

Love

Some expositors claim that if only Adam had the love for God that he should have had, he would not have eaten the forbidden fruit. In love, he would have obeyed God's explicit command. After all, Scripture says, "This is love for God, to obey His commands" (1 John 5:3). Eating the fruit (according to this notion) demonstrates that Adam didn't love God sufficiently. That's why sin entered humanity. But Adam *did* love God when he ate that fruit. Adam was created as a son. And Adam's love for God was like that of a son for his father; it was filial love. The command to love God in Scripture is not, however, as a son to a father. It's not merely filial love, but a radically new and transcendent kind of love. We need to discuss this because I'm certain most of us, even those who've attended evangelical churches for years or even decades, don't understand biblical love.

Part of the problem is that our notion of love comes to us from our culture. And we can't escape our culture because it's like the air we breathe, we're embedded in it. So to us, love is what movies and novels tell us it is. So we all know that love is . . . it's a feeling. A sentiment. Love is what we feel for our spouse, or for other close family members. Love can even be for a pet cat or dog, or it can be for a dear friend. It's a kind of love that's self-fulfilling, that satisfies the one who loves. But this isn't the biblical love that we're to have for God. So what is that love that's in the Bible?

First I have to point out that love is complicated. Anyone who says, "I know what love is, you don't need to tell me about it," hasn't spent enough time reflecting on Scripture. Nowhere in the Bible is love defined; it is illustrated. And so there evidently are several kinds of love. For example, there's Laban's love of idols. There's love of wisdom in the Bible. And there's love of money. But there's yet a different kind of love, such as the love of Isaac for Rebecca, for example. Or the Shulamite's love of Solomon, or Abraham's love of Isaac, or Rebecca's love of Jacob, or Jacob's love of Benjamin. And there's Ruth's love for Naomi.

Scripture says that Solomon "loved" his innumerable foreign wives and concubines. So what kind of love was that? The text, I suspect, is being sly there because it must have been erotic love. What else would it have been? Sometimes the word love simply means affection, as, for example, Jesus' love for Lazarus. And then there's this compelling statement: Paul ends his first letter to the Corinthians with, "If anyone does not love the Lord, a curse be on him," which most understand to mean affection for Jesus. It probably means more than just affection, though. Paul may be suggesting that only being a disciple of Jesus counts for salvation; love for Jesus, not merely a profession, identifies the true follower. After all, the Father loves the one who loves Jesus (John 16:27). See also John 12:25-26 and similar statements in Luke and Matthew. Paul must mean devotion, commitment, by his use here of "love." There's lots more to discuss.

Let's think about Abraham's relationship with God. The text says that Abraham believed God. Yes, he did that. But the story of Abraham is a love story; Abraham loved God. He was so committed to God, so obedient, so trusting, that he was willing to sacrifice his only son, his beloved son, the son that God had miraculously given him in his old age, for God. The text says that Abraham "feared" God, but to fear God is to love Him. It was an act of worship, it was an act of love for God. All worship necessarily involves sacrifice, and the greater the worth God has to us, the greater the sacrifice we make. The more we love God, the more we will sacrifice for Him. Abraham loved God intensely! Of course, Abraham didn't know what God would do about Isaac's death, but he trusted God and was committed to him. Abraham's love for God was expressed not only in trust and obedience, but in deep self-sacrifice and commitment. That's not maternal love, filial love, nor spousal love. It was transcendent love, God's kind of love.

And let's think about Jonathan's relationship to David. He committed himself to David even though it cost him *big*. Jonathan sacrificed everything that would have been his, and nearly his life. Why? For his love for David. Jonathan wanted David to be king over Judah, not his father, not himself. Jonathan denied himself, not merely to promote David but because of his love of David. Jonathan even committed his descendents to supporting David and David's descendents, forever. Jonathan not only committed himself to David, he sacrificed himself for the benefit of David, the person he loved with a transcendent kind of love.

How does God love us? The same way. God sent the Son into this sin-saturated, hate-filled, violent world to suffer horribly in order to save us, unworthy humans all, from the punishment we rightly deserve. Why? Because that's what God's transcendent kind of love does. And in abject humility, God the Son committed Himself to this saving work, sacrificing Himself and denying Himself, in order to fulfill God's unique love. And let's observe: How did the Son love the Father? By being so committed to the Father he did nothing and said nothing apart from what the Father willed. The Son was obedient to the Father, and He trusted His Father. The Son denied Himself for the sake of, and because of, His love

for the Father. All this was more than filial kind of love. It's the transcendent love of God. The Son revealed in the most tangible, empirical way possible this kind of love that exists in God's innermost Being. We love because the object of our love is lovely. God's love is radically different: He loves because it's His very nature to do that, regardless of the loveliness of the one He loves—or the utter lack thereof. God rules His creation in love. He blesses in love. He judges in love. He disciplines in love. He reveals Himself in love.

So love is commitment and self-denial for the sake of the one we love. It involves self-sacrifice as well as trust and obedience. It seeks the benefit of the one who is loved. Love is as love does. This is the kind of love we're to have for God, indeed, for Jesus. It's what the kind of love is that we're to have in our character and to express in our lives. It's the kind of love that is able to fill us and overflow to others, so that they too can experience it.

The message of Deuteronomy is, Israel was to have this kind of love for God. But they didn't, and they couldn't. Israel had a "heart" problem. They needed a new heart, one capable of loving God. So the Scripture promises that in the future, after God's punishments and disciplines have had their effect, Israel will turn and seek their God, and God then will give them that new heart that they need to love Him.

It is the purpose of salvation that God's kind of love should be in us who follow Jesus. ". . . that the love you have for me [Jesus] may be in them [His followers] and that I myself may be in them" (John 17:26b). It's the Spirit of Jesus indwelling us that enables us to love God. Otherwise, we're no different from Israel. "Love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God" (1 John 4:7).

The commandment to love God with all our being, therefore, can only be satisfied if we're following Jesus and yielded to His Spirit. The Spirit bears fruit in our lives, and the chief fruit is love (Galatians 5:22). Self-sacrifice, self-denial, commitment, and especially obedience to God's will – these are how God's love is expressed (see John 14:21). If we're grieving the Spirit with sin or worldliness or idolatry or deliberate immaturity, love isn't expressed. Nor are there any of the features of biblical love, such as thanksgiving, serving Christ, and loyalty. And so, another loveless, fruitless life.

The love this lesson is about involves the entire person, mind and will as well as the affections; it involves our whole being. Love is our character and how we live. It's what we are and what we do. Love is expressing the life and Person of God through the Son. Let's not trivialize Christianity by pretending it's having our sins forgiven and a promise of being in heaven one day. That's so inadequate as to be farcical. The Gospel is in essence an invitation to enter into and participate in the transcendent love of God. Salvation therefore is being in loving relationship with God through the Person of the exalted Lord Jesus. It's experiencing the blessings that God bestows upon the objects of His special love, those who love the Son.

Love sacrifices self for the benefit of the one loved; it seeks to bless or to help the one loved; it seeks to honor, exalt, or promote the one loved. It is the desire to be with the one loved, in intimate personal relationship. Love is not passive; it forgives, teaches, extends mercy, encourages, intercedes, shows kindness, rejoices, protects, and is generous toward others. And more.

In Matthew 26, a certain woman anointed Jesus' head with expensive perfume. Jesus said that what she did was to be preached in all the world *along with* the Gospel. Why? Because Jesus wants us to know that belief in Him demands loving self-sacrifice, just like that woman expressed. The Gospel requires a response from us, and the appropriate response, the expected response, is not mere mental agreement but a loving, transforming, self-sacrificing relationship with the living Jesus. She loved God biblically. The great spiritual issue of today, before which all other issues pale into insignificance, is loving Jesus with that kind of love, or not.

Dear Reader: God expects us to love Him. He commands it! But to love Him, we must first know Him. And there's the problem. The noetic effect of sin means we resist knowing Him. Yet God has revealed Himself to us in Scripture with the clear intent that we know and love Him. He is an infinite Being who is beautiful, wise, and good. He is truthful, loving, kind, and faithful to His promises. He is lovely in every respect. To know God is to love Him. To love Him is to obey Him, fear Him, serve Him, and trust Him, as Deuteronomy repeatedly commands.

The Spirit of Christ enables all of this, if we want it. So let's want it more than anything else in life, willingly removing from our lives whatever resists or blocks the Spirit and taking whatever risks or sacrifices are necessary. Why? Because Jesus is worth it. And because nothing else matters.