

A row of colorful books on a shelf, with the text 'Love The Final Ingredient' overlaid. The books are in various colors including red, orange, yellow, green, and blue. The text is in a black serif font.

Love The Final Ingredient

By Rondall Reynoso

On *Faith on View*, I posted a powerful article by Heath Veuleman entitled “[What’s Love Got to Do With It?](#)” The article got me thinking about so many different issues. One of the main issues though ties into some artwork I began working on in 2003.

In 2 Peter 1:5-9, Peter gives a recipe for spiritual maturity.

But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of

our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. (2 Peter 1:5-9)



Virtue Series, 2003-2010

This passage was important for me artistically when I was struggling to really unpack the heart of my artwork. In this passage, the given for a follower of Christ is that they have faith. That is the most basic element in being a disciple. To that faith Peter provides a sequential list of things to add- virtue (the commitment to do right),

knowledge, self-control (Temperance in the KJV), perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love. In my artwork, the fact that as an artist I made art was the given. As a believer, the first things I need to add to my faith are virtue and knowledge. As an artist, the primary elements in my work were the line and the drip.

One thing that occurred to me over the years as I meditated on this passage is how backward so many evangelicals have it.

Depending of the stripe of evangelicalism our instinct is either to first add love or godliness, often interpreted as holiness, to our faith. But, these are actually toward the end of the recipe. First we add virtue. Literally, it means manliness but the idea is that we add the commitment to do right. Then we add knowledge. This actually makes a ton of sense. It should seem self-evident that if we are going to do right we need to be committed to doing right and we also need to know what is right. In many churches knowledge is really looked down upon, not necessarily in rhetoric but in practice.

As an aside, there is also the issue of Gnosticism. For many people, any focus on knowledge gets tied to the ancient heresy of Gnosticism. Gnostic doctrine famously required secret knowledge as an element of salvation and I certainly would condemn that. But, the real issue of Gnosticism was their conception of God. In large part (it must be acknowledged that Gnosticism was not a monolithic movement), Gnostics believed that the Jewish God was evil and that the benevolent and good Jesus was sent to earth by a greater deity to save us from the Jewish God. This is of course an over simplification but it gets at the point. Our fear of knowledge is often tied to the Gnostic heresy but it is our lack of knowledge that allows us to do so.

Back to the main point- the recipe. After virtue and knowledge, we add more elements that lead to spiritual maturity: self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and finally love. I won't belabor the point but I think a little reflection really can make clear the logic of this progression. What really struck me was how love is

the capstone of the list. It isn't that we have faith and then add love. There are a litany of elements that come before love. Why?



Scripture is clear as to the importance of love. In 1 John, John goes so far as to say that one “who does not love does not know God.” In 1 Corinthians Paul argues that out of the great virtues of faith, hope, and love that love is the greatest. He even argues that love is greater than the power to work miracles!

If all that is true, why is love then the last element? I believe it is because if we do not lay the proper foundation then the love that we add to our faith is not Biblical, Godly love but worldly love. I

think maybe this can be more easily seen in the issue of holiness/ godliness. It is all too common in churches for the Godliness or holiness we teach to not be grounded in knowledge, self-control, and perseverance. Rather than a Godliness that reflects God we actually often teach a holiness that is more reflective of the Pharisee. Rather than teaching our congregants to engage with a living and loving God we teach them to follow a list of statutes, a legal code.

When it comes to love, there are a variety of perversions that we can bring in from our worldly perspectives. One that I see most often ties our conception of love to our emotional response. Jack Crabtree, a philosopher at [Gutenberg College](#) who I respect has said, “There are two kinds of people in the world. There’s philosophers and

drug addicts. And, Christianity is the drug of choice for a lot of people.” I see this often in how people approach the issue of spiritual maturity. Many do not see spiritual maturity as developing greater consonance and relationship with truth but as maintaining a spiritual high. The problem is that to maintain that spiritual high you often have to live in a disconnect with the everyday realities of our lives. This harms us spiritually and pragmatically (it is completely inconsistent of the spiritual experiences recorded in scripture, those of the prophets and apostles) and destroys our testimony to the world that begins to see us as odd balls who are not truly connected to reality. For many evangelicals, their conception of love is shallow and self-centered not the deep profound love called for in scripture.

This sort of shallow love also gives us a false sense of how loving we are. We become convinced we are loving because we have an emotional feeling which we have connected to love. I would guess that most of us have heard in a church or seen on Facebook the person who spouts hate claiming that it is love. The problem is that it is virtually impossible to feel self-satisfied when holding ourselves against the Biblical concept of love. Think of the story of the Good Samaritan. How many of us love our neighbor in that way? It is also interesting to think about who the characters would be if Jesus were talking to evangelical Christians today? Would it be the pastor and the evangelist who walk on the other side of the road and the homosexual who helps the person in need? If that were the case would we be able to hear Jesus’ message or would we be distracted by our disdain for homosexuals as the first century Jews were about the Samaritans?

We tend to justify our love by looking at how we treat those who return our love. But, Jesus pointed out that even the tax collectors (the lowliest of all people) love those who love them. The real test is how we treat those who disagree with us, who disturb us, those we find objectionable.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul tells us that love is patient (I gain encouragement from the NKJV translation suffers long), kind, does not envy, is not arrogant, or rude, it does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable, nor resentful,

it does not rejoice in wrong doing, it rejoices in truth, and it believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, and never ends.

How do we measure up against that? How do I measure up against that? I think all of us tend to think about those traits in relationship to those who we like. But, scripture calls us to love those who spitefully use us. Ouch! I've had several situations like this over the last few years, some professional some personal. My situation at Louisiana College has been well documented on *Faith on View*. It is easy to justify the anger. I was wronged. I was spitefully used. But, God's call is for me to love the administration at Louisiana College despite that. While hanging on the cross Jesus prayed that the Father would forgive those who were killing him. I have to admit that that is not how I felt toward members of the administration when they violated my rights and frankly did horrible, deplorable things.

My cry to God was not for their forgiveness but for my vindication.

There have been similar situations in my personal life over the last couple of years. When I am asked why I continue to try my answer has been that "love suffers long." To be honest, I haven't always "felt" love when I have said that. But, I am committed to seeking out Peter's recipe for spiritual maturity in my life. In my own broken flawed way I am committed to working it out in fear and trembling. I fail...constantly.

I am not always patient. Even when others think I am being patient I see the impatience that I am hiding under the



Temperance Series, 2010

surface. I am not always kind. I seek to be. But, I fail at times. I can even be flat-out rude. I envy. At times, I am arrogant. I am an artist and an academic. These are two fields that almost celebrate an over inflated ego. There is no doubt that I have an ego. When I look back at the me of 20 years ago, I see that I have grown but I also see how far I have to go. I tend to be laid back but there are times when I insist on my way for no further reason than it is my way. I can be irritable...ask my kids...ask my wife. I can be resentful. Do I struggle with resentment over how I was treated in Central Louisiana? Yes. It is getting better. But, at times I even nurse the feelings to make sure they don't completely fade. While I do think I rejoice in truth I, at times, also rejoice in wrong doing. Do I believe all things, hope all things, endure all things? To be honest I have trouble even contemplating that. It is so immense. Can I behave properly in any or all of these traits of love for a time? Yes. But, without end? No.

It is certainly possible for me to puff myself up about how loving I am. But, it is a lie. When I do that, I am bringing to the table a worldly vision of love. A Biblical vision of love is humbling. If we tell ourselves, we are living up to it we are lying!

The good news isn't that, when we are in Christ, God empowers us to live to the perfect Biblical standard. Those who teach this are heaping on their followers a heavy burden that they themselves cannot bear. The good news is that despite our failures and our lack of love, we are loved. This love is not based on our performance. It is not based on any of the toxic beliefs that Christians so often hold (as an aside everyone should read *Toxic Faith* by Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton). God does not want our guilt or to motivate the elevation of our spiritual performance. He wants our love. He doesn't promise health, wealth, or temporal satisfaction for the faithful as a reward. He promises hardships and trials. Don't feel guilty if your life is hard!

I once had a person tell me of the resentment they felt for me because I had made all the wrong choices in life and they had made the right choices and my life was easy and theirs was hard. There is no doubt that I have filled my life with wrong choices. I would suggest that the notion that my life was easy was misplaced. But over the last couple of years as my life has been exceedingly hard, I have taken great solace from the life of John the Baptist.

Jesus himself said that there was no one greater on earth than John the Baptist. Yet, what was his reward? He lost his head! I know it is sad that I take comfort from this. But, our view of love really affects our theology. When we bring our distorted view of love to the table we begin to distort not only how we view others but how we expect God to view us. There is no doubt that God loved John the Baptist. Yet, his reward is eternal not temporal. His love was not manifested in the warm fuzzies but in his care for John's interior self and his eternal state.

As any sinner should, I have also taken great comfort from the story of King David. Here is a man who loves God. God even says that David is a man after his own heart. Yet look at all the horrible things he did in his life! But, there were also times when he was keenly close to God and worked only to glorify God. When David volunteered to fight Goliath, his oldest brother accused him of doing it out of pride. Yet, scripture is clear that he did it out of love and honor for God. When we follow God, we will be accused of doing wrong- sometimes by those very close to us.

After my [second Letter of Concern](#) about Louisiana College came out, someone in my church whose family we were close to told me, "I hope you find what you want somewhere. You will not! LC was your 'Red Sea.' You failed the test." This person went on to say, "You ruined what might have been some great Godliness that was to come your way in your life. I am afraid your next 'Red Sea' will be harsher than this one. It always is. So son, you have a lot to learn." I fundamentally disagree with this person. I do believe that my time was a sort of Red Sea moment but the question was if I would obey God or man. I believe the sea parted but was followed by a wilderness. Interestingly, while Moses was in the wilderness he was accused of pride and consolidating power by those under him, even his brother Aaron. Yet, God's claim of Moses was that he was humble, more so than anyone on the face of the earth. Those close to him had no real sense of his character.

It is easy for us to look at story like this and say, "people don't get me." "I am a good person." And, it is probably true...relatively speaking. But, take a look at our examples of Moses and David! David was a murderer and an

adulterer whose actions had devastating results on his family. Moses was also a murderer and in the end sinned so that he could not enter the Promised Land. None are Good!

We sometimes look at our well-behaved children and their success, or our own, and the comfort it has created in their lives; and, we feel as though we are pleasing to God. We deceive ourselves. God does not care about the exterior but the interior. David sinned by murder but showed true contrition. I fail to love and justify myself. My sin is greater.

A Biblical concept of love humbles us. We fail at it. I fail at it. My greatest failures are often when I bring in my worldly understanding of love and justify my own failings.

The more I think about it the more convinced I become that there is really only one sin. Pride. When we lie, kill, steal, are selfish, rude, or any myriad of sins it is ultimately because we believe that we know better than God or maybe we, at that moment, just don't care what God thinks. That is pride. We elevate ourselves as idols above God. The contrast to pride is humility. When humble, we understand our place as creatures not creators. C. S. Lewis said, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in Hell choose it."

When we bring our worldly understanding of the all-important love it can be easy to justify ourselves. We are loving. We feel loving. Comparing ourselves to others we see how great our love is. But, compared to God we fall short. Compared to the love that is without end we fail. I fail! But, thankfully despite my failings, God's love is without end and he loves me despite my flaws my failures, my selfishness, my pride, my...