

# WHAT LOVE IS NOT

Dub McClish

## Introduction

Several rich and beautiful Biblical words have been “wordnapped,” redefined, misused, and abused. Among them are *grace*, *faith*, *miracle*, *elect*, and *predestined*. Love is another of these words. I will only briefly touch on *love* as it appears in the New Testament. The *agape* family of Greek words represents the very highest concept of love. This word conveys the idea of seeking the very best for others, with or without affection for them, and whether or not they are worthy of our benevolent attitudes and actions. It is basically an act of the will that can be commanded (John 13:34), rather than a spontaneous emotion of the heart. The emotional and affectionate aspects of love are conveyed by the word *phileo*, as I will indicate below.

There are numerous false concepts of love. By accentuating some of the things this most wholesome and lovely trait are not, we will be able thereby to demonstrate, at least to some degree, what it actually is.

## Love Is Not Mere Words Spoken

John clearly stated the possibility that one may speak words of love without possessing love: “My Little children, let us not love in word, neither with the tongue; but in deed and truth” (1 John 3:18). Of course, John is not forbidding or even discouraging the speaking of loving words. We all likely need to do more of this to one another in all of our relationships (e.g., husband-wife, parent-child, among brethren). The apostle is saying that words of love **alone**, apart from loving acts, do not constitute love.

The statement in verse 18 is a conclusion and somewhat of a summary of what John began discussing in verse 14:

- Genuine brotherly love is a signal of spiritual life (v. 14).
- Hatred of a brother constitutes figurative murder (v. 15).
- Genuine love caused the Lord to lay down His life for us; it will cause us to lay down our lives for one another (v. 16).
- Genuine love will cause us to help our brethren in physical need, according to our abilities (v. 17).
- Genuine love is demonstrated by our deeds, not merely by our words (v. 18).

“Word only” love is as worthless as it is hypocritical. Our Lord was frequently reviled and blasphemed by the Pharisees, scribes, and others of His day. He denounced them as hypocrites on more than one occasion and for more than one reason. However, had they told

Him they “loved” Him just after their bitter and hateful words of opposition and accusation, they would have but added to their hypocrisy. They may as well have claimed that they demanded His crucifixion because they loved Him so much!

Some who read these words have doubtless witnessed (and/or sometimes been on the receiving end of) cruel, heartless, and hateful actions merely for trying to be faithful to our Savior. Sometimes strong, loud, and abusive words of accusation and denunciation are spewed out recklessly and without provocation. These railings may then have been either immediately prefaced or followed by declarations of “love” for the subject of abuse. It would be hard enough to deal with such did it come from associates at work or school, but it is made all the more imponderable and difficult to bear when a brother or sister in Christ is its source. All who so behave demonstrate hatred rather than love, and they become figurative murderers (v. 15). Such brethren are hypocrites in the fullest meaning of the term. They verily love in word and tongue only, which is all pretense and no love at all.

Theological liberals pride themselves on their “love” for others (in contrast to those mean and hateful conservatives). Some, who will not actively teach error, nonetheless promote it by acting as “bodyguards” for those who do. Not only will these protectors not oppose or expose error and sin, but they also do not want anyone else to do so either. So when their pet false teachers and their false doctrines are exposed, these same “loving” folk may often themselves become very skilled in their use of both hateful words and deeds toward the teachers of Truth. They remind me of Joab, who with one hand pulled Amasa to him to kiss him and ask of his welfare, and with the other, stabbed him to death with his sword (2 Sam. 20:8–10).

Not only words, but deeds that seem to express love can be hypocritical and false, as exemplified by the kiss Judas gave the Lord in Gethsemane (Mat. 26:47–50). Thus we need to remember that John said we should love not only “in deed,” but “in truth,” meaning **truly**, **genuinely**. Paul’s exhortation to the Romans is appropriate here: “Let love be without hypocrisy” (Rom. 12:9a).

### **Love Is Not Mere Emotion**

Modern culture to a great degree has been caught up in romanticism. It is difficult to find persons today who are willing to think or are even capable of rational or logical analysis and/or response to stimuli. The common—almost universal—operational procedure is emotional rather than rational. This being so, the definition of “love” by many is some touchy-feely, ooey-goey, superficial, and syrupy feeling or expression of feelings. Unfortunately, this misconception of love that turns the brain off and relies solely on raw surface emotions is alive and well among

brethren. This flawed view explains how brethren can hear a man get up and entertain them with stories and illustrations while he teaches false doctrine, and they can come away almost enthralled with how “dynamic” he is. This kind of emotional response is far removed from love.

Having said that, it would be both foolish and erroneous to deny that love—including *agape* love—involves the emotions. The other common New Testament Greek word for *love* is *phileo*, which actually connotes tender affection, thus strongly involving the emotions. Several passages set forth the emotional factor involved in the love saints are to have for each other. For example, Paul urged: “In love of the brethren be tenderly affectioned one to another; in honor preferring one another” (Rom. 12:10). Peter makes an even fuller statement concerning the emotional ties brethren should have to each other: “Finally, be ye all likeminded, compassionate, loving as brethren, tenderhearted, humbleminded” (1 Pet. 3:8).

In these passages we see mentioned such emotion-seated traits as tenderness, affection, and compassion. These are all noble and desirable feelings that we should entertain and cultivate toward others. However, until they are expressed in appropriate words and/or deeds, they remain mere feelings or emotions. Paul makes this plain in his personification of love (*agape*) in 1 Corinthians 13:1–7.

We learn from this marvelous passage that, even if we do not possess the emotion-based affectionate love (*phileo*) for a person, we still have the obligation to exhibit the mind/will-based love (*agape*) for him. This obligatory love will cause us to speak and act toward him, even if he is an enemy, so as to seek his good and benefit. Such is the very love that God had for sinful man in the giving of His only begotten Son, as John 3:16 so eloquently and simply declares. Love does not consist of the mere affectionate feelings or emotions themselves, but of the appropriate expressions of these feelings.

### **Love Is Not Mere Lust or Sexual Fulfillment**

My father was a Gospel preacher, and many years ago he asked a class of teenagers to define *love*. When no one would volunteer a definition, he called on a young man who shrugged and said, “Just sort of ‘huggin’ and kissin,’ I guess.” The entertainment industry (TV, movies, song lyrics, books of fiction) has so corrupted *love* in the minds of the masses since the 1960s that *love* and *sex* have practically become synonyms. Before the disastrous “sexual revolution” of that decade, Jo Stafford had a hit record in 1954 with her song, “Make Love to Me.” It was an innocent song about courtship that leads to life-long marriage, as its lyrics indicate. However, to most people the phrase *make love* has gradually been warped to mean sexual activity almost exclusively.

God has created us with sexual instincts, and fulfillment of this desire is wholesome and honorable within the institution and the limits set by God. In marriage alone, and that between a man and woman who have a Scriptural right to be married to each other, is fulfillment of one's sexual instincts honorable and innocent: "Let marriage be had in honor among all, and let the bed be undefiled" (Heb. 13:4a). The expression of sexual love is not only a privilege of marriage partners; it is a duty:

But, because of fornications, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. Let the husband render unto the wife her due: and likewise also the wife unto the husband. The wife hath not power over her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power over his own body, but the wife. Defraud ye not one the other, except it be by consent for a season, that ye may give yourselves unto prayer, and may be together again, that Satan tempt you not because of your incontinency (1 Cor. 7:2–5).

Sexual fulfillment outside of Scriptural marriage is forbidden by God and constitutes fornication and/or adultery, which will cause one to be lost eternally if not repented of: "for fornicators and adulterers God will judge" (Heb. 13:b). Paul wrote plainly of the eternal cost of sexual sins:

Or know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with men, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-10, emph. DM).

It is lamentable beyond description to observe the social and cultural crises that have resulted from this misconception and abuse of the beautiful and wholesome trait of *love*. Over the past few decades millions of marriages have been based upon the Hollywood concept of sexual lust rather than unselfish love (as defined by the Bible). Most of these were doomed to end in divorce from the start, and conveniently, state legislators came up with "no-fault divorce" laws to accommodate the increased number of divorce cases that began flooding the courts.

The casual attitude toward divorce only intensified the ever-growing casual attitude toward marriage, which has practically become a meaningless "throw-away" contract. The next "logical" step has been to question the need for marriage at all, so now millions are "living together" (a euphemism for fornication), before and without marriage, in open and unblushing immorality. Many, not wanting to be "tied down" to one sexual partner even without marriage, just drift from bar to bar, looking for a "one night stand," usually rather easy to find after whatever inhibitions one might have had have been washed away by a few drinks. Such behavior has come to be not only accepted, but glorified by entertainers, which provides them with a twisted sense of justification for their own barnyard "morals."

This tortured definition of *love* has produced millions of “one-parent families” in which children are being reared by minimum wage daycare personnel because father is missing (and sometimes unknown) and mother has to be the breadwinner instead of wife and mother. These children, far more often than those from normal two-parent families, have problems in school, turn to drugs, become involved in crime, and marry, divorce, and remarry repeatedly. What a terribly successful ploy the devil has used in redefining *love* to mean lust and sex and thus to advance his evil aims.

### **Love Does Not Give License To Sin or Freedom from Law**

A large block of U.S. citizenry began openly defying authority, law, established moral principles in the 1960s, principally among young people on college campuses. These people despise any limits on their behavior. One justification they offer for their philosophy is to drag *love* down from its high and lofty perch to serve their low and sorry goal. Psychologists have pandered to and encouraged these authority-haters. Many parents now excuse their utter lack of discipline because they “love Johnny too much to make him mind” or they “love little Susie too much to punish or set limits for her.”

Preachers and elders sometimes say that they “love” their brethren too much to rebuke and correct them. Theologically, many are advancing the idea that God’s love for us cancels His law for us and that these are somehow antagonistic to one another. They admit that God’s people in the Old Testament had to keep the law He gave through Moses, but they argue: “We’re under grace, rather than the law.” True, we are not under the Law of Moses because it was given only to Jews, and its authority died with the Lord on the cross (Col. 2:14).

Men in every age, however, have always been accountable to the Law of God. Rather than the withholding of discipline’s being a sign of love, it is the very opposite: “He that spareth his rod hateth his son; But he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes” (Pro. 13:24). Therefore, children are commanded to obey their parents, and parents (led by the father) are to nurture and admonish their children in the Lord, which includes teaching them to obey (Eph. 6:1–4).

The Lord “chastens” and “scourges” His children from time to time because He loves us (Heb. 12:6). The Bible also teaches that the faithful are to reprove and rebuke those who despise the Truth (2 Tim. 4:2–4).

The New Testament nowhere teaches that, this side of the cross, we are without law of any sort from God. It rather teaches the opposite. Only false teachers, whether through ignorance or deliberately, would dare assert that God’s love has freed men from accountability to law. Those who teach this damnable doctrine often flee to Romans 6:14: “for ye are not under

law, but under grace.” This statement cannot mean that men are under no law, but are under grace alone, for only a little later, Paul wrote, referring to the Gospel: “The **law** of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and death” (Rom 8:2, emph. DM).

In Romans 6:14, Paul used a literary device in which one denies one element in order to emphasize another. Thus the sense is: “For ye are not under law [alone], but [also] under grace.” John used the same device in a passage earlier noted: “My Little children, let us not love [only] in word, neither with the tongue [alone]; but [also] in deed and truth” (1 John 3:18). If we were absolutely and exclusively under grace, then all men would be saved unconditionally: “For the grace of God hath appeared, bringing salvation to all men” (Tit. 2:11).

If Paul meant in Romans 6:14 that we are absolutely free from law, then he directly contradicted himself when he wrote that he was “under law to Christ” (1 Cor. 9:21) and that we must “fulfill the law of Christ” by helping others bear their burdens (Gal 6:2). Furthermore, James describes the Gospel as “the perfect law of liberty” (1:25).

We will do well to notice that our love for God and His Son is measured and demonstrated by our obedience to Their law:

If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments.... He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself unto him.... Jesus answered and said unto him, If a man love me, he will keep my word: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him. He that loveth me not keepeth not my words: and the word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father’s who sent me (John 14:15, 21, 23–24).

John repeated this great principle in his first epistle: “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous” (1 John 5:3). Whatever love is, it most certainly is not a principle that frees us from obeying God’s law and obeying His commandments, nor does it give us license to sin.

## **Conclusion**

We have observed four things that love is not:

- Love is not mere words
- Love is not mere emotion
- Love is not mere lust or sensual fulfillment
- Love is not license to sin or freedom from obedience

May the learning of what love is **not** help us avoid popular errors and misconceptions that could cause us to be lost eternally.

**[Note:** I wrote this MS, and it originally appeared as an “Editorial Perspective” in the July 2003 issue of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, a 36-page monthly of which I was editor at the time.]

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