

WHAT IS LOVE?

George Matheson was born in 1842 in Glasgow Scotland. When he was only fifteen when he was told that he was losing what little eyesight he had. Instead of giving up, Matheson immediately continued with his plans to enroll in the University of Glasgow, and his determination lead to his graduation at age nineteen. He wanted to become a pastor, but as he pursued graduate studies in theology for Christian ministry he finally lost his sight. His sisters joined ranks beside him, learning Greek and Hebrew to assist him in his studies. He pressed faithfully on.

But his spirit collapsed when his fiancée, unwilling to be married to a blind man, broke their engagement and returned his ring. He never married, and the pain of that rejection never totally left him. Years later, as a well-loved preacher in Scotland, his sister came to him announcing her engagement. He rejoiced with her, but his mind went back to his own heartache. He consoled himself in thinking of God's love which is never limited, never conditional, never withdrawn, and never uncertain. Out of this experience he wrote the hymn, O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go.

O love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths it flow
May richer, fuller be.

Human love is very uncertain and I am sure all of us here today have experienced rejection at some point in our lives. Like George Matheson we need to learn to lean on and trust God's perfect love. His love is our hope and our goal. Being a Christian means that we learn to love like Jesus.

Today we start a new series "LOVE IS..." We will be looking at 1 Corinthians 13 which says that "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast ..." Each week we will be looking at a different aspect of what love is, but today I want to answer the most basic question – what is love?

1 John 4:7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

So how do you learn to love like Jesus? To do that you first have to understand what love is:

1. The Standard of Love (vs. 7a)

John gives us the standard of the Christian life here in this passage when he says LOVE ONE ANOTHER. God's standard for us is that we are to love one another.

That sounds easy enough doesn't it? As long as we have positive feelings for each other and get along with the people around us then we are doing fine. That is not really what it says. To understand what it means to love one another you have to understand what the word LOVE really means. There are three words in Greek which are translated as LOVE.

The first word is PHILEO. This means brotherly love or friendship. The second word is EROS. This is the word for romantic love.

The third word AGAPE is the deepest level of love. This means sacrificial love. AGAPE love is not an emotion but a decision. It is an act of the will.

John 13:34 A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

Emotions are neutral. We feel what we feel. Emotions are neither good nor bad. When Jesus commanded us to love one another He used the word AGAPE. This means that love is not an emotion but a choice. I could tell you right now "BE HAPPY" but you can't just turn happiness on and off because it is an emotion. The love that John is talking about here is this deepest level of AGAPE love. We are commanded to love one another sacrificially.

Sacrificial love means that we love others even when it costs us. It means putting other first. It means we love even people who are different than us and loving even the unlovely. It is laying down your life for others and choosing to give yourself to another person in a grace filled relationship and friendship.

During the puritan Oliver Cromwell's time as Lord Protector of England (1653-1658) a young soldier was sentenced to die. The girl to whom he was engaged pleaded with Cromwell to spare the life of her beloved, but to no avail. The young man was to be executed when the curfew bell sounded, but when the sexton repeatedly pulled the rope the bell made no sound. The girl had climbed into the belfry and wrapped herself around the clapper so that it could not strike the bell. Her body was smashed and torn, but she did not let go until the clapper stopped swinging. She managed to climb down, bruised and bleeding, to meet those awaiting the execution. When she exclaimed what she had done, Cromwell commuted the sentence. The poet Rose Hartwick Thorpe beautifully recorded the story as follows in her poem Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight:

At his feet she told her story, showed her hands all bruised and torn,
and her sweet young face still haggard with the anguish it had worn,
Touched his heart with sudden pity, Lit his eyes with misty light.
"Go, your lover lives," said Cromwell; "Curfew will not ring tonight."

2. The Test of Love (vs. 7b-8)

John goes on here to say that loving one another is not only our standard (what God expects from us and has commanded us to do) it is also a test of whether or not we truly love God. He says here that "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love". Jesus said it like this;

Matt 22:37 Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

If loving God is our greatest purpose then the second is loving people. Jesus says here that these two commandments are connected when He said the second is LIKE IT or the same as it. Part of loving God means loving His family.

For example, if someone said that they really liked me but hated my wife, they would probably not be my friend. We are a package deal, accepting one means accepting the other.

1 John 4:20 If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. 21 And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

If you want to know whether or not you are really a Christian the test is simple; do you love God and do you love the family of God (the church)?

1 John 3:18 Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. 19 This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence 20 whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

If we know God then we will be loving people. A Christian is a little Christ. We are to imitate our Master and act like our Savior. That's what being a Christian is all about. We grow to become more and more like Him every day. God never intended us to live the Christian life in isolation. He has given us two institutions and both of them are based on relationships – family and the church. God expects us to have relationships with other people. One of the fruits of the Spirit is love. If you hate the church then you have to ask yourself "where is the fruit?"

A traveler fell into a deep pit and couldn't get out. Several persons came along and saw him struggling in the pit. The sensitive person said, "I feel for you down there." The reflective person said, "It's logical that someone would fall into the pit." The aesthetic person said, "I can give you ideas on how to decorate your pit." The judgmental person said, "Only bad people fall into the pits." The curious person said, "How in the world did you get down into that pit." The perfectionist said, "I believe you deserve to be in that pit." The self-pitying person said, "That's nothing - you should have seen my pit." The optimist said, "Cheer up! Things could be worse." The pessimist said, "Be prepared! Things will get worse." Jesus, seeing the man, took him by the hand and lifted him out of the miserable pit. As Christian we are called to do the same thing.

3. The Example of Love (vs. 9-10)

Jesus did not tell us to do something that He was unwilling or unable to do Himself. He practiced what He preached. He gave us the ultimate example to follow so that we would truly understand what love really is. He modeled sacrificial love for us on the cross when he gave himself completely for us.

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Rom 5:8 God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

There is an old story about a man by the name of John Griffith, who lived in Oklahoma in 1929. He had lost all he had in the stock market crash. He moved to Mississippi where he took a job as bridge operator for a railroad trestle. In 1937 he was involved in a horrible accident. One day his 8 year-old son, Greg, spent the day with his Dad at work. The boy poked around the office and asked dozens of questions - just like little boys do. The bridge was over a river and when-ever a ship came John had to open the bridge to allow the ships to pass. The day the boy was there with his father a ship was coming so John opened up the draw bridge.

After a moment or two he realized his son wasn't in the office and as he looked around, to his horror, John saw his son climbing around on the gears of the draw bridge. He hurried outside to rescue his son but just then he heard a fast approaching passenger train, the Memphis Express, filled with 400 people.

He yelled to his son, but the noise of the now clearing ship and the oncoming train made it impossible for the boy to hear him. All of a sudden John Griffith realized his horrible dilemma. If he took the time to rescue his son the train would crash killing all aboard, but if he closed the bridge, the boy would be crushed in the gears. John would sacrifice his son. He made the horrible decision, pulled the lever and closed the bridge. It is said, as the train went by John could see the faces of the passengers, some reading, some even waving, all of them oblivious to the sacrifice that had just been made for them.

4. The Application of Love (vs. 11-12)

Let me ask you a simple question as we close today. Do you love the people sitting around you this morning? I didn't ask if you liked them (PHILEO love) or if you are sexually attracted to them (EROS love). Do you love them the way Jesus loves you? Do you accept them? Do you want what is best for them? Would you give of yourself for them?

The non-Christian, Greek writer Lucian who lived from A.D. 120-200 made an observation about Christians. He said, "It is incredible to see the fervor with which the people of that religion help each other in their wants. They spare nothing. Their first legislator Jesus has put it into their heads that they are brethren." Lucian said that Christians spare nothing. Sparing nothing is an indication of unconditional love.

Saint Jerome recounts that Saint John the Evangelist, living in Ephesus in his extreme old age, would be carried with difficulty into the church by his disciples. He had no strength for lengthy exhortation, but could only say, AGAPOMEN ALLELUS - Let us love one another. At length, the disciples and church members who were there, wearied by the repetition, asked, "Master, why do you always say this?" He replied "Because it is the Lord's command and if that alone is done, it is enough."

Today that command is still with us – AGAPOMEN ALLELUS. We all have different likes and dislikes. Some like more lively worship while others like more conservative. What do you say? AGAPOMEN ALLELUS - Let us love one another! Some are from one cultural background, others are from another -- what do you say? AGAPOMEN ALLELUS - Let us love one another!

I just shared with you the story of John Griffith and the bridge. God once faced a similar dilemma. He could not save sinners and spare Jesus as well. How could He be just and justifier at the same time? God had to allow the jaws of death to close in on His Son. He allowed Jesus to give up His life for us. Millions every day go by oblivious and indifferent of this sacrifice. However, there is one tremendous difference between the two fathers. Unlike the Memphis Express that caught John Griffith by surprise, sending Jesus was not a panic move. It wasn't a spontaneous decision. It was planned. Paul said

Gal 4:4 But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son

Jesus' death was not the result of jealous Jews or hard-hearted Romans. It was the result of a loving God who saw there was no other way to save man. We all know what John 3:16 says, but do we also know what 1 John 3:16 says?

1 John 3:16 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.

The love of God demands a change in our lives. We love one another out of the love we have received through Jesus. As we close the service today I want you to think again about this story. We are going to show you a clip from a movie that was made around the story of John Griffith. The movie was made by a film company in the Czech Republic and is called MOST which means THE BRIDGE in Czech.