

## LOVE IS A SPENDTHRIFT

For those of you visiting or just wandering by, and for those of you who come here faithfully every Sunday but still never seem to have a very clear notion of what is really going on here: We are in a series of sermons asking some questions about “love.” This is not to imply that we are answering the questions; just that we are asking them. Where does love come from? What is love? What is love good for? How do we get in on it? Things like that. Today we begin on the second question, “What is love?” I intend to do such an inadequate and incomplete job that we will be on the same question again next week.

*Webster’s Dictionary* says that love is “a feeling of strong personal attachment induced by sympathetic understanding; ardent affection.” I like that very much. I recognize and identify with it. I feel that way sometimes toward some people. It has led me into lots of trouble. When I was in fourth grade, for instance, a new kid came to school. Doug Purcell was his name. At recess, some of the boys in our class piled onto him. I got some of that there “sympathetic understanding,” and pretty soon the two of us were standing the whole crew. It made us friends for a while. But a couple of years later, I wished I had left things alone.

In any case, *Webster’s* makes a valiant try. We could hardly expect more from a definition. And yet it is hopelessly inadequate. It does not begin to cover the subject. It does not begin to explain two people standing hand in hand and saying, “Until death do us part.” It really does not cover spending your life making music, serving in a hospital in Africa, teaching children, living with lepers on Molokai – or dying on a Cross.

What then *is* love? When that question hits the brain-circuits, it blows all the fuses. Something twitches, expands, explodes. A winsome look, a shrug of the shoulders, a foolish laugh – and the one who asked the question smiles and nods in agreement. Love has no definition. To define something is to set boundaries, to find limits. Love breaks boundaries. Some are not sure it *has* any limits. Other things are often judged and clarified by the light of love. Earth has no light bright enough to bring love into clear relief.

Love calls the worlds into being; creates us in its own image; sets before us the ways of life and death; reconciles the world to itself. We just cannot put that sort of thing into neat little definitions. Only God knows, and even God could find no word of definition – except the Word made flesh.

It is recorded in the third chapter of Exodus that Moses once asked God to define and identify himself. “What is Your name?” Moses asked. “When I go to do what You ask, who shall I tell them sent me?” In those days, to name something was to define it. To know the name of another, or one’s own name, gave one power. Like Moses’ own name meant “deliverance” – the delivered one who will deliver others.

God must have laughed. What innocent effrontery, with a brain so small, to ask a question so BIG! Finally God replied, “*I AM who I am.*” That is: “Call me I AM. Tell them I AM sent you. It is enough for you to know that I exist.” That is as close as we have ever come. *Yahweh*, sometimes poorly anglicized into *Jehovah*, is an ancient form of the verb “to be.” *Yahweh* – God – is the One Who IS.

Just so with the life force – the nature, expression, and power of this One Who IS – that we call “love.” It is enough to know that it exists – that it can carry and lift and heal and transform and send us. We do not have to define it to feel it; to know that it uses us; to realize that it calls us into life, and ever into greater, more abundant LIFE. It’s a shame that we have turned it into such a petty, familiar little word: a word that passes our lips so easily; a word that we use to mean everything and anything – and nothing. You try to teach your children not to use the words “God” or “Jesus Christ” in ways that seem petty or show disrespect. In England, mothers tell their children not to say “bloody,” a contraction of “by the Lady” – meaning Mary. But the way we use the word “love” is often a far greater blasphemy.

In any case, we cannot define, but we must keep trying to comprehend and to check *our* ways against what we know of *love’s* WAY. In our case, that sends us to the study of the Scriptures, and especially to the information about Jesus. From this we get no final definitions, but we see illustrations. We learn that love is sometimes like this ... on occasion love behaves like that ... and love has been known to conduct itself in the following manner ... We get bewildered because sometimes it is soft, sometimes it is stern, sometimes it is all grace and forgiveness, and sometimes it calls us relentlessly to tasks we cannot possibly accomplish, at least not alone.

From the Scriptures we learn that love is frequently not like what we want it to be like. Biblical love is rarely even close to what our society claims it to be. I still remember the great shock in those early Bible study groups in my very first church. I had read the Bible earnestly since fourth or fifth grade. But you know how it is with things that are “holy”; we “revere it” too much to ask what it really means. Of course, I had studied it “technically” in seminary, if you know what I mean. That was fascinating and very helpful in many ways. But it is still altogether different to sit down with a group of people who intend and want to be Christians in reality and who go into Bible study together to figure out “How do we go at this?” Pretty soon there are “no holds barred” and nobody is playing “holiness games” anymore, because this is about life as we really intend to live it, and we do not want to get out there and get our heads kicked in because we did not read the manual right. At least not without a very good reason.

So it was a great shock to discover that Jesus was not a very good “Christian.” Jesus did not live by the codes or expectations of love, or at least not by what any of us had been taught was love. All of us in those early groups were far more loving than Jesus. That is, we tried to be nice and considerate and polite, tried to please people, tried to not cause trouble, tried to be thoughtful and helpful to everyone who crossed our paths – regardless of the circumstances. And we tried to keep a pretty close balance of favors between other people and ourselves.

No matter how we tried, we could not get the stories of Jesus’ life to match our assumptions about love. We thought He was supposed to help us be even nicer, more thoughtful, and more considerate than we already were. Only, He was *not* nice – He was a bear-cat! Sometimes we wondered if Jesus ever tried to please *anybody* – except God. Certainly He *displeased* a great many people. While that never seemed to be His aim, He knew perfectly well that it was happening and made no move to soften it. He was focused and adamant, and neither family nor best friends could persuade or pressure Him from His course.

Jesus frequently tried to duck helping people; no one in Israel had a sharper, more sarcastic tongue; He took shamelessly from His friends; He laid enormous demands upon His friends; He did immense favors for people He did not know and would never see again – sometimes causing great expense and embarrassment for His friends. Yet as the stories unfolded in our study groups, we found ourselves drawn to Him more and more, not less. Nevertheless, this Jesus was supposed

to be the great example, the illustration – the very source of our love – and Jesus was not doing it like any of us thought *we* were supposed to be doing it.

We were stunned. In the end, the conclusion was unavoidable: The vast majority of people in our society have a general set of expectations, pictures, and understandings about love – and about Jesus and what the Christian Life is like – that have nothing whatsoever to do with the New Testament record. A much smaller yet still influential group tries to understand love not from what society has made up but from what Jesus told and showed us – that is, from God as revealed in Jesus Christ. And these two groups have completely *different* concepts and aims in mind.

If I tell you that God loves you and you think what I mean is that God will be *nice* to you, we might as well be speaking Greek to Chinese. If you think God is *nice*, you will spend all of your prayer time trying to avoid life's real issues. And you will keep trying to rework your experiences to look like what you think they ought to be like, instead of trying to learn from what is really going on here.

I do not know of anything in the Bible that suggests that God's love is soft, easy, polite, pleasant, undemanding, unconditional, or even reasonable. That is, these elements may occasionally drift into the picture, but they are not even close to the essence of love. Love, in the Bible, is dynamic, transforming, uncompromising, unyielding. It comes more often as imperative than permissive. It is frequently more demanding than complimentary. It believes in you far more than you believe in yourself. And it will never ever quit on you, no matter how much you deserve it – not even if you wish it *would* quit and go away.

*“For the LORD your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God.”*  
(Deuteronomy 4:24)

*“The LORD your God is a merciful God; he will never fail you or destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your forefathers which he guaranteed by oath.”*  
(Deuteronomy 4:31)

*“God is a just judge, constant in his righteous anger.”*  
(Psalm 7:11)

*“Our God is a God who saves; to the LORD God belongs all escape from death.”* (Psalm 68:20)

*“Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.” (Hebrews 12:28-29)*

And we want this God to be soft and nice?! Of course yes, that is what we want. But there is more at stake – and love has more in mind – than that. The Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that God *loves* us. But look to the verb in that declaration. If we misunderstand the nature of love, we have misunderstood *everything* about our religion. If every time the Bible says *love*, we think *nice*, we are going to end up being the sugar of the earth instead of the salt. Everybody, by the way, likes sugar, even though it really is not good for us in the long run. Without salt, however, we die.

We are still trying to get oriented to our question, “What is love?” What do we expect from knowing that God loves us? There is not and cannot be a clear definition because love is too large for us. Nevertheless, there are widely divergent impressions about the very nature of love. We all use the word carelessly as well as very intentionally. Either way, we are frequently saying the word without any clear notion of what others are “hearing” and vice versa.

Let me suggest that part of our confusion about love is caused by our desire to “look good,” especially in the eyes of God. We have more than a little incentive to see ourselves as loving people. But if each definition of love must end up making us look good, how will we ever understand? If love is so high that we cannot even define it, is it not likely that we will fail to live up to its full meaning in our daily lives? To comprehend where love is trying to lead us, we must be willing to let go of our need to declare ourselves already very loving people.

By the way, which person among us is the most loving? Is it the most popular? Is it the most self-effacing? Is it the gentlest, or the kindest? Is it the one with the fewest personal opinions? Is it the one who makes us feel the most warm fuzzies?

The truth is that all day, every day, we are going about in the midst of people we do not love. All around us are thousands more who very much *need* to be loved. On a good day, we may become aware again of a few people we really *do* love, and maybe we will have opportunity to act or respond according to our love. But by any absolute standard, we are not very loving people. We are barely getting started

in our careers to become loving beings. It is important for us to accept this, or we will always be pretending and play-acting – trying to make it look good on the surface – instead of seeking the truth and seeking *true* love.

Love may have no limitations, but we do. Think of the criteria. We should be cautious about claiming love for any person we would not (potentially) die for. At least we would be willing to give up most anything we own if they were in trouble *and* it would help them. Surely we would be willing to get into serious trouble to defend or support them if circumstances required it. There is not much they could do to turn away our affection. There are not many mistakes possible that would devalue them in our eyes. How many people did you say you loved? You think a Thanksgiving basket or a few presents at Christmastime qualify as love? If that is what you think, you are not reading the same Book I am!

Becoming loving is not something we have accomplished; it is something we have been sent here to learn – to grow into. To learn to love – to become truly loving – is the purpose of life, by the way, if anyone ever asks or should you ever wonder. It is very freeing to come down off our pedestals and say, “Help me, Lord! This love thing is much bigger than I thought. I can’t even get it right three days running in my own home, never mind all the time or for the whole world.”

I hope it does not overly distress anybody, but love is not unconditional, love is seldom nice, and we are not very loving people – yet. Of course, some of you are very loving in comparison to other people I have known. And that is wonderful. But we cannot measure our love against other people; we can only measure it against God, or God in Christ Jesus. Comparing ourselves to the standard of New Testament love, it simply is true that we are beginners.

To recuperate from such insight, many people revert to the Greek language. In what could be called “divide and conquer,” the Greeks used several words for love, and that takes some of the heat off. So we use *agape* to refer to a spiritual, self-sacrificing love, like we often associate with Saint Francis or Albert Schweitzer or Gandhi. And *philos* refers to friendship, like between David and Jonathan or people who play golf together or philosophize together. And *eros* is reserved for moonlit nights and honeymoons and passion between a man and a woman, etc.

Sometimes it *is* helpful to dissect something, if we do not forget that the pieces still belong together when we are talking about real life. The dissection of love has many people believing that there is little passion or excitement or emotion in *agape*. Or that there is little nobility or spirituality or self-sacrifice in *eros*. Both assumptions are dead wrong and lead to great misunderstanding.

Hebrew, like English, has one word for love. Translating it into the Greek *agape* is not an improvement, in this case, but an inescapable error. There are not three different kinds of love, but there are many ingredients to *true* love. A person can experience the ingredients separately, but that is not yet love. For instance, a person can feel pity without passion, but if they feel no passion, they have not felt love yet either. A person can feel *agape* without *eros*, but if there is no *eros* in it, it is not yet love.

Have you ever been in one of those conversations where people are talking about how hard it is to love some people? Somebody always comes up with Old Faithful: “Well, you can love them, but you don’t have to like them.” What kind of ducking, dodging subterfuge is that? By that kind of logic, would you rather be “liked” or be “loved”?

That’s what comes from dissection. Christians feel obliged to pretend that they have *agape* toward everyone, but they will keep *philos* and *eros* for those they really care about. Does that not make *agape* the least valuable of the three? It certainly does from any receiver’s point of view. It merely turns things so upside down that people would prefer to be “liked” rather than “loved.” But in truth, if we cannot come up with a little thing like “liking,” it is some kind of monumental spiritual snobbery to claim that we can nevertheless keep in step with the passionate caring of the God who goes all the way to the Cross for us.

Quite frankly, if somebody does not even *like* me, they can keep their “love.” I cannot use it, do not need it, and will be considerably better off without it. I might still appreciate some justice or even a little fair play even if they do *not* like me. But if there is no affection in love, forget it. Which is just a way of saying: That’s not really love! It is only a word game people play so they can go on pretending that they love everybody – like they think they are supposed to – so that God cannot disapprove of them. “Nothing personal, you understand, but I do love you – it’s my duty. I would not give you the time of day or ever want you in my house, but I love you.” Yuck.

Love is an empty word – a meaningless theory – unless there is an “I” on one side of it and a “you” on the other. If we speak of *only* physical affection or *only* intellectual sharing or *only* spiritual compassion, we do not reveal different levels of love. We reveal that we are not yet talking about love.

In the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, Paul is attempting an answer to the question, “What is love?” He answers it in the proper way, by pointing not to a straight definition but to the quality and nature of love as he understands it. He resorts to poetry, and the heart more than the mind has to discern his meaning. But he also provides a checklist. Where we claim to love, is it patient (uncompromising and enduring, in the old meaning of that word), and kind (in the long run, not just in the moment)? Is it jealous or envious? Does what we call love within ourselves keep score on wrongs and slights we have received? Does our love set up our own conditions and expectations, or does it look to God’s? Is it willing to face *anything* with faith, hope, and endurance?

Another Paul, whose last name is Scherer (1892-1969), puts the same theme in different words. What is love? His answer: “Love is a spendthrift.” Love goes out on a limb. Love spends the whole wad. Love goes for it all. Love burns bridges, kills the fatted calf, sells all it has for the pearl of great price. Love is a risky, daring, caution-to-the-wind sort of power, and it acts for the true or higher benefit of another. Think of any experience or any illustration that moves you – any picture or example of love that you like. Is there not always this one common note or quality present? Love goes for it all, dares the loss of all, puts all of its weight on what it cares about and believes in. Love is not ignorant of reality; it simply acts in scorn of consequences – IF it believes that will bring true benefit to the loved one. Love will even risk losing or being hated by the loved one, in order to bring true benefit to the loved one.

Paul Scherer’s full comment is: “Love is a spendthrift, leaves its arithmetic at home, is always ‘in the red.’ And God is love.”

Today I have tried to say more about what love is not, in preparation for next week and what love is. For myself, not just for you, I need to reawaken my curiosity. If I want to be loving as Jesus meant it – as the early church understood it – I must break from the current understandings and assumptions, and so must you. We need to stop trivializing the most important verb in the Christian language.

Jesus started a world religion – a following of highly disciplined, highly committed, enormously dedicated individuals gathered around faith and loyalty to God as God revealed himself in Jesus the Christ. And the principle that gave it power and inspiration, the principle that taught and corrected and restrained and freed – the principle on which it ran – was LOVE: the love of God, and what that kind of love means here on earth to individuals like you and me. That is what Christianity is about. Yet it is about almost nothing that goes under the name of “love” today. If we want to be part of it, we have to seek again in wonder the content, the meaning, and the flavor of LOVE as Jesus lived and revealed it.

Meanwhile, sometime this week, make a list of the people *you really love*. If necessary, would you give up your life for them? Would you give up your money for them? Would you give up your property for them? How many people do you really love? Are you already more loving or less loving than you would like to be? In short, how is your love life?