

C.S. Lewis on Love

by Dr. Art Lindsley

Given the centrality of love in Biblical teaching, it is not surprising that C.S. Lewis commented on love a great deal. He recognized different kinds of love in his book *The Four Loves* (affection, friendship, romance, and charity-agape). There is no way we could do justice to all the wide-ranging comments he made on the subject—so we will focus on a few observations on “agape” love.

MATTER OF THE WILL

First, C.S. Lewis believed that (agape) love is not primarily a matter of feeling but of will. Obviously, it would be ideal if both duty and desire are fully present in our emotional and spiritual life. But we need to remember that love is commanded. We are obliged to love whether we like it or not. Thus Lewis says, “Christian love, either towards God or towards man, is an affair of the will.” In another place, Lewis amplifies this thought further, “Love in the Christian sense, does not mean an emotion. It is a state not of feelings but of the will; that state of the will which we have naturally about ourselves, and must learn to have about other people.” It is good to have the feelings as well. Lewis says about the affections that, “if they ever also play their part, so much the better.”

ACT AND FEELING

Sometimes he points out, even when we don’t particularly like someone, acting lovingly can change our feelings towards them. Lewis says:

The rule for all of us is perfectly simple. Do not waste time bothering whether you “love” your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less.

CAN YOU LOVE TOO MUCH?

You can follow this advice if you feel you love someone “too little,” but what about the opposite danger of loving

someone “too much.” Can we love someone “too much?” Lewis maintains that there is a sense in which we cannot love another person or thing “too much.” He says:

I think God wants us to love Him more, not to love creatures (even animals) less. We love everything in one way too much (i.e. at the expense of our love for Him) but in another way we love everything too little....No person, animal, flower, or even pebble, has ever been loved too much—i.e. more than every one of God’s works deserve.

In *The Four Loves* Lewis gives some additional thoughts on this theme:

It is probably impossible to love any human being simply “too much.” We may love him too much in proportion to our love for God; but it is the smallness of our love for God, not the greatness of our love for the many that constitutes the inordinacy....But the question whether we are loving God or the earthly Beloved “more” is not, so far as concerns our Christian duty, a question about the comparative intensity of two feelings. The real question is, which (when the alternative comes) do you serve, choose, or put first? To which claim does your will in the last resort yield?”

We need to proportion our loves according to the degree of importance that each person or thing deserves. Augustine wrote a lot about competing loves. Lewis says about him:

We must aim at what St. Augustine calls “ordinate loves.” Our deepest concern should be for first things, and our next deepest for second things, and so on down to zero—to total absence of concern for things that are not really good, nor means to good, at all.

Thus we cannot love somebody “too much,” only God too little. We cannot love God with our mind “too much” only with our heart, soul and strength “too little.” We cannot love our wives (or husbands) or our children “too much” only Jesus “too little.”

LOVING GOD AND OTHERS

In fact, Lewis takes this step further and says, “You cannot love a fellow creature fully till you love God.” Certainly it is good to get out of yourself and begin to care for, admire, or love—that is the way to avoid spiritual bankruptcy. Lewis says:

To love and admire anything outside yourself is to take one step away from utter spiritual ruin; though we shall not be well so long as we love and admire anything more than we love and admire God.

Even more, to love God allows us to love people more than those who don’t know God. Lewis adds, “Because we love something else more than this world we love even this world better than those who know no other.”

LOVE AND COURAGE

Loving anyone is a risky thing. In fact, we could argue that “love is never seized apart from courage.” When we make ourselves vulnerable, we could get hurt. Lewis knew about the pain of loving. He lost his mother when he was about nine years old. He lost a close friend that he fought with in World War I—Paddy Moore. He lost his father and last but by no means least, his beloved wife, Joy, to cancer. Lewis nevertheless says about love:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell.

We must allow “love to cast out fear” (I John 4:18) of being hurt. Often fear creates what is feared. The more we are afraid we will do poorly on a test the more likely that we will freeze and do poorly. The more we are

afraid of rejection by others, the more unnaturally we act, and the more likely we will be rejected. But the more we love someone without concern for our own acceptance, the more likely we will be accepted. Fear is directed inward, focused on what will happen to me if I fail the test, or am rejected, etc. Love is directed outward, towards caring for the other person more than we care for ourselves. The more you look outward (love) the less you look inward (fear).

Of course Lewis points out other things than love that cast out fear:

Perfect love, we know, casteth out fear. But so do several other things—ignorance, alcohol, passion, presumption, and stupidity. It is very desirable that we should all advance to that perfection of love in which we shall fear no longer; but it is very undesirable, until we have reached that state, that we should allow any inferior agent to cast out our fear.

AGAPE MEANS GIVING

But if we learn to love in an “agape” way, that will lessen our fears and anxieties. Agape focuses on giving not getting. Lewis says, “Agape is all giving, not getting...Giving money is only one way of showing charity; to give time and toil is far better and (for most of us) harder.”

C.S. Lewis is one who gave considerably of his money—all his outside income and half of his meager don’s salary. But he also gave of his time and toil. Walter Hooper tells of the first time he met Lewis. He was to have an appointment the next day, so he decided to find the house the day before to make sure he didn’t get lost. When he approached the house, Lewis saw him and immediately invited in this unexpected, unplanned guest, made him tea and talked for more than an hour as if he had nothing better to do. After about the third pot of tea, Walter asked if he could use the bathroom. Lewis immediately took him to a room with a bath, gave him two towels and shut the door. Sheepishly, Walter came out and said that he had a different room in mind. Lewis with a smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye said, “That will teach you Americans to ask for what you want.” Hooper remembers that first meeting fondly and was so amazed at the loving response he received. This

was typical of the few months that Hooper lived in the house with Lewis. He was unfailingly gracious and considerate of his guest. C.S. Lewis not only wrote about love but he demonstrated it in the way he gave of his money and his time.

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