

Understanding Love

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The world does not understand the love of God in Jesus Christ. But the world loves to talk about love. It is often used with reference to trivial things like, “I love that car!” “I love football!” or “I love those shoes!” Phrases like these are common and I’m sure you’ve said something like one of them. I know I have.



The problem is not in the phrases themselves, because it is perfectly fine to have likes and dislikes and to talk about them. The problem is using the idea of love to describe feelings that in the end are not love at all.

If we are not careful, these wrong conceptions of love can become replacement ideas for Biblical love, and replacement ideas tend to bring confusion. So for the sake of clarity, consider a few wrong ideas about love.

What love isn’t

Love is not the way something or someone makes you feel. A supreme liking for chocolate or hiking or any other object or activity you prefer is not love, but partiality. That fluttery feeling you get when a girl or guy that you are attracted to walks into the room is not love, but desire. Feeling is part of love, but not the whole of it.

Also, love is not equal to the current understanding of tolerance. It is not the acceptance of all belief systems and ideas of morality as equally valid and righteous. However, most of the world’s understanding of love is limited to these ideas that are, for the most part, self-centered, fleeting emotions. They are subject to the whims of culture and the turning tide of history.

What love is

In the book of 1 John, there are numerous statements that help us understand what love really is:

“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.” 3:16

“In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son

into the world, so that we might live through him.” 4:9

“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” 4:10

“For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.” 5:3

Notice the theme of giving. God gives Jesus, Jesus gives His life, and believers give up personal autonomy and pursue obedience. In every instance, love has everything to do with sacrificial action.

Biblical love is affection for someone that moves you to self-giving. It is the bending of your will toward the interest of others rather than self—giving your time, money, sweat, tears, energy, talent, and life for the good of another. Love is Jesus broken on the cross for you not seeking a way out, bleeding from the head saying, “Not my will but Your will” to the Father.

Love is the Father giving his only Son for the sins of rebels. It is a mother losing sleep to care for a child and a father spending time with his children after work knowing it will mean staying up late to get other things done. Love is the gift of self, rather than self-promotion—sacrifice of desire, rather than indulgence—working for the benefit others, rather than personal gain.

This love is what produced the marriage of Ian and Larissa Murphy.¹ While dating in college, a car accident left Ian with an injured brain and multiple disabilities. He would never work, would need constant care, and would not dance at their wedding. Four years later, they stood before a judge with their pastor and covenanted in disability and in health, with full knowledge that barring a miracle, it would always be disability.

Why? What gain could there be in loving someone who could, humanly speaking, offer you nothing but need? In the sorrow of sickness, the love of Christ crucified for sinners was moving Larissa and Ian. The selfless abandon of Jesus on the cross He did not deserve, is the driving force of true love.

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