



## What Jesus Loved

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“I just don’t love her anymore.” Identical words uttered on separate occasions by two men, one married to his wife for only four months, the other married to his wife for over fifty years. That may sound bizarre, but it’s quite tragically true. Both men said that they no longer felt anything for their wives, and that they weren’t getting anything out of the relationship. They both also said that they had now found another woman whom they “really” loved. They eventually left their wives and went off in pursuit of what they described as their own personal happiness and fulfillment.

That was the introduction to my first year as a pastor. It was quite a shock, especially because both men were professing Christians. Wouldn’t their professed love for Jesus make a difference in their other relationships? Those incidents forced me to take a hard look at what we call love.

Tune in to a number of different radio stations and listen to a selection of songs, and you will hear the word “love” used to express a variety of things, ranging from infatuation to brotherhood and good will, to sexual activity. The way that we use the word “love” so generalizes the term that it could refer to most anything, especially when we get some kind of pleasure out of it.

### A Revolutionary Love

But “love” in the New Testament is a specific term for a uniquely biblical orientation toward relationships and toward life, which is best seen in the example of Jesus Christ. In fact, the kind of love that Jesus taught and displayed was revolutionary, because it was centered in *giving*, not *getting*.

In what may be the most familiar verse in all of Scripture, we might easily overlook the profound

nature of Jesus’ love because we are too familiar with it: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16). The key to understanding Jesus’ love is the word “gave.”

God the Father gave his Son, and the Son freely gave his life so that we might live. As Jesus was prepared to go to the cross, the apostle John tells us, “Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love” (John 13:1). The full extent of his love meant giving his life for us on the cross. That is the profound nature of Jesus’ love toward us, and it becomes the example of the love that we can have for one another.

But paradoxically, we must receive true love before we can really know how to love. The apostle John reminds us emphatically that, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). When we have experienced God’s love, it impels us to love. We can finally find a way of reversing the pattern of self-centeredness that dominates our lives by receiving God’s love. It shows us what real love is all about, and enables us to love with his kind of love.

Jesus is the supreme illustration of the effect of God’s love in a person’s life. The eternal love relationship that was experienced between God the Father and God the Son was the storehouse that nurtured and supplied Jesus’ entire earthly life and ministry with an inexhaustible source of love (cf. John 17:23-26). And the way that he loved gives us the example of how we can also love.



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### **Jesus Loved God His Father, Which Produced Obedience**

Any parent understands that there is no more beautiful expression of true love than in the relationship that can occur between a parent and child. The epitome of that love relationship existed between Jesus and his Father. At Jesus' baptism, the voice of the heavenly Father declared, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17; cf. 17:5). This love relationship was at the core of Jesus' personal identity as the Son of God.

And Jesus' love relationship with his Father had a powerful effect upon his personal behavior. "I will do what the Father requires of me, so that the world will know that I love the Father" (John 14:31 NLT; cf. 8:29; 15:10). Jesus' love for the Father gave him the ultimate purpose for his life: he came to do the will of his Father. As his agonizing prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane demonstrates, even when facing the most horrific test of their love, Jesus came to do the will of his Father, not his own (cf. Luke 22:41-44). The proof of his love for the Father was in his obedience to his Father's will for his life, even when his immediate circumstances seemed to deny the love relationship that they shared.

Do you love Jesus? Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15; cf. 14:21, 23). One primary proof of our love for Jesus is found in our obedience to God's Word (cf. 1 John 5:1-3). And this is as we should expect. The one whom I love the most is the one whom I want to please the most. The ultimate goal in life is to hear at the end, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:21, 23). By knowing the Word of God, we will be able to discern God's will for us. This is stated in other ways, such as, "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33), and "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24).

### **Jesus Loved His Disciples, Which Produced Transformed Lives**

Jesus had a profound love for his disciples. And his love was always directed toward their highest good. His love for Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary involved deeply-felt emotions. Knowing that the Jewish leaders were already plotting

to put him to death, Jesus nonetheless put himself in harm's way to go to Bethany near Jerusalem to be with Martha and Mary when Lazarus died (John 11:8, 16). He wept at the tomb, which caused the Jews to recognize his love for Lazarus (John 11:36). But his love had a higher purpose in his friends' lives. It directed their growth in belief in him as the One sent from the Father. It guided his every action so that they would find true resurrection life by believing in him (cf. John 11:23-27; 38-45). Jesus' love displayed the depth of human emotion, yet it was always directed toward his disciples' spiritual growth.

Have you experienced Jesus' love? You may certainly experience a depth of emotion, but his love will also produce in you a transformed life. His love produces his very character in our lives. His love produces freedom from sins by his blood (Rev. 1:5), righteousness in our daily lives in Christ (Gal. 2:20-21), and victory over anything that would separate us from his love (Rom. 8:37-39). Jesus' love in our lives, which compelled him to die for us, compels us in turn no longer to live for ourselves but to live for him and for those others for whom He died (2 Cor. 5:14; Rom. 14:15). Because he loves us, he rebukes and disciplines us so that we will repent from our sins (Rev. 3:19; Heb. 12:6). Because he loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God, we are now called to be imitators of God and "live a life of love" (Eph. 5:1-2).

This transformation not only produces individually changed lives, but also transformed relationships. As a collective body of believers, Jesus' love will transform us to have an enduring influence of purity and love in this world. The apostle Paul writes, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (Eph. 5:25-27). Jesus emphasized to Peter that if he really did love him, it must be demonstrated in caring for Jesus' followers (John 21:15-17).

Relationships that once were dominated by self-centeredness and pride can now experience transformation to reflect Jesus' own love (John 13:34-35). And what kind of love is that? The apostle John tells us clearly. "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.... Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:16, 18; cf. John 15:9-17).

We say that we love God. But talk is often cheap. The men I mentioned earlier had also stated that they loved God. They also said at one time that they loved their wives. But the intriguing nature of real love is that it will be patterned after the way that Jesus loved the church, and gave himself for her. Husbands are to love their wives with that same kind of love (cf. Eph. 5:22-33). I define this kind of love as an unconditional commitment to an imperfect person, in which I give myself to bring the relationship to God's intended purpose.<sup>1</sup> If our families have this kind of love at the center, it will be a real evidence that Jesus' love is alive.

### **Jesus Loved His Enemies, Which Produced a New Hope**

But the extent of Jesus' love went beyond his close relationships. His love extended to those who were his enemies. Paul declares, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us...For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" (Romans 5:8, 10).

I am always moved by the story of the rich young ruler who could not give up his wealth to receive Jesus' offer of eternal life, because his wealth was the god of his life. In the middle of the scene occurs a simple, poignant comment, "Jesus looked at him and loved him" (Mark 10:21). That young man represented all that Jesus came to challenge: the self-righteousness of the religious establishment (e.g., Matt. 5:20), the allure of wealth as a source of power and prestige and security (e.g., Matt. 6:19-24), the smugness of the legalists (e.g., Matt. 23:13-15). But although he appeared to be an opponent, Jesus saw through to his heart, and loved him. Loved him even though he ultimately walked away. Loved him enough to try to win him, even when he rejected him. That is an amazing kind of love.

Can we say that we love with that kind of love? There are dangerous, devious, forces at work in our own day, ranging from ultra-rightwing patriot militias and ethnic supremacists to ultra-leftwing gay activists and political anarchists. Those forces are blatantly opposed to clear biblical truth and seek to undermine Christ's church and his values. Yet, do we love them? Not just at arm's length. Not just theoretically. But do we attempt to get to their hearts and win them for Jesus, even when they reject our love? I can't always say that I do. But I must. Because their eternal destiny is at stake. That is the astonishing kind of love that Jesus demonstrated, even at the cross, when He said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

### **Do We Love The Way That Jesus Loved?**

Do we love the way that Jesus loved? Probably not as much as we think we do. Because to love with his kind of love will mean our full obedience to God's will for our lives, the continuing transformation of our personal, corporate, and family life, and our dedicated outreach to the world around us, even to those who may be our enemies. When we experience Jesus' love in our lives, we will be able to give ourselves completely and solely to God and to those around us. Ultimately, that is what it means to truly love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>For a fuller discussion of this definition and its relationship to biblical teaching, see Michael J. Wilkins, *In His Image: Reflecting Christ in Everyday Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997), chapters 7 and 11.

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