

What Is Love?

John 15:9-17

What is love? That is a pretty ambitious question to ask, isn't it? Sort of like, "What is the meaning of life?" It's way too broad a question to have a concise yet comprehensive answer, and it is way too complicated a subject to have a single, concise definition. But the Bible does give us some helpful ways to understand what love is all about.

We live in an age that doesn't know much of anything about the nature of love, an age in which love is seen as something you "fall into" and might just as easily "fall out of." Love is often expressed with little or no commitment, with no sense of self-sacrifice, and with little awareness of the duties and responsibilities of that go along with love.

By contrast, the focus of love in the Bible isn't upon the sort of emotional experiences that we typically use to define love today. Nor is love expressed in the Bible in merely subjective or emotional ways. Instead, we read that "love never fails." Similarly, love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

But still, what is it? What is love? Let me begin to answer that question this morning with a model. A pattern. An example.

I. A MODEL FOR LOVE.

That model is found in the Trinity, and I hope you have noted just how often I have made reference to the Trinity in this study of John's gospel. For John, the Trinity is not some strange and mysterious doctrine that seems impossible to define. The Trinity, for John, is not simply a theological proposition. Instead, it is an intensely practical awareness of the very nature & identity of God.

So if you have trouble defining with words the precise relationship between the three persons of the Trinity, if you can't quite express or even understand the theological nuances of the Trinity, then please settle for this,

A. The Father loves the Son.

Again, I could get much more technical. And we could use much more complicated theological language, but here is the basic idea of two of the three persons of the Trinity. There is a father. There is a son. And the Father loves the son.

v.9 "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you..."

And this is how that love is modeled, with a thorough-going personal sense of unity in every way. For example, we read,

John 5:20 "For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself does."

John 8:28 Then Jesus said to them, "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and that I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things. 29 And He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him."

And most especially,

John 17:20 "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; 21 that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. 22 And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: 23 I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me."

The Father is in the Son. The Son is in the Father. The

Father loves the Son. The Father gives his glory to the Son. The love is so profound, the connection is so deep, that Jesus will even say,

John 10:30 "I and My Father are one."

That's love. And we use that same image to define the love of a husband and wife, too, don't we? The two shall become one. Unity of being. That's the model of love. The Father and the Son are so deeply connected by love as to model for us the reality that they are, indeed, one God.

There is another model for love given to us here.

B. The Son loves his people.

As I have already read,
v.9

Look down to,
v.12

So the question becomes, "How has Jesus loved his disciples?" How has Jesus loved us? And at that point, the answer is easy. He has loved us in the greatest possible way anyone could possibly love.

v.13

This is familiar theme for John.

John 10:11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. 12 But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. 13 The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. 15

As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep."

"Jesus loves me! This I know, For the Bible tells me so...Jesus loves me! He who died, Heaven's gate to open wide; He will wash away my sin, Let His little child come in."

That's love. Or in the words of,

Is. 53:5 "But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."

The Son loves his people so much, he died for them. Beloved, that's love. And that's the model of love given to us, namely self-denial to the point of death. Laying down your life for the object of your love. The next time that you tell someone that you love them, think about that. For this model of love becomes the model for us to follow, doesn't it?

Eph. 5:2 "And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma."

Especially in the context of marriage, as we read this,

Eph. 5:25 "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her."

That's it. Nothing else is really needed, except to fill in the details. This is love, that you lay down your life for the object of your love. That's love.

Phil. 2:1 "Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, 2 fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love,

being of one accord, of one mind. 3 Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”

That is the only context in which you can begin to understand and apply that definition of love found in,

1 Cor. 13:4 “Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; 5 does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; 6 does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never fails.”

That’s the model for love God the Father and God the Son give to us. And the model is not just a suggestion, it’s a command. Even as I just read,

Eph. 5:2 “And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us.”

II. THE COMMAND TO LOVE.

So, love can be commanded! Love is not simply a feeling or an emotion, neither of which can fully be the subject of a command. But this model of love that Jesus is showing to us can be commanded. And so it is.

v.12

That’s pretty easy to understand, isn’t it? I don’t need to work very hard to explain that.

A. Jesus calls us to love one another.

It is his commandment!

Again, for repetition,

v.17

So this is our duty! This is our obligation. Love for one another.

John emphasizes this same idea in,

1 John 3:11 “For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, 12 not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous. 13 Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you. 14 We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. 15 Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. 16 By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”

John, then, gets rather practical and personal,

1 John 3:17 “But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? 18 My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.”

So love is to be demonstrated. Love is to be shown, in action, in deed and in truth. It is a demonstration of self-sacrifice, considering others more important than yourself. Then, even more broadly, love can be seen as obedience to the law.

B. Jesus calls us to keep his commandments as an outworking of love.

v.10

Two parts of that. First, plainly, love is obedience. And Jesus calls us to keep his commandments. You can’t separate the two. We’ve seen that before in John,

John 14:15 “If you love Me, keep My commandments...21 He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.”

Even more directly,

1 John 5:2 “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. 3 For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.”

So love and obedience are joined together. You cannot rightly claim to love God if you have not committed yourself to obeying his commandments. Jesus is the preeminent example of one who showed his love for his father by his obedience!

But let me add something very important to that. The second part. Yes, love is obedience. That is the first part. But secondly, that obedience itself is an outworking of love. So love is not only defined by obedience, but true obedience is motivated by love!

That’s what Jesus means when he refers to “abiding in my love.”

v.10

You live, or dwell, in fellowship with Jesus, in the experience of his love, when you keep his commandments. It’s not a mere performance of duty. It’s not a bare moralistic obligation. It is nothing at all of legalism. Nor is it anything related to works-righteousness. Rather, obedience is the outworking of love. The outworking of Jesus’ love for you, in you.

So as Jesus loves you, as you come to comprehend and believe what that means, that love is worked out in your own life

in the exercise of your own obedience. You obey because you love. You obey in the context of your love. You obey, as the very demonstration of your love. Therefore, as you obey, you abide in Jesus’ own love for you.

So again,

v.9

And how do you experience that glorious sense of “abiding in Jesus’ love?” Obedience. And Jesus’ relationship to his father is the model for us to follow.

v.10

Let me then move on to my third main point,

III. THE EFFECTS OF LOVE.

What I mean by that, is to identify the effects of this sort of love on the practical matters of your own daily life. What happens to you, when you abide in Jesus’ love? What happens, when you love one another, as Jesus has loved you?

I hope this answer will be greatly encouraging for you. Because the effect of love is,

A. Friendship with Jesus.

v.14

The importance of that idea is made very clear in,

v.15

You are no longer a servant. No longer a slave. No longer an employee, as we might say today. Instead, you become a friend. And the definition here of a friend is someone with whom you communicate freely and personally.

You are a friend, because Jesus talks to you! You are a friend, because Jesus communicates with you.

I have a few friends whom I seek out when I need someone to talk to. I have a few friends who listen well, who know what I am doing. And I seek to be that sort of friend to others. Such friends are extremely valuable. Such deep, personal communication is extremely valuable.

Again, just think about that for a little while. Jesus calls you a friend, you who abide in his love by obeying his commands.

Only once before, in an off-handed address to his disciples, does Jesus call them friends. It's a description of a relationship that we don't often think about with Jesus, but it is clearly what Jesus wanted to stress in this last time spent with his disciples. He calls them friends.

What a high and glorious privilege. It is a description that our weak minds can hardly grasp and take in. The King of Kings and Lord of lords not only has compassion upon and saves us, but he calls us friends.

We are perhaps too careless today in our use of the word friends, but Jesus isn't the least bit careless here. There is a degree of equality between friends, an equal standing that is obviously missing with the bondservant. A servant, a slave, does not know what his master is doing. He is simply told what to do and when. He is obliged to obey, and the master has no other obligations to him.

But a friend! A friend is so different. A friend is an intimate acquaintance, one from whom no secrets are hid. A friend shares all the details. And in that sense, Jesus has withheld nothing from

us. He has revealed to us the fullness of the glory of God.

v.15 "All things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you."

That's the first effect of love. Friendship with Jesus. The second effect is,

B. Joy in Jesus.

v.11

That's the goal, joy! True, genuine inner happiness. Joy is the happiness of the soul.

Let me try to emphasize this appropriately. The point here is not simply obedience. The point here is not simply some definition of love, or even the right commitment of love. The point is not related simply to the outward aspects of love and obedience. The point is that Jesus is teaching us about joy. He is teaching us the path to joy. He is showing us how to gain that joy, by abiding in Jesus' love.

I don't think we stress this enough, this idea of experiencing joy. We can too technical. Too concerned with legal definitions. We get too focused on duty, or responsibility. Or too embedded in theology or doctrine. And we forget our first love! The great delight of our soul, which is joy in Jesus.

John doesn't forget that. This is how he presents the gospel itself,

1 John 1:1 "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life— 2 the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the

Father and was manifested to us— 3 that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. 4 And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.”

I want to be careful with words, and I don't really want to sound flippant by talking about “being in love with Jesus.” But something of that is the idea here. The effect of love, if you love another person, is joy, isn't it? It is happiness on every level.

So it is to be with Jesus. So it is when you abide with Jesus, in his love. And walk in his ways, in obedience to his commandments.

Ps. 128:1 “Blessed is every one who fears the LORD, Who walks in His ways. 2 When you eat the labor of your hands, You shall be happy, and it shall be well with you.”

Do you see how warm that is? How exciting? That is the effect of being in love with Jesus. Joy. And with that joy,

C. Fruitfulness in Jesus.

v.16

So Jesus chose us for the purpose of bearing fruit. We looked at that idea last week in,

John 15:5 “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing...[Then that fruitfulness is defined.] 7 If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. 8 By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.”

For that very purpose, Jesus has chosen us and called us to

be his friends.

v.16b “...I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you.”

So what about you? Do you love Jesus? Do you love him the way the Father loves him? Wow, it's hard even to imagine that, isn't it?

And the related question, do you love one another the way Jesus loves you? I want you to go home with that question in your mind today. Do Will you love one another the way Jesus loves you?

You can forget everything in this sermon, and that's ok, if you remember that one question. And respond to it in your heart as well as in your life. Do you love one another the way Jesus loves you?

That's the goal of our doctrine, the goal of our Bible study. That's the goal of my preaching, and the goal of your discipleship, that you love Jesus. And in his love, you love one another.

So do you? Do you love one another the way Jesus loves you?