

“What Is Love?”

Have you ever felt that you should love people more, but you didn't feel very loving? When seventeen God called me to a life dedicated to ministry. It was like being thrown into a character mold by the people of my home church after sharing that call with them the following Sunday. They, all of a sudden, expected me to be a loving person, and the fact was loving anyone at that time felt like an impossibility.

There seemed no lack of interest in loving others, but not much energy was spent trying to get my heart beyond a point of disinterest. Sometimes we do not know how to have what we want most in life. We may be afraid, or we believe that it really is not important though our hearts tell us differently. Probably both was the case with me.

My interests had been focused on my selected future. Suddenly the Holy Spirit was flagging me down to take a look at these words: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:30,31)

Every day my need to change was prayerfully shared as a special request with God, “Help me to learn to love you more, and to love others.” No day passed without this plea.

Thankfully, God patiently worked with me so His answers to my prayers could be seen and understood. The scriptures started to consistently challenge me to seek to know more about love, and it was through the Bible that my knowledge grew.

“A new commandment I give to you, that you will love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34,35)

“Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13)

“He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and He who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him.” (John 14:21) - These and other passages took on new meaning for me.

Ok, our love is a witness for Christ, and self-sacrifice seems a part of that love. Love of God is to be demonstrated by keeping the commandments to which Jesus referred; but still the question remained, "What is love?" I asked the minister, Sunday school teachers, family and friends, but the answer varied greatly and I seemed no closer to a satisfactory answer.

This concerned me, because the more I studied the more love was shown to be at the center of our relationship with God and others. Yet, no one appeared to understand much about it.

While continuing to study, a second approach came into focus. Why not make up a questionnaire and ask as many people as possible to write out their definition of love?

At every opportunity, a small questionnaire was extended to people at church, school, and work. By this time there were occasional preaching opportunities at various churches on Sundays, or at youth revivals, and as always the questionnaires were distributed.

The answers received became lessons about love. The most common factor was that love was seen as action.

Some answers made me want to laugh, cry, or stare in shocked disbelief. The best were those which made me think.

Then one day the words of a minister filled my ears about love being "self-sacrificing service." This definition was accompanied with numerous illustrations. Enough to convince me that he was right.

Finally, a small amount of comfortable understanding had begun to quench my spiritual search. The trouble was it did not last very long.

The downfall of all definitions encountered thus far was the following: We say that love is self-sacrificing service or whatever, but what causes us to do these deeds of love?

What causes us to take action? Whatever that was must be what love is, and the actions must follow as an expression of that love.

So, the question remained, "What is love?" It was one of those little questionnaires that took me back to the basics. Someone had written, "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

Have you ever felt as though you overlooked something very important that you already knew. "A light bulb going on," does not describe my feeling as well as "a kick in the pants."

Of course, it did not take me long to open my Bible to first John, chapter four, verse eight. "The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love."

But what caught my eye was verse seven: "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God;..." It made sense. If God was love then love must be from God. Now this Truth from God could be combined with the other knowledge gained over what had now become several years of seeking.

Obviously, seeking more than just “any” definition of love was critical. Rather, seeking “a” definition of love which would be a “working definition”. The purpose being to gain a better understanding of how love works in our growth relationship with Christ, and His outreach through us.

The key factors which seemed necessary for a working definition were: love comes from God, results in action, and is intended for good results. A desire to love and be loved is an attribute every person, whose ever talked to me at length, has possessed with a felt sense of need.

Through time in prayer and study my conclusion is God made this need a part of His creation of mankind. It seems like it’s an indelible imprint upon all of humankind by the Creator; likely a result of being made in His image.

We don’t know exactly “how” this desire was given with certainty. My thought is this gift was given as God breathed His Life into Adam. (Genesis 2:7)

While considering everything learned the following working definition about love was finally written:

“Love is a gift from God that compels us to seek to meet our needs, or the needs of other people or living things as we become aware of those needs, with an intent of accomplishing good.”

Now, how do we apply this definition to our lives? Let me use a simple illustration as a beginning point. It begins with a white and brown dog.

Many years ago, every time when parking my car at the church it was my privilege to pastor, this dog came trotting across the street to greet me. Even his name was unknown to me. As a matter of fact with my memory, there’s no certainty “he” wasn’t a “she”. Yet what do you suppose happened during this exchange of greetings?

Almost without fail petting the dog was a “must do”. Why? Because it was clear the dog wanted to be petted. A wagging tail, excited eyes, and flopping ears as the dog trotted toward me could not be ignored. There was a strong compelling to stop and wait while the dog turned over indicating the belly was the spot to be rubbed. The tail never stopped as the neck was stretched and a gentle moan of pleasure was heard.

Now, aren’t there other examples that are more serious, and make a bigger difference to people? Sure there are, from most people’s perspectives.

This is not about importance, it’s just about understanding love regardless of the level of seriousness we apply to the circumstances. Love is not defined by the circumstances.

In my human way of thinking the time spent seemed to make the dog happy. The result was feeling better because of the time taken to express kindness. There’s a part of love my prayerful consideration found to be true; by giving we also receive, even when our intent is self-sacrificing service.

Let’s take this definition and apply it first by considering our love for others. To love another, we use the gift of love God has given all of us to attempt to meet the needs of the another person(s).

We may not be aware that the impulse to do this comes from God, nor may we realize it is a gift, but the result is the same. This attribute of giving and receiving is an ever-present aspect of the gift of love.

To love ourselves we seek to meet our own needs. To love someone else as we love ourselves, we must seek to meet other's needs equally with our own.

This is why no greater love is expressed than by one person laying down their life for another. They are placing the other person's needs above their own. Even to the point of causing their own death.

Selfishness can be defined as placing our needs above the needs of others, even if it is at the expense of others that our needs are met. Where this definition becomes especially interesting is concerning our relationship with God. Selfishness in its fullest sense must include our willingness to get our needs met above God's will for our lives, or the lives of others.

God loves us. He has expressed that love by meeting our deepest and often hidden need. The need for an eternal relationship with Him. We hide this from ourselves. God does not hide this eternally important need from us. One thing's for sure, we all need the Life the Lord offers us.

He has met this by sending His Son to lay down His life for us and then resurrecting Him from the tomb. Thus, proving His power over sin and death, and creating a new type of Life.

Through Christ, God created Life that has already suffered everything Sin and Death, essentially all of Satan's power, can use to destroy any life. Jesus became Sin on our behalf, and suffered and died for all of our sins, and to break the power of Sin's claim of ownership of us. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Now, the choice is ours. We can ask for and receive this eternal Life created through Christ, which made Him our only source of forgiveness and the eternal Life of Christ. Our other choice is to not ask Jesus, Who is Life, to forgive us and give us His Life; His forever Life.

If we refuse to receive Jesus, we are rejecting the Life God has created for all of us. In doing so we are condemning ourselves to an eternity in Sin, Death, and suffering. An eternal existence without any form, or influence of God's active presence, which of course will be in Hell.

Instead, we can be made Alive in Christ, trusting in God, and acting upon that trust. He will see that our needs are provided as required to complete His will for our lives.

His will, however, cannot happen by us pushing some mystical button of religious good faith. Rather it happens by humbling ourselves as we accept His authority over us, seeking forgiveness, and receiving Jesus-Life within us by asking Him to come into us as our Savior and Lord. Then we can begin loving the Lord with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength with the Love God gives us.

After all, as it says in 1 John 4:8, God is Love. We need to all realize what this means. Love is not a "what", it is a "Who", and that Who is God Himself.

This brings us back to that great commandment which the Holy Spirit laid upon my heart many years ago. We are to love God first.

It also brings us to a place where my working definition breaks down since we cannot love God by meeting His needs, because He has no needs. God is complete within Himself. He does not need us, nor does He need our love. He does desire our love, but He does not need it to be complete, or to fulfill any need of His.

This is one thing that makes His love for us so perfect. Since He needs nothing from us He will never seek to manipulate us for His benefit. Since God is perfect, and He is Love, obviously True Love is perfect.

He created us because He is Love, and it is His nature to express Himself through creation. His Love is righteous and never ending. So, His Love, given to us, can be expressed through us in accordance with His will for us in Christ Jesus. True, pure Love is a manifestation of God Himself in the world!

Therefore, all He desires for us is that which He knows is best for us. This is His will for our lives. We demonstrate our love of Him by doing His will, as we are empowered by His presence within us. This He will do in us through Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit. "If you love me, you will keep My commandments." (John 14:15)

God, through Christ, in the power of the Spirit is the only One Who can faithfully keep His commandments. This can only be done in, and through us as we act in union with God, humbly, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

That can happen because of God Who is Love within us. As His presences in Christ is lived out through us.

Please take a moment and prayerfully consider all of this about God's Love. Absorb it within mind and heart. When it seems it's clear pray some more. It is a never-ending source of Truth.

God's Love for us goes beyond any words of any language, or thought. God Loves us so much He has changed Himself in order to give us a chance to choose to love Him back.

His desire for us to enjoy all that He has for us is so great He has gone beyond anything our mind can imagine. His Love is as deep as the greatest depths of God, as great as God's highest heights, broader than all we think we know about all universes in space, or anything else.

Ok, what comes next also requires careful consideration. We love God by seeking to do what He wants, and what He wants us to do is what will be best for us (give us life in abundance – John 10:10)

Therefore, there is nothing that we can do which could result in a greater fullness of Life than to obey the will of God! God knows this, and that is why He has given His commandments to us, in Christ. We are to love Him first, before considering anything else at any time, and obey His will for us.

The capacity of Love Jesus is within us, then, is not simply following some urge to reach out and meet the needs of others. It is acting in unity with God to live-out the will of God.

It's allowing His Love, thus allowing Him to compel us to meet the needs of others as we are led and empowered by the Holy Spirit. This comes through obedience as we rely upon the Holy Spirit's guidance.

That is what happened in the life of Christ, and what, in my opinion, is supposed to be happening in our in and through us. We are to love others as Christ Loves us.

“...Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.” (John 5:19b)

Jesus did what He saw His Father doing, and we are to do what we see Jesus desires to do in and through us. He was led and empowered by the Holy Spirit, and we are to be led and empowered by the same Person through Jesus.

Someone surely is thinking of one, or more of the following by this time, “Well what about the feeling of love, where does that come in? Don’t our feelings matter? Can you have love without feeling love?” All really good questions, so let’s dive right in!

From my perspective, feelings do not initiate love. It’s initially by someone meeting our needs that provides the emotional response that we come to know as love. We certainly have the feelings of wanting our needs met.

When our needs are met then the comfort, and feelings of satisfaction connect and become combined with that set of circumstances. We are already “wired” to connect other circumstances to those feelings, and other feelings to those circumstances.

Our response to the circumstances can be controlled by the emotional experience we interpret, or desire as well. In other words, Our emotional needs begin to drive our sense of having needs we want met. This quickly layers, exponential complexity on top of what is already very complex.

When our needs are not met we have strong emotions of dissatisfaction and these are usually expressed with exuberance by a baby. The whole process seems to me to become very complex, very quickly. If allowed to do so a baby can control much of the actions within an entire household of people.

Over time children become very skilled at managing the circumstances. They can be down-right tricky about it! What they choose is not a response to just their physical needs, but their emotionally driven needs may become predominant if their physical needs have been met.

There’s probably a huge number of people who disagree with what is suggested above. That’s fine. The important point is we can choose to act in a way that is contrary to our feelings.

As an example, we do something that feels extremely risky, and may end up in great physical damage, or even death. Everyone around us may be saying, “No, No!”, and off we go even though we feel kind of sick to our stomachs before going beyond the “no-going-back” point of the circumstances.

Generally speaking within the world, “To love ourselves, or someone else is to follow the compulsion of the gift of love from God, to meet the needs we are aware of, with the intent of accomplishing good, regardless of our feelings.”

Now, someone may argue that the “compulsion” we experience is emotionally based, while others may argue it is based on cognitive awareness. Be my guest to argue about that one. It doesn’t matter to me.

What does matter to me is the compulsion exists because of the ability to love that is a gift from God. Moreover again, to me it is a result of being created in God's image that remains with human beings to this day. In an imperfect form it reflects the nature of our Creator.

As followers of Jesus, "Love of God, is a gift from God of Himself, where He makes us aware of our needs, the needs of others, or other living things with the solution to meet each need, so we can join Him in doing His will in, and through us by the power of the Holy Spirit."

This definition satisfies a working definition, for me, of what it means to love God, and how we are supposed to love as people who are Alive in Christ. Yes, feelings can, and probably will be a big part of this activity. They are not, however, the origin of those actions.

We are to be obedient to the will of God no matter how we feel. We are not to live by feelings, we are to live by faith! (2 Corinthians 5:7)

As we are obedient to the will of God we will learn to trust Him more and more. If there's a question about that it's because our perspective is not aligned with God's perspective. Remember, His perspective is always perfect, as is His best for us.

Because His will is the best for us our feelings will align with our trust in Him over time. Along with this alignment of feelings will be a growing positive emotional response to God's presence, and His will.

Obedience will become an action filled with the feelings of Joy, and not a burden at all. In fact, it will be experienced as freedom like we could never know otherwise. "... and you will know the Truth, and the Truth will make you free." [the caps on "Truth" are mine.] (John 8:32)

Remember, Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." (John 14:6)

Therefore, to personally know Jesus as Savior and Lord, is knowing the Truth, and knowing the Truth, Who He is, what He does, and what He wants us to do will be true freedom now, and forever more.

After putting this all together, my problem continued to be the need to grow in my love for God, and others. Certainly, some growth had been received during this seeking process, but now my longing was to understand more about how love grows as a result of our experiences within Jesus Christ.

We are going to deal with the "growth Spiral of love" in the next chapter, but first let's take a look at a rough illustration of how love might develop as we grow in Christ.