

So What Is Love Really?



The word "love" may be the most **meaningless** word in our language today. Woman to her girlfriend: "I just love the way you are wearing your hair!" Man to his foursome on the golf course: "Don't you love this weather?" Cheating husband to his mistress: "I love my wife and kids with all my heart – so these Thursday afternoons in the hotel are all you and I are ever going to have." Father to his confused child: "Yes, son, I love Jesus; but that doesn't have anything to do with how I do business!"

But the word "love" may be the most **meaningful** word in our language. Man to his wife in the delivery room: "I love you!" Mother to her just-arrested son: "I love you and am not about to stop loving you because of the mess you're in; we will get through this together." Son at his father's funeral: "I will always love my father because of the things he taught me

about life and people and God.” Two Christian adults in conversation: “I disagree with you about the meaning of that text in the Bible, but I love you no less as my brother/sister in Christ.”

How in the world can we use the same word in such trivial and profound ways? To label such shallow and serious feelings? To indicate such frivolous and intimate commitments? In the light of our confusion over the word, how do we understand the word love? How can we know whether or not we are living what even non-Christians know is the cardinal virtue of our faith?

For Christians, Jesus is the dictionary where we find the meaning of words. For people who live beneath His cross or in the shadow of His cross, all understanding of Him and His will for us revolves around that cross.

In the first place, love is never just words but actions; when the actions consistently run counter to the words, the words are meaningless. Its object is never things or abstractions but always persons. It is less a feeling (lust, desire, affection) than a choice and commitment to seek the good, happiness, or well-being of another. And it ultimately not only imitates and reflects the nature of God but must be empowered by His presence.

Jesus affirmed His love for you as your “shepherd” or “pastor” by contrasting the behavior of a good shepherd and a hired hand in taking care of sheep. The owner of the sheep has an investment in their welfare that a hired hand doesn’t. So he cares more. He extends himself to a greater degree. And he puts himself at risk. Even so, the verb “love” is not the operative term in that illustration. He is pointing in a direction that will define love, but sheep aren’t people. Sheep are not the objects of His love as people are. The shepherd-sheep metaphor is just that – metaphor. In order to define love, the subject and object have to be real people with the capacity for loving and being loved. But I choose to begin at John 10 because of the verb “lay down” – “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

Jesus said: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he

abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep" (John 10:11-13).

Again, He said: "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other" (John 15:12-17). "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" (I John 3:16-18).

What Jesus had in mind that day – and what His disciples would only later come to understand – was the cross. He had His cross in view from eternity past. He knew why He was among humankind. And He knew that His goal to save us would lead to the ultimate of sacrifices, the sacrifice of self.

I confess to being intrigued with this verse from the second text: "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command." Mmm! We earn friendship with Jesus? We are His friends only if we are compliant? His friendship is bargained for on the basis of our obedience? I think not! Verse 16 won't allow that interpretation: "You did not choose me, but I chose you . . ." And is it really true that the greatest proof of love is to die for one's friends? What of the fireman who rushed into the Tower on 9/11? Or Maximillian Kolbe presenting himself to die at Auschwitz in order to spare a Polish man he didn't know? For that matter, what about the outrageousness of someone who would die for his enemies?

That, of course, is what happened at the cross. He didn't die for the sake of the apostles or the faithful women or the church only but also for "the world" (Gk. *kosmos* = **humanity in rebellion against God**), according to John 3:16. Here is the

dramatic language of Paul on this point: **"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 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"** (Romans 5:6-8).

There is a love greater than the one that sends a parent to die for his or her child. Or friend for friend. Or lover for beloved. There is the exorbitant love that would send the Incarnate Christ to die for people who were (are) still in rebellion against Him.

I confess to struggling with situations and people and theories that attack not only the holiness of God but His very person. There are pornographic theaters, child molesters, philandering mates and abusive parents. The easy and natural thing is to rise on my moralistic haunches to denounce and disclaim. The supernatural thing is to be generous and patient, non-combative and kind, self-controlled and loving. That is the loving thing for the simple reason that it requires the "sacrifice of self" to respond that way. Self wants to hide from harm and preserve reputation. Self wants to be unbothered. Self wants no demand made by those, those, those . . . those people. An emptied self accepts trouble and effort and criticism for being authentically concerned to affirm their dignity. Understand their confusion. Call them back to God for healing.

The natural understanding of love has it reaching to lovable people. The supernatural understanding has it reaching to non-appealing, non-likeable types. I've wondered, in fact, if Jesus might have been quoting one of the proverbs of His time – like our "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" or "A Penny saved is a penny earned" – when He said, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." Then He set out to prove it wrong! He trumped love for friends with love for enemies – to show us the nature of God.

"But I can't do that!" somebody complains. "That's asking too much." I understand that response. I can't either. Not without help, that is. Divine empowering from the Holy Spirit.

This section of text is within the larger setting of Jesus' "Farewell Discourse" in the Gospel of John (13:31–17:26). And in this final conversation between Jesus and His disciples, you

hear Him repeating two things over and over again: "I am leaving" (15 times) and "The Holy Spirit is coming" (26 times). Jesus was leaving them to return to the Father, but He was not going to leave them disconsolate and helpless.

I have loved you; you love one another (13:34; 15:12)

You saw my works; you will do greater works (14:12)

I have taught you; the Spirit will teach you (14:25-26)

I was hated; you will be hated (15:18ff)

I am going away; the Spirit will come (16:7)

I haven't finished teaching; the Spirit will declare more (16:12)

The things Jesus had been doing on Planet Earth would not stop but were to continue through the Holy Spirit – as He enabled others to do what they had seen Jesus do. Henceforth, the way God had been showing Himself to them in Jesus was the way God would show Himself to others in them! That is why the church is correctly called "the second incarnation." It is the high calling of the church to enflesh the word of God corporately as Jesus had personally (cf. Ephesians 1:22-23).

We can't do that except in the power of the Holy Spirit. Now we can understand what Jesus said about friendship and obedience. "You are my friends if you do what I command," He said. "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." We can't obey enough to become his friends on merit. Because we **have** been chosen to be his friends, though, we can exhibit his transforming presence through our obedience. We show ourselves friends and partners with Him by daily life surrender – laying down self for Him and for others. We can be about our master's business in the world – continuing in our lives what Jesus started in His. By the same Spirit-presence that conceived Him, in whose power He lived, and through whom He was raised from the dead, we are born anew, live to His glory, and exhibit resurrection life.

The principal command we obey is the one named in that same text: "Love each other as I have loved you." And that leads to the third John text where "laying down" one's life is discussed. This time the words are John's own as exhortation to Christians rather than a quotation from Jesus. "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another," the Apostle of Love insists.

"If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."

Words without actions are phony! They ring hollow. It's not that any of us will ever measure up fully. We will never be perfectly consistent in our profession and our performance. But neither will we be obviously and perpetually inconsistent. Growth into Christ's likeness is not only a reasonable expectation that non-Christians have of us but a clear prospect in Scripture (cf. Hebrews 6:1ff).

A minister shared a story with me many years ago. He told me the story out of his own experience that can be duplicated by lots of people who have had similar moments. He was leaving his office on the church property and noticed a forlorn-looking fellow walking toward him.

I sighed as I watched the man approach. It had been a long day. I had a meeting to return for that night and I was anxious to get home. I would meet him at the door, head him off, give him the only cash I had — a mere \$15.00 as I recall — and then send him, and me, on our way.

"What can I do for you?" I asked with some annoyance in my voice.

"I wondered if you might be able to help a fella on the way South," he said. "I was headed down to . . ."

"Yes, yes," I said. "Well, I'm in a bit of a rush. So here is all I have. A five and a ten. That's all I've got."

The man took the money as I offered it. Looked at it. And without a word, he turned, and headed out toward the street.

Then he stopped, and turned toward me as I locked the church door. "I guess you think I'm supposed to thank you, to be grateful," he said with a surprising tone of defiance.

"Well," I said, "now that you mention it, a little gratitude wouldn't hurt."

"Well, I'm not going to thank you. You want to know why?" he

sneered.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because you are a Christian. You didn’t help me because you wanted to. You helped me because he [now thrusting his finger up into the air] told you to help me!” And then he left.

I stood there, stunned, angry. The nerve of these people!

On my drive home it finally hit me. He was right.

I can’t tell you how laying down your life will work out in your experience of growing in Spirit-empowered love. Giving money to meet the needs of others? Yes. Resolving slights and wrongs that otherwise would tear your family apart? Perhaps. Doing something really helpful for a person you regard as a dear friend? Certainly. Helping somebody who isn’t doing all she can yet to set right her own situation? Possibly. Extending yourself for somebody in a significant way – only to have it go unappreciated? Probably. But doing something really magnanimous for someone who is your avowed enemy? Oh, I can only hope so! For all of us. Because that enters into the experience of Christ in loving as He has loved us.