

Love

M. W. Bassford

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Introduction.

- A. This evening is going to be our final look at 2 Peter 1:5-8. In recent sermons from this series, it seems like we've been wrestling with some obscure and unfamiliar ideas. That all changes, though, as we turn our attention to love. Even worldly folks on the street can, if pressed, come up with a definition for love.
- B. The question is, though, whether most folks' definition lines up with God's definition. For most of the people around us, love generally means being nice to the people who love you back, provided that it doesn't inconvenience you too much. Their version of love is very easy to put into practice, which is why many folks will talk about ignoring all those tiresome rules in the Bible and just loving one another instead.
- C. Of course, the student of the Bible knows that there is nothing more difficult than putting into practice God's definition of love. Let me tell you a preacher secret, folks. If I really want to challenge the congregation and step on some toes one evening, I'm not going to preach about all of those little commandments that worldly people find so burdensome. I'm going to preach about love, because true Christian love is going to be harder and demand more from us and take us farther than any measly little "thou shalt not" ever could. The truly intimidating thing about Christianity is not avoiding sin. It's learning how to love.
- D. Nor is this just a challenge we can refuse to take up. Sadly, many Christians do exactly that. They confine themselves to checklist Christianity and ignore the call that love has on their lives. Just like people in the world, they avoid genuine love because it's hard. The problem is that Christianity without love is like a car without an engine. It doesn't work, and it doesn't go anywhere. Certainly, it doesn't go to heaven. If we want to please God and inherit eternal life, we must have love. Let's look, then, at what love really is.

I. Definition.

- A. You know by now, friends, that our study of love has to begin with a definition, so that we all have the same understanding of what we're talking about. I don't think we can do any better for a definition of love than 1 John 4:10. If we want to know what genuine love is, we have to look to the cross. Love is what caused God to look at each one of us when we were still trapped in our sins and say, "I want to save those people. I don't want them to be eternally lost, even though they deserve it. In fact, I value them so much that I am going to surrender the most precious thing I have, my perfect Son, and send Him to earth to die in their place."
- B. Folks, I can't imagine love like that. I've had to bear the loss of my child, and the pain of even such an involuntary loss is terrible. But that's not what God did. God sent His child to earth to die and watched Him die, and He did it for me. I find that overwhelming. That's what the Bible calls love. It's the idea that's represented in the original Greek texts of the Bible by the word *agape* and its variants. We could try to piece together a nice, pretty dictionary definition of *agape*, but I suspect that as we try, we limit it. We put it into nice, simple, approachable ideas that save us from having to come face to face with the crucified Son of God. I think, though, that God wants us to have to face that. If the Bible has one message, it's God saying to us, "See the value that I put on you? That's the value I want you to put on others." That's what it means to love.

II. Scope.

- A. So, then, we love when we share with God the motivation that led Him to give His Son for us. The question is, though, whom are we supposed to love this way? Whom should we value so much? What's the scope of the Bible's command to love? Jesus gives us the first part of the answer to this question in Matthew 22:34-39. First of all, we are supposed to love God. Second, we are supposed to love our neighbor. Let's tackle the first part of this. It makes perfect sense that we are commanded to love our Father. Of all the entities in the universe, God is the One who is most worthy of our love. This text tells us, in fact, that we need to exhaust all our faculties in loving God. If it's part of our awareness, it needs to be completely invested in loving Him. That reminds me, in fact, of watching college basketball on TV, when there's a player on one of the teams who's just a hustle player, who's always in there scrapping for rebounds and diving for loose balls and collecting floor burns all over his body. A lot of the time, at the end of a game, announcers will say about a player like that, "He left it all on the court." When it comes to loving God, we need to leave it all on the court.
- B. Likewise, we are to love our neighbor. However, the measure of this love is different. Jesus tells us that we need to love our neighbor as ourselves. Don't get me wrong, folks; this is still a very high bar. As Jesus says in Matthew 16, we would consider it a poor trade if we gained the whole world, but forfeited our soul in the exchange. There isn't anything that's naturally worth as much to us as we are. What Jesus tells us, though, is that our neighbor should be. We shouldn't elevate our neighbor to the same level as God. We shouldn't love him more than ourselves, as is true of the way we love our Father. However, we can't love him less, either.

- C. The words of our Lord also tell us whom we should love, and how much, in John 13:34. This verse is not about people in general; it's about a very specific group of people: our brothers and sisters in Christ. It also tells us how much we should love them: as Christ loved us. This makes sense. The church is a family, and God is the Father and Christ the older brother. They're the ones who set the tone and make the rules. In this case, Christ set the standard for the way we should love each other by the way He loved each one of us. Clearly, this is an extremely high bar. Christ loved us by first of all by giving up His position in heaven and coming to earth, then by willingly offering Himself on the cross for our sins. If Christ had it, He gave it. In our case, this means that we have to give ourselves for one another. We have to give our time, our affection, and our help whenever a brother needs them, without stint and without the slightest bit of grumbling. Christ didn't whine about what He had to go through on the cross. We don't get to whine about what we have to go through for each other. That's what it means to love one another the way Christ loved us.
- D. We see a final verse defining the objects of our love in Matthew 5:43-44. Perhaps most challengingly of all, this Scripture commands us to love our enemies. This is hard enough in an abstract sense. We all know people who by their behavior declare themselves, if not our personal enemies, at least enemies of the cross. They live personal lives that are completely the opposite of what God wants those lives to be. Friends, we have to love those people too. It's not our place to insult or ridicule or mock them. It's not even our place to decide that their particular sin is beyond what we can accept and shun them. All those things, and indeed anything in that direction, is not an expression of love. When we do those things, we're not looking out for their good. We're looking out for our own comfort. Often, at the end of that road, we end up harboring ill will toward someone who harbors none toward us, which is precisely the opposite of what the situation should be.
- E. It is equally important, although perhaps even more difficult, to love those who show themselves to be our personal enemies. These are the people who actively go out of their way to make life miserable for us. If we are true children of the Father, we will go out of our way to make life better for them. The way we deal with evil people in our lives is not to meet evil with evil, but to overcome evil with good. That's what love is.

III. Importance.

- A. Now we know what love is, and we know whom we are supposed to love, and even how much, but just how important is it that we do that? Are we still required to be THAT loving, even if we've already got our five acts of worship in for the week? Look at what Paul tells us in Romans 13:8-10. This is a fascinating text, because it tells us that all the commandments are nothing more than an expression of love, either for God or for our neighbor. All those folks who say, "I don't worry about what the Bible says; I just try to love people," have got it exactly wrong. The commandments of the Bible ARE loving people. It's impossible to be loving without fulfilling God's commandments. Just as that is true, so too the opposite is true. It's impossible to fulfill God's commandments without being loving. We can go through all the rituals and forms, but without love, our service to God is useless and pointless. Love is essential to every expression of Christianity.
- B. Paul emphasizes this point with his words in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3. We can have every gift imaginable, whether that gift is miraculous in origin or not. We can do all kinds of great and impressive works for God. But if we don't have love in our hearts, both our gifts and our works are worthless. This is a harsh verse because of the standard to which it holds us, and I think some brethren have been guilty in the past of softening it by taking the emotional element out of *agape*. These brethren would claim that doing nice things for somebody else IS love, regardless of how we feel about what we're doing. Their advice, then, is to fake it until we make it.
- C. There are several problems with that. In the first place, I don't believe it's possible to fake love. No matter how good at dissembling we may be, the objects of our "love" will know something is wrong. Second, the problem with that attitude is that it leads to precisely what Paul is warning against. Love can't be just an intellectual determination to do right, regardless of what I want to do. If it were, the guy who gave all his goods to the poor would please God. Instead, love is also about WHY we're doing what we're doing. Love is about having our intellect and our will and our emotions all caught up in seeking another's good. It is impossible to please God without possessing that attitude. More than anything else, we need it.

IV. Practice.

- A. Undeniably, we need love in our lives. What, then, does love look like in practice? Paul goes on to give us some insight into this in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. In just these few short verses, there's more than enough meat for an entire sermon of its own. However, rather than give you an unadvertised double feature this evening, let's just look at these characteristics put together. What would it be like to be around a person who perfectly fulfilled this Scripture? Honestly, I think you wouldn't notice. A person who doesn't parade himself, get puffed up, or seek his own isn't going to be very conspicuous. Instead of focusing the attention on himself, he's going to focus it on others and on God. You wouldn't notice a person like that when he was around. You'd notice him when he was gone, because you'd miss all the good he was and did. Let's be people like that.

Conclusion. If you want to be a disciple of love, you can join the household of God this evening.