

May 5, 2024

10 years ago, Newsweek came out with an article asking this question: "Is it possible to define love?" And the answer it came up with was, "no." According to this article, love is a strong feeling of affection or attachment based on sexual attractiveness, familial ties, or something else. Love was a feeling- and think about how that definition of love has affected society. About half of marriages end in divorce, often because love is defined as a feeling, and when the couple doesn't have that warm, intense passionate feeling for each other, then they assume that they don't love each other, and they should go be with someone they love! This causes parents, especially fathers, to abandon their families, it causes siblings and families to see each other less and less- If I don't feel love, then I guess it's not really there. As I'm sure you've personally experienced, this causes a lot of pain- when love is just a feeling, then people leave when they aren't feeling it, and that destroys people.

And I get the impression that our culture is beginning to realize this. This past year, Newsweek completely contradicted its article from 2015. Quoting an article by Psychological experts from the University of Maine, it said, "*True love involves total acceptance and the nonjudgmental welcoming of another's wholeness. It also requires one to surrender their own self-seeking behaviors to offer a complete presence and connection with the other.*" Do you see the difference? Americans are beginning to realize that in order for love to be authentic and true, it has to involve self-sacrifice of some sort- but you also see in this article something subtle- that love is always accepting someone- even if what they are doing is wrong. From this, one would conclude that if a husband is lazy or uncaring, the wife must accept that in order to truly love him. If a parent has a child that declares he or she is the opposite gender, the parent must accept that. Is that true? Is that what love is? How does anyone know? What is love? How do we define it, how do we show it, and how do we call out something as unloving? John tells us in letter, and we will see that Love is, **1. Defined by God, not us. 2. Sacrificial, not sentimental. 3. Outflowing, not optional.**

1. Defined by God, not us. Remember what John's first letter is all about- fellowship with God- not just knowing about God, but truly knowing God for who he is, and now he says, how can we know that we actually know who he is? Love. Do you show love? Do you have love flowing from you for others? Why is that so important? Because God *is* love. Notice what John didn't say- he didn't say God is loving, or that he's filled with love, or that he loves more than anyone, but that he in his very essence *is* love. He defines love. Everything he does, whether it's beautiful or horrifying, is done in love. Everything he does is because he loves. Everything he hates is because he loves. Think about that- why does God send people to Hell? Why? Not because he's not loving enough, but because he's too loving to let sin go. When people hurt you, God is enraged because he loves you so much, and because he is eternal, the punishment that God is going to give someone for hurting you is eternal. And, God loves the people that you have hurt and sinned against, so the punishment that you and I deserve for hurting others is eternal, because Jesus is eternally loving. Consider this- if a man was drunk driving and he killed someone you love, and the courtroom judge let him off with a month of community service because the driver said he was sorry, would you say that the judge was loving? Not really- because he didn't give

your family justice! Punishing evil is not unloving. Being angry is not unloving- I've said this before- when you see people you love abused or hurt, you aren't just sad, you're angry! When you see violent people hurt and violate innocent women and children, you aren't just sad, you're angry! Not because you aren't loving, but because you *are filled* with love! The more you love someone, the more you are angry when they are in danger! God's anger and wrath is not from his lack of love, but his fullness of love. What John is saying is this: You cannot say that you believe in a God of love, not a God of anger or judgment or wrath or punishment. Anyone who says, "I just don't believe a God of love would do..." is essentially saying, "unless God does what I think is loving, he must not be." We don't get to tell God what is loving and isn't. We don't get to say, "this is love, accepting this lifestyle is love, treating people this way is love, acting this way is love, therefore God must be okay with it." God is love- so if we want to know what love is, we have to look at him, and read what he says. What does he say?

2. Love is sacrificial, not sentimental. Not only is God love in his very being, but he shows the ultimate manifestation and example of love: he loved you so much that although he is perfect and must punish evil and must have loving anger over your sin, he took that loving, righteous, wrath and punishment and put it all on his only Son instead of you and me. God the Father and God the Son- both in essence God, and they have been together with the Holy Spirit one God throughout all eternity, and within God's very essence there is love, a relationship, joy and friendship. The Father loves the Son- that's who God is! And the Father abandoned his only Son. He crushed, punished, and slaughtered his only Son whom loved with an infinite love, and he heard his son cry out for mercy, and snuffed him out anyway. There is no greater pain than hearing your child cry out and suffer- it's worse than enduring it yourself. And the Father endured it, and crushed his Son anyway, because that was the only way we could be forgiven and embraced into his family. That's love. Not that we loved God, not that we have anything to offer him or any kind of spark of goodness and love- no- but that the Father willingly slayed his Son for the loveless, the evil, his enemies, punished the one who didn't deserve it, so that those who deserved it could be his. That's love- infinite, divine wrath and punishment, but on him who didn't deserve it- just like the innocent lamb was slaughtered as a substitute, Jesus was that substitute who consumed and satisfied his Father's loving wrath forever- so now we can receive his loving joy and embrace. That's love. Not sentimentality, not words, not empty acceptance- sacrificing myself, my wants, my desires, my comfort, all for your benefit, and doing it with joy.

Therefore, that's what we are called to do. When Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose from the grave to prove that we are forgiven and the sacrifice worked, we weren't just saved. Look at what John says- we were begotten of the Father. We were reborn, recreated, renewed, restored, made into something completely new. That sacrifice defines God and his love, and there it defines us and our love. When we love each other, it has to be defined and guided ultimately by that love of Jesus on the cross because that is the center of who we are. God's love isn't something we practice because we have to. It's natural for the Christian. It's outflowing, not optional.

3. Love is Outflowing, not Optional. As we can see, our love is not what saves us or earns anything from God. It's his love that saves us, and it's his love that changes and reforms us into being people that love, and specifically- love each other. In this section, John is referring specifically to the love that Christians need to show and have for one another. Well, if it's natural, why does he have to hammer it

so hard? Why does he have to say such harsh things- that if you aren't loving, you aren't a Christian, that if you claim to love God, but you hate your fellow Christian, you're a liar and not a Christian, that if you can't even love the people you can see, you certainly don't love a God that you can't see! Because although Christian, God-like, sacrificial, "you-first" love is a natural product of God working in us, it's hard to do- especially with other Christians. The closer you are to people, the harder it often is to give them genuine, sacrificial love where you love them, forgive them, put them first, and respect and honor them above yourself. That's hard, but not optional- this is something Jesus commands us. What John makes clear is this: if you are going to have loving, real, faithful fellowship with God, then you must have loving, real, intimate, close fellowship with your fellow Christians.

I've been here for the better part of a year now, and I've gotten to have some great conversations with you, and I've gotten the impression that in the last 30 years, there has been a lot of wounds: rudeness, pettiness, selfishness, unchristian behavior, and often that makes people withdraw from each other. They go home earlier, arrive later, stay isolated- that's exactly what Satan wants. If we are going to love, forgive, honor, cherish, and serve each other, we have to be friends with each other, and yes, that means that people will sin- and we have to lovingly call it out, repent and forgive. The answer is to get closer to each other, not further away. I think CS Lewis says it best: *"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable."*

So what gives you the power to do that? How can you love people that hurt you? Not by saying, "Suck it up, that's what Christians do!" I'm not saying that. Go to the Cross, and marvel at how much God loves you. When you see and are overjoyed at how much God loved you- enough to die for you, it makes it a lot easier to show love to those who aren't easy to love- I love this quote by Spurgeon: *"Has anybody offended you? Seek reconciliation. 'Oh, but I am the offended party.' So was God, and he went straight away and sought reconciliation. Brother, do the same. 'Oh, but I have been insulted.'" So was God: all the wrong was towards him, yet he sent. 'Oh, but the party is so unworthy.' So are you; but 'God loved you and sent his Son.'*

I hope by now you see what John is getting at. Christian love isn't so much something we feel in our hearts, but do with our hands. It's an active, serving love that asks, "enough about me, what about you?" And it doesn't need to be big to be noticed by God. When you forgive your spouse after an argument, when you greet someone at church that you don't know because you want them to feel welcome, when you talk honestly with someone because they said something that hurt, and you love them enough to address it privately so they can repent and you forgive them, when you willingly put other people's preferences and needs before your own when it comes to worship style, hymns, or how we run our church, when you give a few hours here or there to make something look nicer or work better, or you sacrifice a Wednesday night to spend time with fellow Christians or a few hours on a Saturday to be a blessing to a member of the community, all these little things are beautiful, important, and powerful because they are a reflection of God himself. What can I do for you? That's love.. Amen.