

# Defining Love

You are dying and you have just been told that you haven't got long to live. What do you wish to do with the remaining time you have? I have little doubt that you will most likely want to spend it with those you love. None of us denies the inescapable role love plays in filling our lives with meaning, which explains why there is so much hurt and pain when love is lost. Love can't truly be bought or sold yet is perhaps the most valuable quality of life. A life deprived of love is no life at all.

But what is love? It feels so obvious that we don't need to think about it, but when we do, we realise it isn't obvious at all. We know it's there. We know it matters enormously. We know we need it and aren't meant to live without it. Without love life is futile, but it's surprisingly difficult to articulate what this vital ingredient really is.

In naturalism, and therefore atheism, love is just a chemical condition of the brain. If you feel love, it's only because that combination of chemicals enables you to better survive in order to pass on your genetic code. That's all love is - chemistry. So telling someone "*I love you*" is ultimately as meaningful as the dreams of rocks. Love is reduced to the purposeless interaction of matter in a world of blind natural events. In denying God, you deny any definite meaning undergirding life and without meaning you are compelled to deny love any transcending value, or any *true* value at that. The founder of Buddhism renounced his wife and family in search of inner peace. In Hinduism the concept of love is more that of pity. In Islam, submission is demanded by a compassionate god, yet the more one reads about this god, the more compassion seems an empty term. In Christianity love precedes human life and becomes the absolute value for us. This absolute is ultimately found only in God. Love is not merely chemicals, love is not merely an emotion, or even an expression or feeling, it transcends all this to a relational truth found at the heart of God's very being. For Christians, love is revealed in the ultimate sacrifice in which the very likeness of God, Jesus Christ, paid the penalty for the moral imperfection of mankind.

It is the Christian worldview that challenges our priorities and addresses the need of the human heart to love and be loved. Atheism denies the existence of love, Islam seems void of it, Hinduism gives sorrow to it and Buddhism rejects it for personal peace.

Even though all literature, films, music and culture seem to revolve around our quest for love we still witness more betrayal, breakups, and breakdowns in our society. Unless this trend is reversed civilisation will slowly degrade and hatred will unleash, even upon those we claim to 'love'. We want to be loved but find it so difficult to love others. Our idea of love is fatally flawed and the world is suffering because of it.

## What is love?

This is the search of the human heart. Christianity recognises two essential kinds of love, a love based on need (need-love), and a love based on giving (gift-love), an expression of selflessness. These two loves have a unique and vital role in our lives. We will first start with a better understanding of 'need-love'.

### Need-love

Human love is a love of need; Plato described this as "*the son of Poverty*". As soon as we are conscious we discover loneliness. We need others physically, emotionally, intellectually; we need

them if we are to know ourselves. Our love is a craving to be loved; we are desperate. No one is truly self-sufficient, those who try to live totally independently often find themselves depressed. Now we must be careful not to see need-love as mere selfishness. No one calls a child selfish because it turns to its mother for comfort; nor an adult who turns to his friends for company. Since we do in fact need one another, as the ancient scripture declares, *"it is not good for man to be alone."*

This aspect of human love, however, was intended to find its primary fulfilment in God, otherwise the 'need' never truly finds its answer. For example, I remember when hiking the coast of Portugal, one day it was scorching hot, I was carrying a giant backpack and spent the whole day hiking up and down hills. When I got to my accommodation in the evening the first thing I did was have a coke, it felt like the most pleasurable coke I had ever had. But the drink was only a pleasure because I was thirsty. Pleasures are not hated once we have had them, but they certainly "die on us" with extraordinary abruptness as soon as we have had them. Need-pleasures are temporary and lose all meaning as soon as the need is fulfilled.

Our need-love for God is different because our need of Him can never end either in this life or any other. Our love for God, from the very nature of the case, must often be entirely a need-love. He addresses our need-love when he says, *"come to me, all who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest."* (Matthew 11:28)

Grace happily accepts our need, finding joy in our total dependence. A wise man is sorry for his sins which have increased his need for God's forgiveness and ability to transform his heart. There is something in each of us that cannot be naturally loved but God loves the unlovable.

The twist in human nature is to seek fulfilment for all our needs in all the wrong places, scrubbing God out of the picture He created. Instead, we seek fulfilment in wealth, fame, sex, pleasure, apparent 'success'... We misinterpret our need for God as a need for whatever our flesh, eyes, or pride desire. The bankruptcy of our fallen condition is the tendency to claim human love as a divine authority. We may give our human loves the unconditional allegiance which we owe only to God. However, natural loves that are allowed to become gods do not remain loves, they become tyrants. When human love is idolised then these 'needs' demand our total commitment, telling us to ignore the cost. They override all other claims and insinuate that any action which is for 'love's sake' is thereby lawful and even praiseworthy. Therefore excluding God from the picture leads any need-love, whether it's erotic love, love for sport, property, our country, family or possessions, to become a god in its own right.

When we see ourselves as the ultimate reference for our lives, and therefore treat ourselves as god instead of the God who truly holds that place, then human loves translate to mere 'likes'. Life becomes all about our satisfaction.

In western culture, what passes for love today would often be better described as self-gratification. We treat relationships the same way we treat a theme park, hopping from ride to ride. There is this casual attitude that we can just jump from partner to partner, that as long as we are always physically attracted, as long as we feel loved, as long as we always have the emotions and feelings, then we're in it. We question whether we're happy with that person still or whether they still fit into our futures, or how they make us feel and are we pleased? And if they don't fit that, we're not sure we want them, what's the point? As soon as these exciting aspects go, we move on to the next option. We are defining love in what benefits or improves our lives as if the primary objective of our life is our self. We understand love as if it finds its greatest expression in self-satisfaction. This often gives way to the view that our fulfilment is found in pleasure, especially bodily pleasure.

To give an extreme example of the dangers of this, in the old testament we read a terrible account of

the rape by Amnon of his half-sister Tamar (2 Samuel 13). At the start of the account, Amnon secretly tells a friend, *"I love Tamar"*. The language is very telling. He says he loves her, but the unfolding event completely contradicts that. He works out a way for the two of them to be alone in his room. He asks her to sleep with him, and when she refuses, he rapes her. Immediately afterwards he wants nothing to do with her and sends her off. The story begins with Amnon declaring his love for Tamar. But had he truly loved her, this whole grotesque episode would have never happened. It is true that he had intense feelings for her. He was driven by desire, a 'need' or 'want', but he was not driven by the right kind of love for her. This is an unpleasant example, but it makes a very vital point. Our feelings can be a dreadful guide to what is right and loving behaviour. Our feelings and desires can be great servants but dreadful masters. It is why we need much more to guide us than our feelings.

Sexual expression, momentary thrills and any action which gives a bodily sensation are really the most precarious attractions in the world. But the path of pleasure as an end in itself always ends in disappointment. When pleasure has run its course, a sense of despondency can creep into one's soul that may lead to self-destruction. Disappointment in pleasure gives rise to emptiness, not just for a moment, but for life. *There can seem to be no preconfigured purpose to life if every pleasure brings no lasting fulfilment. The built-in mystery and gift of sexual enjoyment has moved from marital relationships to any opportune moment for gratification. We are more indulgent than ever, and more unfulfilled than ever.* Look at how our culture has torn sex from a sacred, precious moment and made it merely a casual act devoid of commitment with whoever you want. We call the sexual act *"making love"* when actually if that act is without commitment, it is literally reducing an individual to an object of satisfaction, the heart is disconnected. The history of sexual ethics in the last half-century has proved all too well that the hedonistic view of sex and relationships is outdated and doesn't work, neither at a social nor personal level.

The result of elevating ourselves to the centre of the universe is that we become self-absorbed and so self-destructive, judging everything solely in relation to how it can benefit us. Elevating ourselves, human love descends into selfish desire. William Morris wrote a poem called *"love is enough"*, but in this sense, it just isn't. The natural loves are not self-sufficient. To say this is not to belittle the natural loves but to indicate where their real glory lies. These loves are unworthy to take the place of God by the fact they cannot remain themselves and do what they promise to do without God's help. For natural loves to be healthy, they must be held in view of God who is the ultimate definition of love and fulfilment of our needs.

## **Gift-love**

Gift-love is not natural. It is the love of God that the bible describes using the greek word 'agape', sometimes translated as 'charity'. Unlike us, God doesn't need anything, He lacks nothing; our nature knows nothing of this. In God, there is no hunger that needs to be filled, only the desire to give. God, as the creator, implants in us both gift-love and need-love. The gift loves are natural images of Himself.

In the book of Corinthians Paul the apostle wrote of this love with the words:

*"Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. Love does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."*

I doubt any of us would object to these statements about love. Most of them seem obvious. But there's more. Love is feeling, but it's also so much more. As John wrote:

*"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth."*

But by putting these together, there is a cumulative effect. Paul shows that love is more than just *actions* and John shows it is also more than just *sentiment*. When we look on how the bible describes love an uncomfortable and unavoidable truth becomes clear. We're not really like this. We want love, we approve, esteem and celebrate it. But we're just not the best at living it out. If you read those words from Paul again but substitute your own name for the word 'love' and see how it sounds. It certainly reveals to me my own lack of it. And what about John's emphasis regarding love? Have I laid down my life for anyone recently? There is a deep and painful irony here. We believe in love, but when we consider it properly we find we're not as loving as we thought. It's not that we're not entirely unloving; yes, we see beautiful and genuine acts of gift-love all around us, but it is not our natural tendency to love how we should.

*"God is love"*, as John later wrote. However, people often make the mistake of reading his words as a mathematical formula, as if God = love means love = God. If I make love my god and I get to define love, in effect I make myself my god. I fashion a god out of my own affections. However, John constantly defined love by pointing to how God laid down His life through Christ's crucifixion, so when he writes of love, that supreme act of love should come to mind. *"God is love"* therefore should be read something like *"want to know what love is? God is the definition of love."*

Saying God is love is saying that it is fundamental to Him. It is not just something he does, but something He is. Obedience to Him will never mean we end up loving people less. You cannot claim to love God while being careless in how you treat others who God deeply cares for. It is why all wrongdoing against others is in fact wrongdoing against God. We cannot succeed fully in love for our 'neighbours' without love for God. The law is two-fold, loving God and loving others belong together.

Our gift-loves are really God-like, and among our gift-loves those which are most boundless and unwearied in giving are most God-like. In its presence, we are right to thank God "who has given such power to men", for this love does not originate from human nature but God gives us this ability out of His own nature. Those who love much are 'near' to God. But of course, it is nearness by likeness. This likeness has been given to us who look to and trust in God's act of love.

The Christian view is not that we should love people because they benefit us, suit us or make us happy, but we should treat others kindly because we see them how God sees them - full of value, purpose and worth. In Christianity, love is often portrayed in our ability to look **outwardly rather than inwardly**, to give ourselves to those around us, ultimately demonstrated in how Jesus denied his life to give us eternal life.

Gift-love precedes any and all questions and doesn't first ask do you like me, do you act like me, do you agree with me, can you benefit me... Love never spoke that way. It is like loving your children only if they're good, your wife while she keeps her looks or your husband so long as he's successful. Gift-love longs to serve, or even to suffer for. Need-love says of a woman, *"I cannot live without her"*; gift-love wants to give her happiness, comfort and protection. If we don't understand the necessity of sacrifice, a love that exceeds our self, all we will do is transfer a pathetic self-centred affection camouflaged as love.

In the Christian worldview, the right way of life as Jesus taught, is to be saturated with love, love for the God who *"first loved us"* and who in his Son taught us what love is. And then out of the

abundance of such a godly life, we bring love to all with whom we have meaningful contact with. Gift-love means will-to-good, and the highest call on a moral being is truly to love.

So to end, let me leave you with these words from the new testament, *“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God”,* and *“greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for another.”*

*This article contains reference from material by C.S.Lewis and Sam Allbery.*