

Special Study

LOVE IS A MANY-SPLENDORED THING*

LOVE is a many-splendored thing. So says a popular song title. But no popular song can really plumb the depths of love's splendor.

But what is love? Love is not self-defining. This is the supreme fallacy of situation ethics, which says "do the most loving thing in every situation." We must go to the Word of God for precept and example. And I Corinthians 13 is not the only Biblical definition of love.

Some will say, "Love is concern," but how do you explain the many hungry people whom Jesus did not feed; the many lame He did not heal? Must a concerned love always be manifested according to our concept of concern?

Some will say, "Love is giving," but how do you explain Jesus' rebuke of Judas when he suggested that the precious ointment Mary had poured upon Jesus could have been sold and given to the poor? Must a giving love always be manifested in the way the world thinks?

Some will say, "Love is speaking pleasantly," but how do you explain the words Jesus spoke to the Pharisees, and sometimes to His disciples, which were harsh, demanding, and rebuking? Must love always be communicated in such a manner as to please the hearer?

Love is many-faceted. There is more to love than often meets the spiritual eye. I hope to present you three oft-unseen facets of the brilliance of God-like love, *agape* love. Love is discerning, demanding, deliberate.

Love is discerning—Love is discerning (discriminating; critical; judgmental; penetrating). In reality love is truth-oriented; truth-focused; truth-centered; love is something done but always in a *truth* frame-of-reference. *Agape* love makes every attempt to see things, issues, and persons as they are in reality for a purpose—a good purpose. *Agape* love could never reject truth in favor of falsehood—it could never be satisfied with only half-truth about issues or persons. "Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth" (I John 3:18).

The Christian loves truth (Ephesians 4:15; 2 Thessalonians 2:10), but he never cruelly or unsympathetically uses the truth in order to hurt. . . . The Christian is never false to the truth, but he always remembers that love and truth must go hand in hand . . . Christian love does not shut its eyes to the faults of others. Love is not blind. It will use rebuke and discipline when these

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FIRST CORINTHIANS

are needed. The love which shuts its eyes to all faults, and which evades the unpleasantness of all discipline, is not real at all, for in the end it does nothing but harm to the loved one (Barclay, Wm., *More New Testament Words*, Harper & Row, p. 22).

“Love . . . does not rejoice in wrong, but rejoices in the right . . .” (I Corinthians 13:6). Would Jesus have shown love to Judas by concealing from Judas the truth about himself? Would Paul have shown love to all the churches to whom he wrote the epistles had he concealed from them the truth about themselves? In that penetrating, piercing confrontation between Jesus and the Jews, Jesus seemed almost astounded that they would seek to kill Him because He told them the truth about themselves (John 8:39-47). He did it because He loved them.

Paul wrote the Christians in Galatia, “Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?” (Gal. 4:16). When God’s Word pierces our facade of sham and discerns us as we are and deals with us realistically—it is an expression of God’s love.

In relationships love is person-oriented; it deals with persons discerning, judging, estimating what they ought to be and can be with the help of God and Christian brethren. A person who, by experience and wisdom, knows something that would benefit me and keeps it from me does not love me. If I do not share with my children some truth that will help them, I do not love them.

There are some of you here this morning living in the joy of being better than you were because your teachers have dealt with you on the basis of their judgment of what you could become! It seemed distasteful to you at first—you disliked us and accused us of putting you down—but now you know we judged that you could be better than you were and we insisted on it. Love demands that those who have the advantage of experience and leadership relate to others on the basis of building up—not leaving others to go backward . . . or even to remain where they are!

In remedies, love is always seeking that which is practical—helpful. That which is the most helpful in a situation, may not always be the most glorious or win the most applause. But love seeks the long-range remedy. Love is never satisfied with superficialities or stopgap measures. (Read Heb. 12:11, 12.)

In an old book given to me by Seth Wilson, I found some ageless principles stated as well as I have ever seen them stated. One of those principles is:

SPECIAL STUDY: LOVE IS A MANY-SPLENDORED THING

. . . If the moral powers (of man) are not employed on right objects and directed to a right end, there is not only perversion but deterioration. The more inactive they are the more they deteriorate. If, therefore, we would do the highest good to men we must seek, not only to perfect their powers, but to perfect the moral powers by directing them rightly. Our object must be to produce a change not merely in the condition, but in the state of men; and not merely in their intellectual state involving acquisitions and capacity, but in their moral state which involves, or rather which is, character (Hopkins, Mark, *The Law of Love and Love As a Law*, 1881, p. 199).

Loving, doing the highest good to men, means discernment!
Love is demanding—Love restrains.

Our love to God is shown in the keeping of His commandments (Exodus 20:6; 1 John 5:3; 2 John 6). Love is more than a mere affection or sentiment; it is something that manifests itself, not only in obedience to known divine commands, but also in protecting and defense of them, and a seeking to know more and more of the will of God in order to express love for God in further obedience (compare Deuteronomy 10:12). Those who love God will hate evil and all forms of worldliness, as expressed in the avoidance of the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life (Psalm 97:10; 1 John 2:15-17). Whatever there may be in his surroundings that would draw the soul away from God and righteousness, that the child of God will avoid (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 3, p. 1933, article, "Love").

Love does not indulge. Dr. James Dobson, in his book, *Dare To Discipline*, says,

Perhaps the most common parental error during the past twenty-five years has been related to the wide-spread belief that "love is enough" in raising children . . . the greatest social disaster of this century is the belief that abundant love makes discipline unnecessary.

A New York psychologist, Peter Blos, is quoted in *Time*, November 29, 1971:

FIRST CORINTHIANS

. . . Parents should set limits, affirm their personal values, deny the "calm for grown-up status," and refuse to be intimidated by charges of authoritarianism.

Permissiveness, or indulgence, is no sign of love! Permissiveness can be the most unloving thing one person ever does to another! Jesus would not indulge Peter and the other disciples even in some actions that appeared correct (e.g., when they would forbid Him from going to Jerusalem and be killed, etc.). He would not indulge the rich young ruler to keep the riches which were strangling his loyalties.

Love refuses. It sometimes has to say "No!"

When we understand what *agape* means, it amply meets the objection that a society based on this love would be a paradise for criminals, and that it means simply letting the evildoer have his own way. If we seek nothing but a man's highest good, we may well have to do the hardest thing to him—for the good of his immortal soul. . . . In other words, *agape* means treating men as God treats them—and that does not mean allowing them unchecked to do as they like (Barclay, *More New Testament Words*, p. 16).

Curtis Dickinson, in the *Christian Standard*, January 25, 1958, "Love's Constraining Power," wrote,

It is easy to camouflage weakness and conformity under the disguise of love. . . . It is just because God loves you that He cannot overlook you. . . . It is precisely because we love our children that we cannot let them escape punishment. How ridiculous, if we said of a child, "I love her so much that no matter what she does I will consider it all right."

God said "No" to the perfect man in Eden, because He loved Adam! God said "No" to one of the greatest saints of all. Three times God said "No" to Paul, because God loved Paul! For a good mental and moral exercise why don't you personally run through your mind all the great men of the Old Testament to whom God said "No!" Now list mentally all the churches and people to whom the apostles wrote letters stating many emphatic "No's!" Add them all together!

Those whom the Holy Spirit has made overseers in the Lord's church are bound by their love for the Lord, for His church, and for

SPECIAL STUDY: LOVE IS A MANY-SPLENDORED THING

its people, sometimes to say "No!" It is not something in which they take selfish, prideful pleasure—it is something for which they feel an obligation, and consider a privilege, because it gives them an opportunity to love for real!

Love reiterates and reinforces. Love does not give up with the first discernment or demand. Love repeats and repeats and repeats (read *The Hound of Heaven*, by Francis Thompson). Love hounds, stalks, trails. The immature tend to classify discerning, demanding love as nagging or harping, or nit-picking. Does the discerning, demanding love of God give us cause to accuse Him of nagging or harping? Were the Old Testament prophets nit-picking when they repeated and repeated God's message?

Continued reminders to you students to keep your dormitory room clean and orderly, continued reminders to pay your accounts, continued reminders to dress modestly, continued reminders to drive like a Christian, continued reminders to conduct your man-woman relationship with decorum—these are not nagging, nit-picking—these are fundamental issues of life and Christian witness . . . and the reminders are reiterations of love! It never ceases to amaze me that athletes and choir members, can so graciously accept all the repetition of practices and dress-alike uniformity; and then get all upset and accuse their deans of nagging and nit-picking when they reiterate and reinforce moral and spiritual values.

Love is deliberate—*It is real. Agape* love is sincere, genuine. J. B. Phillips translated Romans 12:9, "Let us have no imitation Christian love. Let us have a genuine break with evil and real devotion to good." *Agape* love will not stand for sham, superficiality, or unstable emotionalism. (Note: I said *emotionalism*. Love is part emotion but not all emotion.) *Agape* love is not the silly, selfish sentimentalism so often portrayed by the world.

This *agape*, this Christian love, is not merely an emotional experience which comes to us unbidden and unsought; it is a *deliberate* principle of the mind, and a deliberate conquest and achievement of the will. It is in fact the power to love the unlovable, to love people whom we do not like (Barclay).

Agape has to do with the *mind*: it is not simply an emotion which sweeps over us at intervals when we are in the right mood. It is a principle by which we deliberately live, every day, no matter what

FIRST CORINTHIANS

mood we're in or how we feel. It is a conquest, a victory, an achievement. No one ever naturally loved his enemies. *Agape* love demands the whole man; mind, will, and heart. There may be some of you students I know more intimately than others. But it does not mean that my *agape* love for any of you is any more or less than the other. *Agape* love does not depend upon circumstances! It is a real love! Many is the time we have been tempted to love some of you only according to how we feel, or by emotions alone, but that is not real love!

Love is reliable. It is decisive, dependable, firm, stable, consistent. Dennis Vath wrote in *Christian Standard*, November 5, 1966:

Jesus loved consistently. True *agape* love is consistent. It does not always compliment. It is not always manifested in a pat on the back, for this is not always in our best interests. *Agape* love does not always agree. Scripture tells us that the one God loves is the one He chastens. *Agape* on the human level does not allow itself to be dominated or abused, because it is not in a person's best interests to allow him to take advantage of anyone.

One mark of love often overlooked is that characteristic of being able to make a decision, a consistent decision, a stabilizing decision and then to stand firm in that decision. Could you honestly say you believed the leadership of this college loved you if it could not make a decision, consistently, and stand firm?

Love is risky. *Agape* love will never let a man be selfishly-safe. *Agape* love insists upon self-sacrifice. Eugene Nida writes in *God's Word in Man's Language*:

The Conob Indians of northern Guatemala . . . describes love as "my soul dies." A man who loves God according to the Conob idiom would say, "My soul dies for God." This not only describes the powerful emotion felt by the one who loves, but it should imply a related truth—namely, that in true love there is no room for self. . . . True love is of all emotions the most unselfish, for it does not look out for self but for others. False love seeks to possess; true love seeks to be possessed. False love leads to cancerous jealousy; true love leads to a life-giving ministry.

The person who will not risk being hurt or thought badly of—the person who is afraid to do what is best for another because he is afraid

SPECIAL STUDY: LOVE IS A MANY-SPLENDORED THING

of that person's displeasure with him—that person does not know how to love! Beloved, it may seem to you that we deliberately set out at times to court your displeasure with us! We do! Because we want to love you with a real love, we are not primarily concerned with what you feel toward us at first. Because we know that almost always you will someday understand the love behind our counsel and love us in return! Any parent who so fears to risk his child's temporary displeasure that he fails to enforce some genuine, loving restraint, is not worthy to be a parent. And this applies in the family of God!

Conclusion—Love is a many-splendored thing. Love is like a many-faceted jewel; there are many sides to it and they all reflect the glory of God. I have tried in these moments to catch your spiritual eye with three of the more brilliant facets of this superb gem. I would invite you to take up the Word of God and make your own study of the nature of God, finding still other facets and reflections as you hold it in your gaze.

Our love for you is an attempt to reproduce in you this splendored thing. We are going to love you discerningly, demandingly, deliberately, We are going to love you with our mind and our will as well as our emotions. You may not be pleased with us always, but we are not going to let our love be directed by that. C. S. Lewis writes in *The Four Loves*:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one. . . . Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.

To you, my beloved brother or sister, I am vulnerable. I cannot lock myself up. Break my heart if you will, I will still love you discerningly, demandingly, deliberately. To appropriate a phrase from Isaiah, "Behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me."