

Marriage in Christ: True Love
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I bet many of you have had certain moments, special occasions, that changed your lives forever. Certainly, hearing the gospel does that. If you're a follower of Jesus, at some point and time Jesus turned the lightbulb on for you to understand and agree with God that, yes, you are a sinner in need of a Savior. And more so, yes (gloriously!) Jesus is the all-sufficient Savior you need; that his death on the cross and resurrection from the dead is more than enough to forgive you of your sins and reunite you to God himself! And then, as we keep walking with Jesus, he reveals more of himself, more of his grace and truth, that makes a life-changing impact. He's so good! I don't know when it happened and I don't really know where I was, but my life was changed when God revealed to me that much of my life was guided, directed, and determined by my own love for myself rather than my love for God and others. For many years in my Christian life I was totally blind to the reality that I was principally motivated by the selfishness of self-love. I thought God was my greatest love; I lived thinking that my motives were pure. And then, of course, when I got married, I thought that I loved my wife more than any other person. But then God opened up my eyes. I didn't first love God or first love Korby; I first loved me. Since then, God has revealed to me little pockets of how this is still a struggle in my own life and, of course, it's a pervasive and all-consuming problem in our world today. It's in everything we do and it needs to be systematically addressed and dismantled.

This is partly why I react so strongly when I hear Christians, of all people, talk about self-love. *You need to love yourself more; to love others you need to love yourself first.* It's one thing for this message to be everywhere in our culture, but it's a sad reality that it has infiltrated the church. So many who profess faith in Christ see loving oneself as an important key to unlocking God's best for you. Of course, you don't find that in the Bible at all, which should be a pretty big clue for all of us people who say we follow the Bible. We don't need to learn how to love ourselves; we already love ourselves too much; that's part of our problem. God tells us in his word to redirect our focus and attention towards loving others, not on loving ourselves. And if that's not enough, in 2 Tim. 3, the first thing Paul says of this ungodly generation is that we are *lovers of self*. I really mean this: tune out any teaching, any encouragement, any counsel to love yourself more. It will take you away from the path Christ wants you to walk and it will surely hurt and damage your marriage.

Understanding love is pretty important. God has a lot to say about it; depending on what Bible translation you check, the word love appears in the Bible from 350 to 550 times. It's everywhere. No wonder the Evil One works so hard to distort the meaning of love. There is one - the Bible calls him Satan, or Lucifer, or a few other names - who works against the plans of God. He wants to steal God's glory and undue God's creative work. Anything God values and prizes and considers important Satan wants to damage. This, I believe, is one of the main reasons we get *love* so wrong. 1 John 4:8 says, "God is love." If that's true; if God is love, then what better

way to confuse and mislead people, mess with, toy with, lie about God than to distort our view of love. If the Darkness can blind us to what love is, it can blind us to who God is.

I think the anecdotal evidence is abundant: our culture just does not understand love. This influence is impacting the church as even we struggle to hold onto the essence of love. We are going to talk about love this morning; I'm guessing you'll be able to see how this applies to many areas of our life, but I will apply it to the marital relationships specifically since that's our focus in this series. To do that, let's read 1 John 4:7-12 (READ).

Let me very briefly outline what this passage is about and then we'll focus on the key verse. This paragraph starts with a command to love others. John is saying in vs. 7 that we are to love one another; that's what he's hoping to see. In vs. 8 he's simply establishing a correlation; people who know God love others because God is love. And, of course, that's a helpful way to assess if we know and are walking with God; since God is love, if I know God I should be loving others, too. In vs. 9, John tells us where love comes from. Love was "made manifest," or another way of saying that would be, "God showed or revealed love this way." Well, how? How did God show the world and his church love? He sent his son into the world. And by living in him and him living through us, we can love others.

Vs. 10 is our key verse and the one we'll be spending the rest of the morning on and applying it to marriage. Because in Vs. 10 we get a definition of love. Vs. 9 tells us how God showed his love; vs. 10 tells us what love is. Let's read that again, "In this is love, not that we have love God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." I think this verse boils love down as well as any verse in the Bible. Love is too rich and deep to have a simple definition. Love isn't like a coffee bean or a basketball or a violin that can be so easily defined and recognized. It's more mysterious, it's more ethereal and qualitative than that. But that doesn't mean we can't do a better job defining and describing it than what we see out there. So, let's look at the various characteristics of love and apply that to our marital relationships.

First of all, love is willing. Yes, the Father sent Jesus, but Jesus was willing. In John 10:18 Jesus says, "No one takes [my life] from me; I lay it down of my own accord." There's a *want to* in love; you can't force it or demand it. I think this is really important to remember; love can't just be all duty. There is a right determination, there is a right commitment in our love for others, but you also have to have the will and the desire. Jesus willingly gave his life for us. I think this is best understood in light of the second aspect of love.

Secondly, love is sacrificial. I get that from the word *propitiation*. Propitiation is a fancy word that means atonement for sin; or, even more, a sacrifice for sin to appease God's anger. The Bible is really clear that the reason why our sin is such bad news for us is that our sin stokes God's anger and wrath. Sin isn't a mistake; it's not a slip up. Sin is high treason; in our sin we are Benedict Arnold. Do you remember him? Benedict Arnold was a commander in George Washington's army during the Revolutionary War; Washington trusted him completely and gave him command of the strategic fort called West Point. But Arnold was planning to surrender the fort

to the British to strike a fatal blow against the Americans because he was really a traitor. When the plot was discovered, Arnold ran to safety to the Brits and then eventually led the British Army against his former soldiers. That should make all you red, white, and blue-blooded patriots boil in anger. Treason! We're Benedict Arnold before God.

Romans 1 says this about humanity (vs. 18): "for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men." Our problem is God's wrath, his anger for our sin. So, when Jesus became an atoning sacrifice on our behalf, he absorbed the wrath of God that was aroused by our ungodliness and unrighteousness. What a sacrifice! What love!

Love, by definition, is sacrificial. If you do not make sacrifices or you are unwilling to make sacrifices for others, you do not love them. Let's dig a little here and apply this to marriage. To get at this idea of sacrifice, think of the word *cost*. True love has a cost. What's the cost? Our own selves, right? Love in marriage gives. It gives time to go on that walk when you were hoping to spend some time watching the game or going fishing. Wives who love their husbands sacrifice the way they want their house or their kitchen to look like so that their husbands are happy and comfortable to be at home. Husbands who love their wives give up the hope to have the new pickup or the new ATV when his wife is nervous about getting stretched too thin financially; he'd much rather have a wife at peace about their financial status than having a new car or a new toy. If you won't sacrifice your desires, preferences, likes, interests, comforts for your spouse than your love is lacking.

Before we move on, we need to bring in previous aspect of love; the willing part. Are you glad to make the sacrifice? Are you happy to pay the price? If you're like a toddler, pouting every time you have to make a sacrifice, well, that's really not a picture of Jesus' love, who, for the joy set before him, endured the cross and despised its shame. I don't know about you, but we're only half way into this thing and the standard already feels so high; who's happy to make sacrifices? The one who loves!

Next, love works for the good of another. This strikes at the heart of the cultural confusion about love. Culturally speaking, love means you work to help a person do whatever they say they feel like doing. This is partly why our culture has so quickly departed from God's plans when it comes to things like sexual ethics or parental strategies; God says conforming oneself to Christ is the greatest good for everyone while our culture counts doing what feels good as the greatest good.

Consider the example of Christ, which is the foundation of love: Jesus did not die for us to give us what we wanted. He died to give us the ultimate good we needed; to be reunited with God the Father in a relationship of grace and peace. God did not send Jesus to help you get more money, to keep you healthy, to keep you from pain or suffering, to make sure you have a blast in retirement, or to give you a meaningful job. God sent Jesus so you would not perish for your sins; he sent Jesus to make you alive to God and dead to sin; he sent Jesus to live in the power of the

Spirit. And God will take your money away, he will allow pain and suffering, he will permit sickness if those are circumstances we need to keep Christ at the center of our lives.

When I think about this aspect of love in relationship to marriage, this is the question I ask myself: Brian, are you working for your wife's good without her asking you to? Do you know what I mean by that? I'll do stuff if my wife asks me to (most of the time). But am I focused and tuned into her good? Her spiritual good; emotional, physical, and relational good? And then, am I working towards that good without her dropping those oh-so-helpful wifely reminders? Is it my priority? Do I see that as my life's work and joy? Sometimes; sometimes not. How about you?

(Two more aspects). Love does not demand reciprocation. I get that from phrase in 1 John 4:10, "Not that we have loved God, but that he loved us." Look at God's example again: God did not send his son for you because he saw that you did something really great, or that you tried really hard, or that you made an honorable effort to do his will. God's love wasn't a response to some well-intentioned act on our part; no, God loved us from a deep well of love, mercy, and grace that was bubbling up inside of him that he spilled onto us. Love doesn't wait to see if something happened that's worth its response.

This is a big one: How many of us (in whatever relationship - marriage, siblings, friendships) have done something loving for someone else (idk, taking out the garbage, washing her car, making his favorite dish, planning a vacation) and then waited for something in return? All of us, right? And we wait... and wait... and nothing. What in the world! I go out of my way to make sure she knows I'm thinking about her; I make all that effort because he says that's his love language and that's the thanks I get! He doesn't take me on a date! Well, I guess that's the last time I'm doing that!

That, right there, is self-love. I'm really not doing it for my spouse; I'm really doing it for me. And my wife didn't live up to her end of the bargain; she didn't give me anything in return, so I'm done. That's self-love; you're doing it for you and not for your spouse. Love does not demand reciprocation.

Finally, love does not demand that the person is deserving. This, too, is where the rubber meets the road. If you're not convinced that genuine love is a miracle of God's grace yet, this should convince you. How do you love a person who is undeserving? How do you love a husband that, for all your 20 years, 30 years of marriage, just won't change his behavior? How do you love a wife who's hurt your feelings so badly? They are undeserving. In our vows he said he would stay faithful to me; we promised each other *til death do us part* and now she wants a divorce. They do not deserve my love.

It's a miracle; it's a miracle of God's grace that changes us to love people who are not deserving. That's how God loved you and me. Romans 5:8, "but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners [still rebellious, still dead in our transgressions, still selfish, still undeserving] Christ died for us."

Paul Tripp puts all of these qualities of love in a sentence; here it is: *Love is willing self-sacrifice for the good of another that does not require reciprocation or that the person being loved is deserving.*

As we think about applying this message from 1 John 4 to our lives, I want to analyze it from two aspects. First, what if we made sure that we used this definition of love in our daily lives, whether it would be in our marriages or any other relationships? Think of how much confusion we could avoid. Think how much this would help us as we navigate the troubled waters of our current culture. I truly believe if this definition from 1 John 4 was more resolutely embraced by followers of Jesus, we'd have more confidence in our kingdom work, more peace as we love our neighbors as ourselves, and our actual efforts would be more loving. So, I really want to press upon you your need to figure out how you need to adjust your thinking related to love so you're more aligned with God than the world on this important subject.

But more specifically to marriage, it should be our aim to relate to one another in this way. Look at this definition; what words or phrases jump out at you that you're feeling convicted by? What is God saying, "My child, you need my help with this?"

Maybe you're seeing that you expect reciprocation. Every time you do something, you're expecting some sort of reward, some sort of gift in return. And when you don't get it, your attitude changes and you're less motivated to serve your spouse. Or maybe you're recognizing that you've been unwilling to love and serve your spouse because you feel they are undeserving. They sinned against you; you feel neglected. And so you feel they are undeserving of your love.

I'm guessing a lot of you are looking at that word *sacrifice*; I know it gets me. It's easy serving my wife with things I like to do or that I'm good at, or when I have a lot of energy, or when she's been sweet to me. What's hard is helping and serving my wife when it's a sacrifice. To be frank, I don't like dying to myself and we must to sacrifice for our spouse. Or maybe you're thinking, "Brian, I'm just not willing. I have no desire; my interest is gone." You could make yourself do some of this stuff for a week, but you have no heart for your marriage or your spouse.

You know, when I look at God's definition of love, I see that I currently fall short and also feel helpless about being able to love my wife like this. If that's how you feel, friends, that's actually a good thing. That's the first step towards seeking God's help. You have to know and understand that without God's help you won't be the loving spouse he wants you to be. So, what do you do? You lean into him. You seek him. You admit your failure and ask for forgiveness. You rejoice that God has forgiveness for you. And then you implement his power in your life by faithfully doing life his way according to his word. And do you know what will happen? Little by little, you will be more loving to your spouse. You will be more sacrificial. You will not expect gifts in return. You'll forgive when he's undeserving. Even your desires will change. That's how good God is to us.