

Love: A Misunderstood Word

"We love Him because He first loved us"

"For God so loved the world that He gave . . . "

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all . . . "

We all suppose that we know what love is. It's an affection, a desire, a warm feeling, you will surely say. Because we use the word so often, we're certain we know what it means. We've learned what love is from Hollywood, so it's not a word that most of us need to have defined. But actually it is. It's a word so exceedingly important that we need to know exactly what the Scriptures mean when the word is used. We must understand this key biblical word only as it's used in the Bible, and not from the Greek culture nor from our modern culture.

This is how important it is that we understand the word love: Paul wrote, **"If anyone does not love the Lord, a curse be on him"** (1 Corinthians 16:22). The first and greatest commandment is to love God with all our being, and Jesus made it clear that love, that kind of love, is to be toward Him. So, how exactly are we to "love" the Lord? Let's discuss it.

God's love is God's character. The persons of the Godhead are united in a bond of joy, peace and love. They share a common will. They are a unity. *God is love.*

And so God gives. He gives to others; He gives to those who don't deserve anything; He gives goodness and blessing to those who deserve condemnation; in love, He seeks the good, the welfare of others, that they may be blessed. He gives not merely generously, but profligately.

But we still haven't touched on what's at the core of the meaning of love. If we say that love seeks nothing in return, we're getting close. God's love, the kind of love that's biblical, is unidirectional. It's for the good of the one loved and it expects nothing and wants nothing in return. Yes, we're to return God's love, but that's not because God needs it. God is infinitely self-sufficient. He needs nothing and receives nothing from anything or anyone in His creation. We're to return God's love because *we need to*.

Central—and critical—to the meaning of the word love is this: Love sacrifices self. It means suffering personal loss of some kind. Loving another, biblically, hurts! That's a necessary part of love. How did God love the world? He sacrificed the Son. How did Paul love Jesus? He suffered and suffered and suffered. The deeper the love, the greater the sacrifice. When Jesus told His followers to deny themselves, He really meant that they were to sacrifice themselves, their very lives, for Him, because that's how we love Jesus. Love isn't a feeling, it's suffering loss for the sake of another. **"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us"** (Romans 5:8; John 3:16 also) speaks volumes about love: God sacrificed Himself, and that horribly so, for those who really justly deserved to be annihilated. He obviously did it for no benefit to Himself.

But we don't get this. We don't *want* this. We have deliberately intellectualized Christianity. We've turned it into an ideology. It's a set of biblical propositions and doctrines. It has become a love-less set of beliefs. Why don't we love Jesus as we should? Because . . . well, because God's love hasn't really gripped us; because we never really understood the demands of Scripture; because we're too self-indulgent; because we love ourselves inordinately; because we're too much in love with the things of this world. There probably are yet more reasons. But whatever the reason, this is serious. If we don't love God and others as God loves us, that is, self-sacrificially, we may not even be saved (1 John 4:8).

To love as God loves requires a radical transformation of our being, our thoughts, priorities, values, our lives. It would make us to be just like God. Yes! That's the point. The goal of salvation is that we become like God. We don't actually become a god, but we fulfill God's creation intent of reflecting Him and His glory.

Love is more than just a word. It's more than a concept. It transcends all attempts to define it, although it can be described in many ways. Love is character, God's own character. God's own character defines it. So love is goodness. It is mercy. It is justice. It is wisdom. It is righteousness. It is obedience. It is sacrifice. It is peace and order and contentment and . . . yes, God's love is expressed even in wrath [*think about that!*] It's everything about God. When we love biblically, it replicates the invisible, infinite Creator here on earth. It reproduces the Son so that His incarnate ministry continues while He awaits His return in glory. It is the Holy Spirit invading this physical world bringing more love and joy and peace and justice and . . . God's image, Himself. God's rule is God's goodness pervading His creation. Love is God's glory.

Love is relational, that is, it exists only within personal relationships. We don't (and can't) love a propositional truth, even a biblical one. We *can* love God, if we want to. The repeated command to love God assumes that we're able to do that if we're willing. To believe in Jesus is to enter into a loving, trusting relationship with Him, a relationship that is supernatural, that transcends any kind of horizontal, human relationship. When we grasp who Jesus is and all that He has done (and does, and will do), and realize how lovely He is, we will deny ourselves (Matthew 16:24 ; 2 Corinthians 5:14), abandon all that's on offer in this world, in order to love Him and obey Him with all our being. The Father loves the Son, and all who also love the Son are beloved by the Father. That's salvation! That's the essence of the Gospel.

Love generates love. Love for other believers, love for enemies, love for people who don't yet know Jesus, all these engender more love. It's how we defeat the Evil One. God's love empowers us to love as He loves so that we can be the expression of His love. Love also is expressed by obedience (John 14:21). We necessarily obey the one we love. Refusal to obey Jesus accurately reflects the lack of love and probably the absence of a personal relationship.

Love is eternal. Yes, truth is eternal, so is justice, etc. But it's love that's singled out as enduring forever (1 Corinthians 13:13). Love defeats death (Romans 8:37-38; also see John 12:25). It's love that expresses the character, the glory of God more than any other attribute or characteristic. We're here purposely to be godly. A love-less person is still pagan regardless what religious profession he or she makes.

Love is expressed by doing God's work, and by eschewing sin. Easily missed in the opening of Paul's first letter to Timothy is this, "**Command** [the believers at Ephesus, and by extension, all believers, to do] **God's work** [because] **the goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart.**" And what precipitated this command? The misuse of the Law of Moses. So in the very next verses (vv.8-11), Paul states how the Law, God's word, is to so control our heart. Let me connect these thoughts: We're commanded [*commanded*, it's not an option] to express love, a biblical love that comes from a heart made pure by submitting to God's standards. Love isn't a free-floating, good emotion we feel at certain times. It's assiduous devotion to doing God's revealed will with our lives made pure by eschewing all manner of godlessness. We must use great care not to ignore this command.

The opposite of love is not hate. The opposite of love is indifference. I see a Church in the West that's not merely love-less, but indifferent to God, to His will, to His purposes, and to the demands of His love. We don't hate Jesus, far from it! But we're callously, irrationally indifferent to Him. And that's deadly. Why? Because we're in the era of the Son. God sent the Son into the world to experience humiliation, rejection, and a cruel, agonizing, painful death – all necessary because of love. The Son was raised from the dead to give eternal life in God's presence to all who honor Him and love Him, and out of that love to obey Him and fruitfully, faithfully serve Him. This all was necessary to redeem a lost but beloved humanity. This all was God's provision for sin and alienation, procured at great personal expense. This all is freely available in this present era. But for those who spurn what God has lovingly done, or who find it of little importance—interested, but reluctant to meet the demands of love—God's fierce, *dangerous* indignation remains.

Let's conclude with these five thoughts: (i) Love as we moderns know it is Hollywood stuff, and it's self-aggrandizing: "I love you" means "I want you." In contrast, biblical love is self-sacrifice for the sake of others. (ii) Love is as love does. There's nothing passive about love. Love is how we pursue life in God's world according to His revealed will. (iii) God's love has placed us under obligation, like it or not, also to love—to love Him and to love others. We must not allow our lives to be corrupted by licentiousness, rebelliousness or sinfulness, but instead adhere to His rules for godliness (for example, as found in the Law), or we can't express love. As Creator and sovereign Ruler, He has the right to demand this, and as creatures, we have the responsibility to respond as He expects, as He has revealed. (iv) Christianity isn't a set of theological truths that we're to agree with, nor is it a contract with a deity ("God, I believe in Jesus, and You take me to heaven when I die"). Christianity is Jesus! And He's altogether lovely. Christianity is being in love with Jesus and living out that love according to the Word of God in the enabling power of His Spirit. And (v), the purpose of love is to enter into a new kind of existence too wonderful to describe in words, a new life in the presence of the infinite, living God. It's God's blessing for those who honor Him by, in this era, honoring the incarnate, exalted Son.

Dear Reader: Let's free ourselves from fashionable complacency and Groupthink, and from selfish lusts. God has lovingly invited us to enter into something that transcends this present existence. It's a personal relationship with Jesus and all that that relationship entails. So . . . "**put on love**" (Colossians 3:14).