

What is Love?

1 John 4:7ff.

August 7 & 8, 2010
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It is good to be back with you this weekend. I have been out of the pulpit for several weeks recharging the batteries, doing some outside speaking, reading a few books, and generally getting myself geared up for the fall.

I also had knee surgery 12 days ago. It went quite well. I want to thank you for your prayers and expressions of love and concern. Of particular note are the many meals that have been provided for me. If I seem plumper to you, it is because every day a full course meal was dropped off. It makes me think I need to have surgery more often. I am generally walking pain free. I'm in physical therapy, and hope to be terrorizing local golf courses again in a few weeks.

I also want to thank those who spoke over these weeks. I have heard many, many good things about the messages. It is great to be able to be gone and have confidence that the congregation is going to hear and be fed solid teaching from God's Word. Thank you to Tom, Jim, Chris, Jim, Travis, and Brad for delivering spiritual "meals" for the church.

We are launching a new series today on the subject of *love*. Today is entirely an introduction and we will get into 1 Corinthians 13 next week. We are talking about love because the Apostle Paul talks about love to the Corinthian Christians. The church of Corinth is a church that he planted and pastored for 18 months. He then moved on and after he left, the church collapsed spiritually. They were beset by schisms of all different kinds: certain people followed certain leaders in the church giving them allegiance that only Christ deserves; they were suing each other; they were sexually promiscuous with temple prostitutes, confused about marriage and singleness, haughty about Christian liberty issues, and were even perverting the Lord's Supper by turning it into a drinking party. Ironically, their view of their own spirituality was incredibly high. A primary reason for that was their possession of spiritual gifts (chapter 12). They failed to see that spiritual gifts were not signs of spiritual maturity. Their basic orientation was toward self. Everything oriented around their insatiable desire to make much of themselves.

The last thing we saw was 1 Corinthians 12:31 where Paul basically says, *You are all enamored with spiritual gifts and you think that they show you are really spiritual, but "I will show you a still more excellent way."* (1 Corinthians 12:31)

This begins one of the most famous chapters in the Bible. Read the commentaries and they breathlessly describe chapter 13 as the greatest of all Paul's writings. Adolf Harnack called this chapter "*the greatest, strongest, deepest thing Paul ever wrote.*" (Morris, *1 Corinthians*, p. 176.) One writer warns, "*Studying it is somewhat like taking apart a flower.*" (MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, p. 328.) It is often read at weddings and special gatherings. This is part of our difficulty. It is so beautiful that it is easily turned into mere sentiment, like a Hallmark moment or some cheesy spiritual card. When we sentimentalize the grandeur of what real love is, it loses all its force and all its good for calling us to live according to divine love. And without God's grace, none of us can. The ultimate expression of this love is not marriage or parenting or sexual love, but a bloody Savior writhing in pain on an executioner's cross. Sound like something you'd see on the Hallmark channel?

Love is a most wonderful and most misunderstood reality. We use the word for just about anything. We love our jeans, we love our dog, we love our school, we love ice cream, we love to water-ski, and we love to sleep in. Our English word "love" is so elastic that it really doesn't mean very much these days.

I remember in the college dorm, lying in bed and listening as my roommate would whisper in the phone to some girl, "I love you." Then a few days later I'd hear him whisper to another girl, "I love you." What does love mean when offered in such a way? Is that love? According to our culture, yes. If I can use the same word to describe my relationship with my goldfish as I do my relationship with my mom, daughter, and God, we clearly have a problem.

The Corinthian church's problem was the same as our own. Their basic selfishness and pride blinded them to the real nature of love – divine love, crucified love, and the expression of that love in Christian relationships. So Paul gives them a description of real love in 1 Corinthians 13 – ultimate love; real love.

Where Does Love Come From?

Where does love come from? Secular evolutionists suggest love is a social construct; merely a function of evolutionary need. We need a husband or wife to reproduce, we need nurture and protection from parents, we need social love to protect the village. In other words, love is not a reality, it just appears to us to be. I wonder if the evolutionist's wife appreciates that, "I love you. Of course, by that I really mean nothing at all."

Let's lay a foundation stone right here – *Love comes from God*. I don't mean that God is merely the provider of it; I mean that God is love (1 John 4:8), not just in the sense that God is the creator of it or is capable of it, but as God Himself describes Himself, He is love.

Remember, before God created, there was nothing but God. No universe. No heaven. No angels. There was God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. Their relationship was eternally dynamic, filled with communication and joy, and dare I say, laughter. They delighted in one another. God didn't create out of a need for more love. The Trinitarian relationships were enough.

Here is where we all need to understand that there was a characteristic in their relationship which was always true. ***The three persons of the Godhead derived their greatest joy in generating joy in the others.*** *Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.* (John 17:24)

This is how they relate to one another. They give of themselves for the good and joy of the other members of the Trinity. The Father actively seeking the good and joy of the Son and the Spirit. The Son doing the same for the Father and the Spirit. The Spirit directing that energy toward the Father and the Son. They do this with infinite divine joy and power and perfection. They didn't call it love in eternity past. What the Bible calls love is descriptive of the eternal self-relating within the Trinity; the delight and joy and self-giving for the good and delight of the other.

As we have often talked about, God loves to incarnate pictures of Himself. All of creation is a massive self-portrait. Psalm 19 says, *The heavens declare the glory of God*. Romans 1:18-19 tells us that God's divine attributes are clearly seen in creation so that men are without excuse. This world is big because God is big, and it's beautiful because God is beautiful, and

it's symmetrical because God is balanced, and it's colorful because God is complex and on and on we can go. What about love? Is this a part of God's creation? Where did it come from?

Love comes from God as God allows His creation (us) to participate in the energy of the Trinitarian relationships. When God created, He freely chose to build into human beings the capacity to relate to Him and one another like He relates to Himself. Human relationships picture the Trinitarian ones. What do we see in the Trinity? Robust relating to others in self-giving. When we relate to one another in this way, we are participating in the vibrancy of the life of the Trinity. Why is there such a power in love? Why do we so long for it and mysteriously find such delight in giving for others good? This is 1 John 4:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love...No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us...So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. (1 John 4:7-8, 12, 16)

This can sound like biblical mishmash and some of us are looking at it still going, "What?" How about we read it taking out the word "love" and replacing it with "selfless giving"?

Beloved, let us selflessly give for one another, for selfless giving is from God and whoever selflessly gives for the joy of another has been born of God and must know God. Anyone who lives their life without this kind of selfless giving does not know God, because God is and always has given for the good and joy of another. No one has ever seen God; but if we selflessly give for the good and joy of someone else, the life of God abides in us and his own characteristic of selflessness is being perfected in us... God is at his core selfless, generous, and seeking the joy of others, and whoever lives in this selfless, generous, seeking-the-joy-of-others way is living in the life of God and the life of God is living in him.

Think of it. Why is love the greatest reality in the world? It is the very life of God humanly experienced in giving love that maximizes our joy as humans. Might this be why there are so many unhappy people today? Might this explain your unhappiness today? You are longing to be loved when the real joy is giving it.

To love selflessly is to step into the life of God Himself. It is not that we are gods but God has set up the world in such a way that His creatures can taste and actually experience a little of the joy God has in self-giving.

Jesus said, *It is more blessed to give than to receive* (Acts 20:35). Is this only birthday gifts and Christmas presents? We can give to another in so many ways – time, attention, encouragement, ministry, service, physical touch, and even bring meals over after knee surgery. Who was happier after the meal was dropped off? Me or them? Okay, that's not a good illustration because I think I might have been happier...but you get the point. A life lived in self-giving love is the most blessed life indeed. Have we considered that? Think of all the energy we put into making ourselves happy. What an irony if we discover that real happiness is in making others happy.

What is real love?

- *His self-giving affection for his image-bearing creatures and his unselfish concern for their well-being, that leads him to act on their behalf and for their happiness and welfare. (Jack Cottrell as quoted by John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, p. 414)*
- *I call [love to God] the motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of God for his own sake, and the enjoyment of one's self and of one's neighbor for the sake of God. (Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, iii, x, 16)*
- *Love is self-giving for the good and joy of another. (Steve DeWitt)*

Some of you right now are thinking, *What's with all this selflessness talk? I don't know if I am going to like this series!* I come to chapter 13 with some fear and trembling myself. I don't know how am going to survive it. What I mean by that is that the me that I know deep down is too often not self-giving for the good and joy of others. I would imagine some of us have been thinking, *A series on love, how wonderful! I hope my husband is listening so he treats me better and I hope my small group is listening because I see some failures in the way they relate to me and I hope I can learn some ways to be a more beautiful person so others admire me.* You don't want a series about love, you want a series about you. So do I. In fact, *Can I tell you more about my surgery?*

Wouldn't it be nice if there was a word that captured the essence of "self-giving for the good and joy of another" so we didn't have to say that all the time? The early Christians thought that would be nice. Greek was the language of the day and there were several Greek words for love, which had nuances of brotherly love or sexual love.

There was also an obscure word for love that was very rarely used. It is hardly found at all prior to the New Testament. It is used only 20 times in the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. If you read the Old Testament, there are many references to the love of God, but only 20 use this word.

After the cross, Christians needed a word that captured the kind of love God had shown us in Christ. So they took this obscure word and made it famous as it is the most used word in the New Testament for God's kind of love. Here it is:

Agape

Say that with me. Some of you have heard of this and some probably have not. It is a very important New Testament word. It is used 116 times. Paul uses it 75 times and the most famous verses in Scripture referring to love use it.

For God so [Agape] the world. (John 3:16)

This statement doesn't highlight our lovability. God's kind of love isn't concerned with whether we are lovable. It is simply His nature to love, which He did and put into action by sending His Son, Jesus Christ to die for us.

God shows his [Agape] for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

This shows the extent of God's self-giving. He loved us when we were His enemies – sinners; rebels - yet He loved us. God's love, real love, has little if nothing to do with the

object of the love. It has everything to do with the character of the Lover whose basic nature is to give of self for the good and joy of another.

It is a love for the utterly unworthy, a love that proceeds from a God who is love. It is a love lavished on others without a thought whether they are worthy or not. It proceeds from the nature of the lover, not from any attractiveness in the beloved. The Christian who has experienced God's love for him while he was yet a sinner (Romans 5:8) has been transformed by the experience. Now he sees people as those for whom Christ died, the objects of God's love, and therefore the objects of the love of God's people. In his measure he comes to practice the love that seeks nothing for itself, but only the good of the loved one. It is this love that apostle unfolds. (Leon Morris, 1 Corinthians, p. 177.)

Here is the essence of it:

God is [Agape]. (1 John 4:8)

This is a staggering truth. God is love. Not love is God or God can love. God is love. This is God describing Himself. You want to know me. I...am...Agape. Today throughout this room are chairs filled with people and a pastor up front in desperate need of this. Life constantly argues against it. Circumstances and pain say the opposite: *God is unloving. God is unfaithful. He must be selfish. God doesn't care about me. I can't trust him. He isn't good.* Does that resonate with you today?

God...is...love. *We all know words are cheap and how does some old book saying it make a difference in my life?* Have you ever considered the cross of Jesus Christ from this perspective – as proof of love? Proof of what? Proof that God is love.

Words are cheap but actions speak loudly. This whole series we are going to go back to the same spot. Golgotha. The cross. God Himself hanging there. He willingly gave of Himself for the good and joy of others – of us. To what extent? He gave all of Himself, His very life. This act of love, as tortured and bloody as it was, speaks eloquently today that love is real, love is a person, and love is Jesus. It stands with us to believe in Jesus as our Savior and receive this love from God that our sins may be forgiven and eternal life granted to us.

How was all this accomplished? Love. It is the nature of God and the vibrancy of God on display in this world. Paul describes it this way:

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. (1 Corinthians 13:4-8)

There will be more on love in the weeks to come.

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