

Love, More Than a Feeling

For a word we use so often love is a very difficult word for us to define. My dictionary lists eleven different definitions. It is a noun and a verb. It refers to sex, romance, God and tennis. In romance, love is everything. In tennis, love is nothing.

One test of any good definition is if it can be substituted in a sentence for the word that is being defined. Picture a young couple that has been dating. The relationship has grown serious. They have gone out for dinner and are now seated together on a lakeside park bench on a warm moonlit night. Finally he gets enough courage to tell her he loves her - - but he wants to make sure she knows exactly what he means, so he uses the dictionary definition. Holding her hand, looking into her eyes, he says, "I have tender and passionate affections for you as a member of the opposite sex." Somehow that definition doesn't quite capture all that love is about.

As in English, the Hebrew language has only one word for love: "ahab". The Greeks had far more. *Storge* referred to natural affection, especially love between a mother and a child. We know there is a difference between love for a child and love for a mate but we have to use the same word.

Philia was the love word for affection between friends and those we really like. It's too bad we don't have a love word in English like "*philia*" because many of us feel uncomfortable saying, "I love you," to a good friend or a brother or sister. We have the affection but we don't have a good word to describe it.

Eros was the word for strong attraction, especially sexual love. In our vocabulary we often refer to sexual intercourse as "making love". We know this is not the same as other kinds of love, but it is one of the definitions.

They had still another word for love in Greek, although it was rarely used. It was the word *agape*. *Agape* is an extreme love that unselfishly gives for the benefit of another person. While feelings are part of *agape*, action is especially important.

All four types of love are gifts from God. Some people abuse one kind or another, but in their original design and intent every type of love was a gift

that God gave for our enjoyment. The first three kinds of love are by far the easiest to do because they are based on attraction to the ones we love and the benefits we can get back. We love our children because they are related to us and we enjoy being loved back by the children or parents we love. We love our friends because we see something in them that we like and because we get lots back from friendships. We love sexually because we are physically attracted to another person and receive sexual pleasure and satisfaction out of the relationship.

Agape love is different. It is based on the person who is doing the loving, not the person being loved. It is all about giving and not about getting. It is completely to benefit another rather than to get benefit for oneself. *Agape* love is great to get but supernatural to give.

To value love, let's first think in terms of receiving more than giving . . . because love is the best we can get.

God loves us "as is". Everyone loves to be loved. We all want other people to be drawn to us, to want to be with us, to want to do good for us. Wanting to be loved is expressed in many different ways. Some of us just want to be held. We want to be important in someone else's life. We want to be needed. We like having someone stand up for us.

The problem is that most love is based on our desirability. If we look good, we are sexually attractive. If we behave in the ways our parents approve of we think we will win their love. If we keep a husband or wife happy they will love us for doing so. If we have money or something else people want then they will love us.

Wouldn't it be great to just be loved for myself? Wouldn't it be wonderful if someone could know the "real me" and love me anyway? What if someone could see into my soul, know how sinful and rotten I am on the inside and love me anyway? What if I could be loved even when I say and do stupid things? What if someone would just love me for me, the way I am?

There is only one type of love that loves us "as is" and that is "*agape*" love. And there is only one source for *agape* love . . . and that is God. Romans

Agape love... is all about giving and not about getting.

5:7-8 tells us, “*Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*”

This gets right to the point. Who would you die for? Perhaps you would be willing to die for someone really, really special to you and very, very good. You might be willing to die for a child you are really devoted to or for a friend who is absolutely wonderful or for a husband or wife who has been the best.

But most of us would not normally love and be willing to die for a child who hates us and has made life miserable, for a friend who betrayed and bankrupted us or for a spouse that abused us, committed adultery or divorced us. Yet that is exactly the way God has loved every one of us. He loved us in spite of our rebellion and sin against him. He loved us knowing every bad thing about every one of us. “*God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*”

The amazing thing about God is not just that he loves us “as is”. The amazing thing is not that God buys us even though he knows we are lemons. What is amazing is that God was willing to pay top price. He loved us and bought us asking no discount. He paid the most exorbitant price ever charged—the suffering and death of his own Son. That is *agape* love and it is so amazing that it is outrageous.

Notice that the main point about the *agape* love of God is not how God feels but what God does. The real test of all love is action, not words or feelings. If someone says, “I love you” and behaves in an unloving fashion, don’t believe it is real love.

Of course, love always involves feelings. God has feelings of great affection for us. I’m glad he does. But God can also get rather disgusted and angry with us as well. Yet, because of his *agape* love he treats us right even if we treat him wrong. According to I John 4:9:

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

This is not natural behavior! It is not natural to love someone who doesn’t love you. It is not natural to give your best to someone who doesn’t even care. It is not natural behavior to give when there is no guarantee there will be anything in return.

This is supernatural behavior. This is supernatural love. It’s the best we can get. God loves us! Imagine that!

How do we handle this? How do we respond? What do we do when God loves us so much? The answer is obvious: If this kind of love is the best we can get, then this kind of love it’s the best we can give.

One day a very smart lawyer asked Jesus what is the greatest thing a person can do. Jesus’ answer is in Matthew 22:37-39. He told the man that the best thing you can do is, “*‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’*”

The best thing we can do in life is love God. The second best thing we can do in life is love others the way God loves us. Loving others means loving them “as is”. It means loving the lemons. It means loving them even if they hate us. It means loving them on the basis of the love that comes out of us rather than on the basis of anything attractive about them. It means loving them whether they want to be loved or not.

This is the greatest opportunity we could ever have. It is our opportunity to thank God by loving like God. It is our opportunity to be like God by loving like God. It is our opportunity to complete the love of God by passing it on to others.

1 John 4:12 says, “*No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*” People can’t see God, but they can see the love of God when we behave just like God. Not naturally—loving the loveable; but supernaturally, loving the unlovable. It somehow completes the love of God in us. It shows us and proves to us that the love of God in us is real when we see it going out of us into someone else.

We’re all familiar with Christmas lights that are wired in series. They don’t work if a bulb is loose or burned out. The electricity flows to the first bulb and then through the first bulb to the second and so on until they all light up. If every bulb both receives and sends electricity, the entire string shines bright. That’s the way it is supposed to be.

There’s a sense in which that is the way God has wired us. He has wired us to receive the love of God and then to pass it along to others. The love of God supernaturally flows into us; then when the flow of love goes back out to others, “*his love is made complete in us.*” It’s great. It’s bright. It is

our wonderful opportunity not only to be loved but to love like God; not only to get but to give. Jesus said in John 13:34-35 that getting love and giving love is the greatest evidence that a person is a Christian: *“Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

Jesus placed the highest value on love. Notice that he never said that his disciples would be known by church membership or denomination or making financial donations. The evidence of a Christian being a Christian is getting and giving the love of Jesus.

Let me tell you the typical turn of a sermon like this. Next I am supposed to give you a list of things to do and ways to love. I'm supposed to ask you who isn't very lovable in your life and suggest you start loving them like God loves them.

But I'm not going to do that. If you do not love like God loves no suggestions from me are going to make much difference. Usually such sermons merely make us feel guilty and inadequate and do nothing to help us love others.

If you're not very good at giving love to those who don't deserve it let me tell you what to do. Go get loved up. Receive the love of God. Get so full of God's love that it just oozes out of you all over everybody else. You see, the main reason we don't give love is because we haven't received love.

How does a person get filled with God's love? Read about the love of God in the Bible until you are overwhelmed by the truth of how much he loves you. Spend lots of time meditating with God about how much he loves you just the way you are. Quit trying to measure up. Quit trying to impress God. Admit you don't have anything to offer. Accept how much he loves you just for you. Pray and thank God for his love. Thank him at least a few thousand times. Spend time just thinking and feeling and accepting the love of God in your life. Let God just love you, love you, love you. Get so aware of how little you deserve the love of God and so full of God's love that you begin to see others as God sees you and love others as God loves you. Start getting loved up by God right this minute but also make this a priority this week and the rest of your

life. Value the love of God in your life. It's the best you can get - - - and it's the best you can give.

The most beautiful description of *agape* love is found in I Corinthians 13:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging symbol. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not

delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. . . .

And now these three remain; faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Loving others means loving them “as is”. It means loving the lemons.

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