they leave for the world; and those who remain often have hostility and disagreements among themselves, dividing into groups according to their interests. Satan could not have imagined a better time.

And we are approaching the point when a righteous and holy person will soon be a 'black sheep' in the church. He will be expelled by his fellow believers for his stubbornness and firmness. Unfortunately, this is already happening, though fortunately not everywhere. And in such a situation, how does one lay down one's life for one's friends?

I will say honestly that first I want to find them, make them true friends, rejoice in this friendship, and I have no desire at all to die and leave them alone in sorrow. But how else can I show my great love for them? Or perhaps this definition has another meaning as well?

A little earlier, we spoke about the fact that our life consists of time. And if I spend it on my friends and their salvation, then by doing so I give them a part of my life. If I decide to start a family with my friend of the opposite sex, then by this I give my life to that person, and that person gives his or her life to me, and together we belong to and serve one another.

The money we earn by applying our hands and minds to our work also contains a part of our life, because to obtain it we devote much time to our labour; and in the form of the funds we receive, we give this time to our friends, easing their needs. A part of my life—that is, of my soul—is invested in my money. It is not merely pieces of paper, but something that cost me part of my life.

Sometimes I have experienced the following. At a gathering of people, my opponents attacked me, wishing to humiliate me or demonstrate their own importance. How I wanted my friends to stand up for me and simply support me with words of defence and encouragement, but they watched with interest to see how I would get out of the situation and remained silent. I had to ask Jesus for help with all my soul, and help came. And how many times have I myself been such a silent friend, indifferently watching as the world dealt cruelly with my friends and doing nothing to save them?

And when a friend leaves for the world to die there, am I ready to lay down my life for him, pleading in prayer for his salvation and trying to do everything possible to keep him from taking that step? To my shame, I will say that sometimes I do not even understand what I need to do. Sometimes I merely watch and regret his decision, doing nothing more than respecting his choice.

When I had just come to God and believed in Christ, I looked for a church not according to true biblical teaching, but according to whether it had people who needed me and would be interested in me. It was foolish, but this was how I searched for new friends and went from church to church, thirsting for friendly fellowship. I did not yet know the laws and principles of friendship that we are studying, but intuitively I understood that they should exist among God's people. And they do exist, but the best place for these laws is in my heart.

When I write these lessons, every morning I spend two hours of my life on them. This time is enough to compose one lesson that can be read in six minutes. I set aside this time in the hope that this part of my life will benefit someone, and then throughout

the day I check the homework, rejoicing that my time has not been spent in vain. And I thank God that in this way I can give hours and minutes to my friends. How joyful it is to hear that they find time to receive my contribution to their lives and spend portions of their lives receiving it.

And how much of our lifetime do we give to one another in fellowship? Am I ready to lay down my life to remind a friend about myself and ask about his needs so that I may take part in meeting them? Sometimes there is no time for this, and sometimes there is no desire. So many things to do.

Sometimes I simply want to die for someone—to fall asleep and never wake up—and thus give my life. But what meaning would there be in such a foolish death? It is better to live and ask for wisdom about how best to give my life for God's glory.

There are many questions that are difficult to answer honestly. But it is always easy to invent a beautiful answer. How many times have I imagined myself a hero in future battles, but when they came into my life, I 'tucked my tail between my legs' and fell. But Jesus is teaching us.

And the time is approaching when everyone who kills us will think that by doing so he is serving God. We will all pass through the fire. But some of us will burn in it, while others will be purified.

Love gives the correct answer to this definition of Christ. Love itself is the readiness to lay down one's life for one's friend without fearing the consequences, for it cannot live or act in any other way.

Homework 146

1. Did you learn anything new from this lesson?
2. How do you understand the definition of greater love through the desire to lay down one's life?
3. How can one lay down one's life for one's friends and still remain alive?
4. What will happen to me if I give my life for a friend but do not have love?

5. Is it possible to lay down one's life for one's friends while being guided by the carnal spirit?
6. What examples do you know from life in which someone laid down his life for a friend? Please share them.
7. Please read 1 Corinthians 13:3; 1 John 3:16; John 3:16; 10:11-12; and 13:1 in the light of our lesson.
8. What Bible verses came to mind as you studied this lesson?

Lesson 147. A Good Fishing Spot

If you ask any fisherman whether it makes a difference where one fishes, I do not think he will say that it does not. However, the main thing is to have a fishing rod. Fishing is a whole science that must be mastered. And in every science there are rules, as well as exceptions to the rules. Every fisherman has a special place where the fish bite best, where there are many of them, and where it is simply interesting and pleasant to engage in his favourite activity.

It is also very important to have the proper tackle and bait, for every fish has its own characteristics and tastes.

There are also 'good fishing spots' for catching friends. One of them is the table at which you eat wholesome food together.

If there is a vacant place at the table that no one is claiming, you can take a very advantageous position for gaining new friends. The atmosphere is relaxed, everyone is enjoying the meal, conversation becomes a pleasant addition to the beginning of friendly relations, and hearts are open to receiving a new person. And if the soul is inclined towards friendship, it can be experienced very quickly at the table. Later, that person becomes dear and close for life. And if this happens while visiting someone or at large gatherings, there is no need to think about preparing the dishes and spending time on it.

This art is taken from the life of Jesus. He greatly enjoyed eating with different people. Publicans and sinners invited Him, and He ate with them, which at that time was a challenge to society and accepted norms. But by His conduct and His attitude towards people, Christ broke down such stereotypes, giving me an example to follow.

If a person is not open to fellowship or does not wish to develop a relationship with you, then your presence at the table obliges neither you nor him to anything; you are simply eating together.

For example, if I simply approach a person and begin a conversation or try to become acquainted with him, in most cases I will be rejected, but at the table everything happens the other way round.

The gift of hospitality also includes offering food and eating it together at one table, accompanied by mutual fellowship. Sometimes this unites strangers so closely that for the rest of their lives they gratefully remember that invitation and the refreshments.

Even in Eternity, a marriage supper is being prepared for all the redeemed. We will all sit together at one table with Jesus and joyfully listen to His every word, admire Him, and look at one another with love as we anticipate the joy of new acquaintances. We will eat the fruit of the Tree of Life and other delicacies. And our kind Jesus will see the travail of His Soul and be satisfied.

In His message to Laodicea, our Lord promises that if anyone hears His voice and opens the door to Him, He will come in and sup with him, and he with Jesus. That is, in gratitude for an open heart, Jesus offers to share a meal together. In this friendly fellowship, He will be able to reveal Himself to me and also open me to Himself.

Please remember all the meals you have shared with strangers. During the meal they became friends or good acquaintances. The wall of separation fell, and you now have access to that person as someone you know, and he knows you.

When a single man wants to get to know his new female friend better, he looks for an opportunity to spend time with her at a table so that, while enjoying drinks and food, he may learn more about her. For this reason, he invites her to a café or restaurant so that they can become better acquainted. There they come to know each other better. And if they have an opportunity to prepare the food together, they learn even more about each other and retain this knowledge throughout their lives. There is something about food that draws us closer together.

When I understood this, I tried intentionally to gain friends for myself at the table, and I tell you—it works. At first I was surprised myself, and then I began using it to find new friends or maintain relationships with old ones. Miracles take place as unfamiliar hearts draw closer together.

It always makes me sad to watch those who withdraw into a corner and silently eat their bread while looking down at their plates. Unfortunately, there are such people among us as well, but they too need help in breaking down their loneliness through our presence and friendliness. The gift of communication has been given to us precisely for fellowship and for expressing our love in words. And it is so joyful to see your kind and encouraging words enter a heart and, like a seed, sprout and bear good fruit. What happiness it is to love someone whom you did not know before, but whom you have come to know, discovered, welcomed, and valued as a friend for life.

It does not always happen as simply as I describe it here, but if you move confidently towards the goal while being friendly and loving with a pure heart, the result will correspond. In any case, in the eyes of Heaven you will be an overcomer, even if the new friend runs away in fear or anger.

A loving heart respects another person's freedom and senses the boundaries that it does not cross.

If your neighbour runs away in fear or anger, this does not necessarily mean that he was frightened or angered by you. It shows that he is afraid of fellowship and friendship. Perhaps he is ill-tempered by nature and does not wish to maintain such relationships with anyone.

Love, being meek, does not display aggression, but very gently seeks points of connection and paths to the heart.

But it is necessary to take into account that my potential friend sat down at the table to eat, while I am merely an addition to this event; therefore, he may not even look in my direction. However, this does not trouble me. There is always a fish

waiting for its own hook with its own bait, but if it is hungry, then it has a better chance of becoming yours.

In this comparison, it is very important to remember that you are catching the fish not to eat it, but to place it in the aquarium of your heart, where it will feel comfortable and safe, where the tenderness of your soul will heal its wounds and work miracles of love in its heart.

From the moment your little fish enters your aquarium, it is yours and needs care, nourishment, and attention.

Jesus comes into my life to remain in it for ever. He places me in His aquarium called the 'Ocean of Love' and watches to ensure that the predatory fish that enter this space are overcome by me and drawn to Him as new members of God's family.

A table spread with food has its own laws and a tremendous influence upon the human heart. And when my friend sits down at it, his senses and perception are very active. If the food is delicious, beautiful, and wholesome, then against its background I will appear the same. But if my friend is gnawing on a dry crust, then becoming closely acquainted with me may perhaps be associated with that hard food.

Love for people, tender words, attentiveness, respect, and the gift of friendliness can together bring about great transformations in the heart of an unfamiliar table companion. Most likely, he will not immediately become my friend, but the seed of love will be sown in that lonely heart, and my further conduct will contribute to its growth.

And, of course, my desire to have new friends will play the main role.

But I too do not always see a new friend in every person. I may simply eat and fail to notice my neighbour if I have other purposes for that time. Yet, understanding the powerful influence of a shared meal, I take this knowledge to heart and can use it for God's glory. Love teaches me many useful things and takes effect when I decide to apply them in my life.

Homework 147

1. What did you find interesting for yourself in this lesson?
2. In the light of this lesson, what marks the beginning of friendly relations?
3. Why did Jesus accept the hospitality of sinners?
4. Do you think a shared meal can be considered worship of God? Why did Jesus prepare the marriage supper for the redeemed?
5. What touches people's hearts during a conversation?
6. On what important condition does Jesus make us fishers of sinners? Matthew 4:19.
7. Please read Matthew 9:10-13; Hosea 6:6; Luke 19:5, 8; 7:33-35; 7:44-48; Acts 2:46; Romans 12:13; Matthew 22:9; Revelation 3:20; 22:3-4; Romans 12:20; Proverbs 11:25; Philippians 4:5; 2 Timothy 2:24-26; and Isaiah 53:10 in the light of our lesson.

Lesson 148. Speaking About God Without Unnecessary Words

Jesus possessed every gift in perfection. He had all the rights and permissions accepted in the spiritual world, and He used them as necessary. The most vivid of His experiences have come down to us as well. And if we examine what the Lord occupied Himself with most, we can see that He spent most of His time with His disciples and, in His public ministry, more time healing the sick than preaching the word. And when speaking with people, Jesus did not give direct answers, but usually responded with a question of His own or revealed the essence of the truth.

I have always wondered why so little was written about Christ and why many of His disciples did not leave us a single line of instruction or testimony about our Saviour. I would very much like to know what He said in personal conversations, how He testified to people about God, whether He had a sense of humour, and how His cheerfulness manifested itself among people.

How I would love to sit at His feet, listen to His stories, and simply admire the One Who came to save me, Who loved me long before I came into existence.

If only I could catch even one glimpse of this wonderful Man. But He said that blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed, and this makes me glad. Just imagine: we love the One Whom we have never seen, listen to the One Who has never spoken a single audible word to many of us, and obey the One Who is present in our imagination. It is interesting that, although we have different perceptions of God and His love, we are united in this matter.

I often hear the expression, 'I will tell others about God,' and I have become so accustomed to it that I do not even think about what it means. Now I have decided to understand what role this plays in my life and whether I do it.

The phrase is very good, but I have also noticed that it has become something of a stock phrase. It serves as an excuse or a screen that conceals my ignorance, my laziness, and my unbelief.

There are simple things that I do not need to tell people because they can see them for themselves. For example, I do not explain to anyone that I am a man. And that is so. I do not hide this truth and am ready to defend it, but for some reason no one asks me about it.

I have also noticed that when I begin speaking with strangers, even without saying a single word to them about God, they ask me in Whom I believe or to which denomination I belong. Sometimes they try to understand this from the way I live.

I never forbid people to use foul language in my presence, but for some reason they themselves decide not to do so when they come to know me better.

When I begin to show people love and friendliness, for some reason they understand me without unnecessary words.

I also find it surprising that many of you, simply by reading these lessons, begin to consider me your personal friend. Moreover, you are so sure of this that you even write or tell me about it, although I have not personally declared our friendship. Yet you understood me without words, accepted me, and made room for me in your heart, and then told me about it. I accept this, but I did not speak directly about friendship—how did you know? Some of you consider me a friend but, out of modesty, will never say so for fear of being rejected. But I am inclined towards friendliness and am ready to give it to anyone within the boundaries of that person's choice.

In previous lessons, we touched upon the fact that friendship contains an element of the supernatural, and this is so. When I come into contact with other people, God wonderfully begins to use me according to the situation and the other circumstances in which I find myself. I may say one thing, but people hear what they want to hear or what I represent. And I know that something similar happens with every believer.

When I tell a stranger that God loves him, he most likely hears, 'I want you to become like me.' Although I do not say this, that is precisely what he sees in me.

What does 'speaking about God' mean? I do not wish to diminish this phrase, but I want to understand what I put into it and what others hear in it.

There was a time when I made it a rule in every conversation, and it did not matter to me whether people were interested or not. I directed all my communication towards this and then could not understand why people did not want to maintain a relationship with me. Later I changed my approach and tried to work towards it from a distance, attempting to catch the right moment to introduce an element of truth into the conversation. And often our communication smoothly moved into a spiritual direction.

Romans 10:17 states: 'So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.' Knowing this principle, I try to sow the word wherever possible. But the Lord also gives me an understanding of the kind of soil with which I am dealing so that I can foresee the result. If all my efforts lead nowhere and the result is zero, then I think something should be reconsidered and another approach tried.

If in business I work merely for the sake of working and make no profit, I will quickly understand that I need to change my policy and seek something better. But when I labour and testify fruitlessly for years, for some reason I consider it a spiritual achievement. I believe that the result is important here as well.

To speak about God, one must have this God in one's heart, thoughts, and motives; one must speak with God. And God is Love, and this cannot be hidden. His desire is that this love should also be visible to other people. And this is possible if it exists. People have very many questions about love to which they want to know and hear the answers. And love answers with joy.

When I go to people, I am more concerned about whether I will be able to tell them about my love or show it, thereby revealing

God to them through this attitude and assuring them that He is better than I am. Sometimes I return to my old ways and begin to tell them directly the truths that are clear to me, but people close themselves off. Love, however, finds the key to the heart and searches for the best ways.

One philosopher said that he would believe in God if he saw a true Christian. And in this there is a challenge from the world to us as believers.

I think that if I demonstrate my holiness and knowledge to people, but my love to God, that would not be a very proper decision. But if I reverse these, there will be more benefit.

I cannot always testify about the truth or about God to everyone. But I am ready to do so. I can sow by the wayside, I know how to scatter seed among the stones, and I can even sow among weeds. God has plenty of this seed. But do I need wisdom in this matter? Do I act in a similar way with the money that I earn through my labour? I think that sometimes it is necessary to conduct a deep analysis of my activity—for my own sake. By testifying merely for the sake of testifying, I will learn something, but if it produces no result, then I think this matter should be reconsidered.

Love and friendship have nothing but advantages in this respect. They prepare the soil for the true seed and bear much fruit. Through you, they gain many friends for the Lord.

Show people God—and there is a result in this. Sometimes many words are unnecessary, but faith comes by hearing. Let your heart speak, and let your love for people testify to a loving God. But this must be learned, and I think our school teaches it.

Homework 148

1. What new things did you learn in this lesson?
2. What did the Lord spend most of His time doing during His ministry?
3. What does 'speaking about God' mean to you?
4. What do you think should be taken into account when the word is being sown?

5. What can prepare the soil for successful sowing?
6. What is the purpose of exhortation?
7. Please read Ecclesiastes 10:12; Proverbs 20:5; 15:4; Isaiah 32:20; Psalm 126:5; John 13:1; 1 John 2:6, 10; 3:23; 5:16; 3:18; Romans 10:9-10; 1 Timothy 1:5; and James 1:5 in the light of this lesson.

Lesson 149. Friendship in Our Time

Human beings were originally created to love, and this quality of the soul is embedded in the nature of every person.

Unfortunately, sin has distorted this characteristic, and what we have today does not always correspond to the original plan.

Upbringing in the family and at school, the characteristics of the local culture, and the mass media—all this influences the development of the mind and shapes a person's character. And it happens that what was instilled in childhood accompanies me until old age.

When it comes to the understanding of friendship, everyone sees it differently, and most often this understanding is shaped by public opinion. And this opinion erects high barriers in my mind that I do not dare to cross. If I have been convinced that friendship in a particular form is impossible, I will not try to change this, but will build my relationships within the bounds of that understanding.

Friendliness breaks down many traditional notions of friendship. When God endows me with this gift, He also gives me wisdom to manage it, keeping relationships pure, loving, and holy. I have to reconsider many established ideas about friendship and introduce new rules. But if I live within the old boundaries, I will be enclosed by these walls, and one day my development will stop, because I will be unable to overcome what I have made impossible for myself.

Today we have the internet and mobile communications. This is a significant breakthrough in the history of humanity, and this innovation must be taken into account.

Some people live in the old way and do not want to change anything in their lives because they have decided to retain the simplicity of their approach to life, and this should be taken into account. There are many opinions about the influence of these innovations on the individual. We will not dwell on this, but all this diversity must be considered and accepted. And when accepting these discoveries, we should use the new

opportunities that do not fit within the old culture. When young and elderly people come together, they do not understand one another. A conflict between generations arises.

Thanks to the internet and its capabilities, one can quickly master any field of knowledge and become well-known, famous, or wealthy. One can create a community and gather like-minded people from all over the world. One can establish a church and preach in it to the whole world.

And one can make new friends and build friendships with them without ever having met face to face. These features of our time should be accepted and used for God's glory. At the same time, help and wisdom from above are necessary.

God understands the internet very well and knows how it can be used for good in making friends through it.

But it must be remembered that the concept of friendship on social media is also very vague. For example, I have more than one thousand friends on Facebook, many of whom I do not know at all, but they are listed as friends. My daughter believes that I maintain relationships with all of them and is therefore jealous of them. And because I am friendly, I do not mind becoming better acquainted with each person and then loving that person personally.

And here the question arises: where can I find time for all my friends? I want to give an answer as I understand it.

How many friends will I have in Eternity? I think that number will include all the redeemed, all the holy Angels, and representatives of other planets. Together they will make up an impressive group. And one of my goals is to know all of them more closely and deeply.

Let us imagine that there will be about one billion of them. Each one will need to be given enough time, and I will need to enter into the essence of that person's soul, discovering a new planet for myself. This will require a certain amount of effort on my part and a great deal of time. I will also need a good memory and a profound thought process in order to absorb

everything I learn. I cannot manage without God. I hope for a miracle in my mind so that I may be everywhere and with everyone at the same time, while retaining everything in my memory and developing endlessly.

And God will endow me with this capacity of perception and will continually renew and perfect it.

And Eternal life has already begun for me through faith in Jesus Christ. I already live according to the laws of Heaven, which are set forth in the Bible. I try to comprehend the essence of the union between the earthly and the Heavenly.

My understanding of friendship has undergone changes, but I am not suffering any loss from it now. I do not lose friends, even when there are very many of them, but become deeply attached to them and note all their individual characteristics so that I can build relationships while avoiding 'sharp corners' and showing tact and love. Without God this is impossible, but with Him everything is within my power. And He gives me these relationships and arranges matters so that, whenever possible, they are mutual and do not descend upon me all at once.

And when I am burdened with something beyond my strength, the Lord waits for me to give these cares to Him. And He gladly takes everything that I cast upon Him.

Christ's presence is necessary in every relationship and every friendship; otherwise, it will be an emotional, earthly, carnal undertaking that will one day collapse and bring much suffering. In Christ, however, every friendship acquires a special status and meaning. It is no longer an earthly decision, but something that binds us with eternal ties, unconditionally and forever.

A friend is like a child: once this person was not in our plans, but through my deep knowledge of God and our relationship with Him, a person called a new friend appeared in our life. This person did not exist there before, but now that person does, and this is an inheritance from the Lord. And all children are different; among friends, too, no two are alike.

Of course, I myself have my own character and individual traits, so I do not claim to possess the most correct understanding of truth. Jesus is the Truth, and in Him lies the meaning of eternal development and progress.

We should not be afraid of the new opportunities we have today to make true friends, but it is also important for us to become genuine ourselves. And once again we come to Christ. Without Him this is impossible, but I can do all things through Jesus Who strengthens me.

If I set boundaries in my mind for my understanding of friendship, God will work within the boundaries of my perception and bless me in little things, if I allow Him. If I go farther and dive deeper, He goes with me and opens new opportunities.

Friendship is a boundless ocean of discovery and development that each of us should explore and expand. It has no boundaries; it extends into Eternity, where it will always develop and amaze us with endless discoveries. But to know the eternal, a union with the Eternal God is necessary; otherwise, everything will be limited by earthly bounds and interests. God, however, makes all things new. He greatly delights in restoring the ruins of my shattered stereotypes according to His eternal standard.

And now the Lord is opening unique prospects in the discovery of love and friendship, but these fields of knowledge should be studied and developed in one's personal life, and Jesus will teach and guide in this direction everyone who chooses this path.

And my friends are those people who will also support me in difficult times. In answer to their prayers, God will perform miracles in my life, and in answer to my prayers—in the lives of my friends.

We should not be afraid of the distinctive features of our time, but should use them wisely for God's glory.

And the Lord will give us wisdom as to how best to do this and accomplish it.

Homework 149

1. What interesting things did you find in this lesson?
2. For what purpose were human beings originally created? Is God's purpose in creating them still relevant in our time?
3. What prevents a person from looking at friendship in a new way?
4. Who helps us build proper relationships with other people?
5. What opportunities for friendship extend before us here and in Eternity?
6. Can the internet help us find new friends?
7. Does the prospect of having a great many friends frighten you?
8. Please read Psalm 111:10; 119:113; 127:3; Isaiah 58:12; 60:3; 2:3; and Romans 12:2, 10, 13 in the light of this lesson.

Lesson 150. A Deliberate Attack

And now we have come to the culmination of our theoretical knowledge about friendship, which smoothly transitions into practical skills.

I will describe how this happens in my life, and you may decide for yourselves how suitable this method is for you. When I begin to explain this subject, for some reason everyone becomes very joyful. Perhaps each person imagines himself as the 'victim of the attack' and anticipates the consequences.

As we have noted before, an overcomer is one who does not sit in a fortified defence, but attacks. It is easy to define this, but how can it be put into practice?

Friendship begins with my decision to become a friend to a particular person, and it is confirmed by the Holy Spirit as this act of will is put into practice.

Sometimes this happens unexpectedly, when my new friend, knowing of my friendliness, finds me and lets me know that he is interested in me. Then my heart immediately responds to such a challenge and rejoices over the new soul whom it receives. After that, in prayer, I ask for a blessing upon our friendship.

But it may be that my future friend does not know that I am friendly and would not mind having a relationship with him, and then I may wait for him all my life without ever seeing him come. So as not to deprive him of the joy of friendship with me, I decide to take the first step. I think public transport or the street is not the best 'fishing spot,' although an appeal can be made there as well.

And so I choose the 'victim' of my attack. The very first and best thing to do at once is to pray for God's blessing upon this undertaking. I begin to study this person and ask for special wisdom so that I may understand which little key fits the heart of my future friend. I pray for this soul and ask for special blessings in this person's life. My heart is ready to accept this

person forever, while leaving my friend the right to choose what to do with me.

A person's freedom of choice must remain inviolable, and special tenderness is needed in this attack so that these boundaries are not violated and the relationship is not built upon a sense of duty, fear, or guilt. It is also worth making sure that I am of interest to my friend, so that I do not torment his heart by irritating him with my offers or help. I pray for special discernment, and the Lord answers.

If there is an urgent need, I can even fast in order to make sure how sincere I am in my decision to be a friend and so that the Lord may also put His Hand to my efforts.

And so I approach this soul and begin a conversation. Depending on the situation, I may immediately declare my desire to be a friend and explain that, for now, it is a one-sided decision and places no obligation upon the other person. At least this person now has an idea about me and can decide how to respond. But the word has been spoken, the seed has been sown, and the process of receiving and germinating this message begins in my friend's mind.

And I ask for special wisdom about how to conduct myself from that point forward. I try to understand what suits my neighbour, what he does not like, which subjects interest him, and what his soul loves. I immerse myself in the world of his interests and expectations and look for those points of contact through which I can cleave to him with all my soul.

To be a friend is my one-sided decision, and it carries the danger that I will be rejected and will have to go on living with that, while the decision to be a friend remains and I can no longer change it. So as not to trouble a heart in vain, I do not aim this weapon at the first person I meet, but choose the one whom the providence of the Lord has brought into my life.

I do not think about how our friendship will continue; first I plan how to begin it, and I entrust all the consequences to God.

But the most important thing, after all the decisions and prayers, is to take the first step and attack. The attack may take different forms, but its essence is one: to make myself known, to let the person understand that I exist, that I rejoice over this friend's appearance in my life, and that I truly need him. I may express this through a simple greeting, an offer of help, or participation in his needs. Everything depends on the situation. Then I watch the response very carefully and pray.

It is very important to notice the good qualities and positive traits in my friend's character. I can gather this information from his acquaintances and friends simply by asking them to tell me something good about this person.

If my carnal nature begins to object to such a decision and tries to persuade me to abandon this undertaking and not interfere in the person's life, I will not listen to that voice. Life without this friend in my heart would be uninteresting, and how could I look him in the eyes throughout Eternity, knowing that I could have become his friend while still on Earth, but did not? What shame I would feel in my own eyes!

When the first step has been taken and I have entered the person's personal space through my greeting or a thoughtfully chosen approach, I begin to observe the response in order to understand what to do next.

And here agape love is greatly needed, for it can very quickly reveal to me whom I am dealing with and what I should do next. In union with me, it begins to influence the heart of my new friend, showing me the best way to act and what should or should not be said. Sometimes love begins with words of love; sometimes it touches a friend; sometimes it helps him in his needs or spends time with him. And with some people, I can speak directly about my intentions and declare my desire to be friends. Love has enormous persuasive power, and it should not be ignored. After all this comes a time of waiting, which may last a fraction of a second or extend for several days. But the seed of friendship has been sown, and it needs time.

Perhaps my friend has no time for me and already has enough cares and other friends, and he will let me know this immediately. Yet my task is to convince him that I am special and purposeful, that I will be one who thinks about the happiness of his friends and does something for it, and that I need nothing from my friend except him and his heart.

And I begin to comprehend what can make this wonderful person happy. Not everything is within my power, but I have myself and I have my heart, which loves at all times and can give itself for eternal use. With this arsenal I enter the battle and attack, unwilling to leave my friend to live in this world without my friendship.

Then, having reached the goal and gained another victory, I continually think about this person's happiness, periodically reminding him of myself within the limits of his acceptance and desire to have me in his life.

There is no single rule for everyone. Every person is a new discovery and an unusual experience. And this is a special joy and experience for my heart, even if, at first glance, nothing has worked out.

An overcomer is one who rises from his chair and goes on the offensive, leaving the clearing of the territory and the consequences to the Lord. God Himself goes before me and prepares the way for the battle. This is a very fierce war. All my fears, my selfishness, my laziness, my alienation, and my loneliness rise up against me, and together they declare that I may lose them forever and must make a very difficult choice. I choose love and friendship, and I go on the offensive. May the Lord help me.

Homework 150

1. What did you understand from this lesson?
2. Do you have your own 'strategy of attack'? Please share this experience.
3. Have you ever gained friends whom you personally chose?
4. What role does the Holy Spirit play in joining the hearts of two previously unacquainted friends?

5. Is it worthwhile to think about a friend's happiness, and what should be done for this?
6. Is it worthwhile to have friends in this last time?
7. Would you like to try this strategy described in the lesson and see how it works in life?
8. Please read Luke 16:9 and share how you understand this verse in the light of our lesson.
9. Please read Philippians 4:8; 1 John 4:10-11; Romans 5:5-8; and Matthew 4:19 in the light of our lesson.