

What is Love?

Today is Valentine's Day. This is a Day that is dedicated to one idea: Love. Everyone at least knows what love is, and everyone loves love. I've met people who don't like Valentine's Day because they can't find a girl or a boy to like them, but I've never met someone who didn't love love. You don't need a boyfriend, girlfriend, wife or husband to love. Everyone has had a parent to love, and some of us really love our siblings. Maybe you are fortunate enough to have grandparents or children to love, and who love you. The happy feeling one gets from being loved by someone else is something with which everyone can relate. But what is love?

Love is portrayed everywhere. Just about every story ever written has some kind of love interest written into it. The movies that we watch all show people who are in love. Any book you might pick up has some kind of love in it. Romances are about love between a man and a woman. Family stories are about love between parents and children. War stories are about love a man has for his country or homeland. There are even animal movies about the love someone has for a pet. But all these different ways of depicting love sometimes causes confusion about the real meaning of love. For instance, we have different ways of expressing love. I say that I love pizza, the U.S.A., and my church. I love my car, my wife, and the color green. But I don't mean that I love all of those things in the same way. I don't love my wife the same way I love pizza. I don't love my car the same way I love my kids. How should we understand what love is? What is love?

First, we must talk about what love is not. Since there are so many ideas about what love is, we should narrow down the field to talk about real love. There are some who have an idea that love is the feeling you get toward someone else. You may not be able to explain it, but it is a good feeling. This is the love that we often talk about in romance stories. Two people feel happy feelings toward one another, and so as the story goes, we see that those feelings grow stronger, until they are finally, "in love." But is this the best understanding of love? Let me ask you a question: If love is just a feeling, what happens when you don't have that feeling anymore? What if your feelings are based on how your spouse looks? What happens when he or she isn't as beautiful as they once were? For you who are not married, would it be acceptable for you if the one who said they loved you told you one day they just weren't feeling it anymore? I suspect that it would not.

Some think of love as a force of nature. Now, it is true that when you truly love someone, there is an inexplicable attachment you have to them, but is love just a force? This is the way that people in history have thought of love. This is where the idea of the god Cupid came from. Cupid would shoot humans with an arrow, and the first person they saw they would be forced to love. Of course, most Americans don't reference Greek gods when they speak of love, but we still speak of this kind of love when we say, "I can't help the way I feel! I love her!" Is this the best understanding of love? Let me ask you a question: What would you have thought if when you were little and asked your mother: "Do you love me?" she would have shrugged and said, "I have to. I have no choice." What if during your wedding vows, your spouse would have turned to you and instead of saying, "I do," he said, "I must." Is that real love? I submit that none of you really think of love in this way, when it comes down to it.

Let me interject here and say this: Love is also not the same thing as sex. You may get a feeling that comes over you toward a member of the opposite gender, but that feeling does not equate to love. It may be raging hormones that cause a physical reaction when you see a girl or boy. The Bible says that it is lust, not love. You may lust after someone and not love them, and you may love someone you do not lust after. Sex is not the same as love, and anyone who says otherwise is a liar.

What about a choice? Is love merely a choice? Can you choose to love someone, whether you have feelings for them or not? I think that this is close, but those of us who have ever been in love concede that love is more than a simple assent of the mind, or a simple choice. Love must be more than a choice. Some of the best love stories ever written are about people who are trying not to "fall in love" but fail miserably. Against their choice, they love. But eventually, they do choose the other person.

What is a good working definition of love? Webster defines love in this way: “an affection of the mind excited by beauty and worth of any kind, or by the qualities of an object which communicate pleasure.” Let me quote that definition again: “An affection of the mind excited by beauty and worth of any kind, or by the qualities of an object which communicate pleasure.” What does that definition say about love?

First, it says that love is from an affection. Affection is not a word we use much anymore, unless we are talking about a hug or holding hands. Again, Webster defines affection as “a bent of mind toward a particular object.” This means that the object of your love is someone who has caught the attention of your mind. I remember almost six years ago when I became a father, my son Caleb caught the attention of my mind. In one sense, it was beyond my control. But at the same time, it was more than that. Second, the definition says that the affection comes because of the beauty and worth of the person or object being loved. We don’t love things we deem worthless. If you think wads of chewed up bubble gum are worthless, you are not going to go out of the way to collect and love them. You must see some beauty in the object or person you love. Obviously, when you cease to see worth in something, you stop loving it.

But how do you know when you really love someone? How do you know when you have genuine love for someone? You can know that you have love for someone when you want the best for them. I know that I love my wife because I want the best for her. I want her to be safe, so I protect her. I want her to be happy, so I provide good things for her. I want her to be admired by others, so I speak well of her. My love for Amy makes me want the best for her. In fact, the Bible talks about this kind of love in one of the most famous passages in the Bible. The Bible uses the word “charity” for love, and it says in 1 Corinthians 13: “Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth” This is the only kind of love that has any kind of substance.

Now that we know what love is, it is important that we ask, “Who are we supposed to love?” Who is the one for who we should want the best? Who is the one who should be object of our affection? We ought to look in the Bible for the answer for the following reason: God, who wrote the Bible, is the best expert in the area of love. Long before Dr. Phil ever came on the scene, God wrote in His word that He is love. He says in 1 John 4:7-8 “Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.” God is not just loving, but He is love. Since God knows the most about love, who does He say we should love?

First, the Bible says that you should love your spouse. God instituted marriage in the Garden of Eden, with the very first man and woman. He is the One who said, “The LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.” Adam and Eve were married, and it was God’s intent that they should remain together forever.

In the New Testament, God says that a man should love his wife. He says in Ephesians 5:25 “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;” He says a few verses later: “So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself.” Husbands are supposed to love first of all, their wives. Your wife should be the most important person to you. Wives, your husbands should be the most important person to you. No one else should occupy your affections more than your spouse. If you find yourself loving someone else as much as you love your wife, you should be careful. Your spouse should be the one you love more than anyone on the planet, including your parents and children. Your parents need your love, but the Bible says that when two people are married, they leave their fathers and mothers and

unite together. The Bible says to love your children, but your spouse still must occupy the most important place in your life.

Second, the Bible says you should love your neighbor. Jesus said this: “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” Paul goes a step further and says this: “For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” In America, we think of our neighbor as the person who lives next door to us. It may be someone in the same neighborhood. But in Jesus’ day, a neighbor was anyone you knew. That means that when you are in the grocery store, your cashier is your neighbor, even if she lives in another town. That means when you are on vacation in Mexico, the people you meet are your neighbors. You ought to love everyone you come in contact with. You ought to want the best for your doctor, your mechanic, or the guy who cuts you off downtown. You ought to love everyone.

Which brings us to our next category of people to love. Am I really supposed to love the person who cut me off? Well, you might be saying, I suppose if he did it unintentionally, I could love him. But what about the person who cuts you off intentionally? Or worse, what about the person who cuts you off and then makes an obscene gesture at you? What about your next door neighbor, when he lets his trash blow into your yard? What about the crabby checkout person? Do you have to love them? What does the Bible say? Again, let me quote from Jesus. He said in the Sermon on the Mount: “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which spitefully use you, and persecute you.” You are to love your enemies. The Old Testament even says, “If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink.” The Bible does not give you any exception to the person you do not have to love. You must love everyone.

The last person we need to talk about loving is the person of God. Someone once asked Jesus: “What is the greatest commandment?” They wanted to know what would make God the happiest. They were expecting Jesus to say that you should not murder, or that you should give money to the poor, but Jesus did not say that. He said, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” Jesus said that the greatest commandment in the Bible is the commandment to love God. He said that this is the first and greatest commandment. He then said that every other commandment in the Bible would be taken care of and obeyed by following God’s first commandment to love Him.

This is true. If we loved God, we wouldn’t want to murder. We wouldn’t want to lie, because we would love the truth. We wouldn’t want to steal, because we’d be grateful for what God gave us. If we could love God and keep Him first in our lives, we would obey every law found in the Bible. But, if loving someone means that we want the best for them, how can we love God? He has everything, and decides what will happen to Him. How can you want the best for Him? And why should we love Him? We will answer these questions as we go along.

We will talk about why we are supposed to love in just a minute, but for now, we need to talk about how to love. If God wants me to love my spouse, my kids, my neighbors, and everyone with whom I come in contact, how does He say that I should love all those people?

The kind of love that God says we should have is first of all selfless. If real love is wanting the best for someone else, then sometimes your desires must take second place. For instance, if you love your wife, you won’t need to win an argument with her. If you love her, you will want the best for her. Remember, 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter, says that love “seeketh not her own.” Galatians 5:13 says “but by love serve one another.” Philippians 2:4 says “Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.” There are so many other verses that say that love should be selfless.

Now, that does not mean that if you are supposed to love everyone, and love is letting someone else get the best, then you should let everyone get in front of you when you are in a line. It doesn't mean that you should be a doormat. But it does mean that you should treat others the way that you want to be treated. This is called the Golden Rule, but it actually came from the words of Jesus. Luke 6:31 says "And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise." Instead of thinking only of yourself, you ought to love everyone by putting them first. God wants you to love selflessly.

Another way that God said we should love is found in Matthew 22:37 "Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." Jesus said that when you love, you should do so with your whole heart. When you love others, you should not love half-hearted. This means that you should love your spouse with everything you have. If you love your husband with a sense of duty or obligation instead of real love, that shows that you aren't loving with all of your heart. The kind of love that takes instead of gives is the kind of love that is not whole-hearted. You must love with your whole heart. That is the way God loves, and that is the way He expects you to love as well.

Since we are talking about God, how does God say that He wants to be loved? Can I love God any way I feel like He wants to be loved? Does God really care how I love Him? Let me say first of all that God is very interested in the way you love Him. Second, God has set some standards for the best ways to love Him. Not everyone likes to be loved the same way. God says that He wants to be loved through our obedience. Jesus said this in John 14:15 "If ye love me, keep my commandments." God says that if we want to show our love for Him, we should do what He says. We should obey His Word, the Bible.

There are some who get indignant when told that God wants them to keep His commandments. They think that a God who commands obedience is a tyrant, not someone who deserves adoration. We will talk about why we should love God in a little while, but let me explain why obeying God is the best way to love Him. If you think of God's commandments as prohibitions against harmless things you find enjoyable, like fornication and drunkenness, then it is plausible to think that God is mean. You may assume that God is only happy when you are happy, and so to make Him happy, you should do the things that please you. This is a fallacy. God does not exist to make you happy. In fact, your happiness is of relative unimportance in the Bible.

God does love mankind, and so wants the best for Him. But God has given all men a free will to choose to love Him. You can obey God and do right or you can obey yourself and sin. God has not prohibited certain things because He does not like you or because He wants to ruin your fun. God warns about sinning, because sin is destructive. God has made us a certain way, and when we sin, we are destroying ourselves. God loves us, and so tells us not to do things that will hurt and eventually kill us. But He leaves it up to us. In this way, we can love God by doing what He has commanded. Our obedience shows that we trust what God says about us. We show that He is trustworthy and faithful to us. Disobedience says that God is lying to us and doesn't love us, which is untrue.

Finally, we must ask this: Why should we love? God has told us to love all these different people, but why should we love them? Why is God so interested in love? First let me say that if God is love then He knows the best about love. He knows how good love is and what it can do. We should first love because God Himself is love, and loving is the best thing you can do for some people.

But why should we love our spouse? I have no doubt that some of you listening to this radio broadcast this morning are having problems with your spouse. You are saying, "I used to love her, but she's changed!" or "I can't love him anymore." Despite what you feel or think, the Bible says that God wants you to love your spouse. The verses we quoted earlier tell you to love your spouse. But what about when your spouse has been unfaithful to you? What if you don't feel as though you love your spouse anymore? Does God still want you to love your spouse then? First of all, I would like to point out that God said in Genesis 1:24 "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh." The Bible says

that marriage is more than two people who live together. They have joined themselves to one another, and that binding should not be broken. Jesus said in Matthew 19:6 “Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” Jesus said that in a marriage, God puts two people together. Those should not be pulled apart by man. A change of feelings, a change of financial circumstances, or a change in desires should not be a reason to end your marriage.

But God gives another reason for why you should love your spouse. At your marriage ceremony, you made a promise to her or him that you would love and be with that person for the rest of your life. God is very serious about vows, and tells us that we need to keep them. He says in Ecclesiastes 5:4-5 “When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.” You need to keep the promises that you made to other people, especially when that person is your wife or husband. God wants you to love because you have promised to love, and you are bound by your promise to love.

But why should we love other people? Why does God say that He wants us to love our neighbors? Aren't there certain people in the world who we could legitimately say we do not love? God wants us to love other human beings because we are all made in the image of God. Genesis 1:26-27 say “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” God created the first man in His own image, and since we are all from that one man, we are all made in God's image. Now, that doesn't mean that we are made in God's physical image, because God is a Spirit. He does not have any physical properties. But the way that God made us was very special, more special than the rest of His other creation. Therefore, we should love other people because we are all made from the same stuff, in God's image.

But finally, we must ask the question: Why should we love God? We have already seen that we are supposed to love Him, but why? The Bible gives many reasons for why we should love God. One reason is that He has given us everything we have. Do you realize that if it weren't for God, you wouldn't have your next breath? God not only gave you life and keeps you alive, but He gave you everything you have. You have your health, your family, your house, your car, and all your possessions because God allowed you to have them. Since God has given you everything, you should love Him. He didn't have to give you anything, and He did.

You should also love God because He loves you. Did you know that God loved you before you loved Him? Logically, if God existed before you did, then He would have loved you before you loved Him. But the Bible says that He not only loved you before you loved Him, but that the reason you love Him is because He first loved you. 1 John 4:19 says “We love him, because he first loved us.” We love God because He first loved us. How did God show His love to us? That is what I would like to talk about for the last few minutes we have.

Jesus said in John 15:13 “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” The greatest love that someone can have for someone else is to sacrifice the thing that is most important. Nothing is more important to a person than his life. Jesus said that someone will demonstrate the greatest and best kind of love by laying down his very life for someone else. Friend, this is exactly how God showed His love to us. While it is true that God is a Spirit and cannot die, Jesus came to Earth as a human to lay down His life. Jesus willingly laid down His life so that we could have life. But not just any life: life eternal.

But how could the death of Jesus give us life? Jesus, when He died on the cross, took upon Him all of our sins. When He died on the cross, He was being punished by God for sins that He did not commit. Jesus took the punishment you and I deserve by dying on the cross. And He did this while we were enemies of God. Romans 5:6-8 say this: “For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Jesus gave His life for

those who didn't even want His sacrifice. He died for the Roman soldiers who put Him on the cross, the Jews who called for His crucifixion, and the disciples who ran away in His hour of need. Jesus died for sinners.

Friend, that is you. You are the sinner for whom Jesus died. You are deserving of eternal punishment, yet Jesus paid for your sins by His death on the cross. He showed the best and ultimate love through His sacrifice. He died so that you could have life. But how do you receive this life? The Bible says this: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Friend, if you will admit that you are a sinner deserving of that place called Hell and put your faith in what Jesus did on the cross for you, you can be saved. Simply acknowledge to God that you are a sinner and ask for His free gift of salvation. God, who is love, has already promised that you will have that new life He gives. He says in John 6:37 "him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out." He says He will give you that free gift of salvation. If you have any questions about how to experience God's love this Valentine's Day, please feel free to contact us. You can do so in the following ways.

You can stop by our church building, which is located at 909 W. 8th St., by the softball diamonds. You can call us at 732-3321. You can E-mail us at church@fbcpr.org. That's CHURCH at F B C P R dot O R G. Or you can log on to our website, which is www.fbcpr.org. If you would like to have a copy of this broadcast, either in audio or transcript form, you can find it on our website tomorrow. I would like to once again invite you ladies who are interested to our ladies Bible study. It meets every Monday for the next few weeks at our church building from 11:45 to 12:30. Feel free to bring a lunch with you and study the book of Ruth with us. Please join us again next week for the Way of Truth Radio Broadcast, brought to you by the First Baptist Church of Park Rapids, Minnesota.