

## Committed to love

20/11/2011

Romans 12:9-21

As we continue in our series on character, if I was to ask you your favourite quality of character I guess many of you would say 'love'. To be sure, it is a wonderful quality and the subject of countless songs, poems and stories throughout the history of mankind.

But, what is love?

Is it merely a chemical reaction that takes place in the brain as a result of some external stimuli?

Personally, I don't ascribe to this biological definition. Is love simply a socially acceptable word we use to describe more base urgings such as lust, desire or sexual passion? Personally, I feel this kind of definition greatly diminishes the essence of real love.

It is of interest that, in some cultures and languages, there are a number of words to define 'love', while in some others there is no word or concept of love at all. English seems to be somewhere in between, in that it is restricted to only one word, though we have other words that convey a similar concept or intent.

What is of even greater interest is that, in those languages that **do** have a word for love, sometimes this word is expressed as an emotion or feeling, while in others, it is something very clearly evidenced by an action or outcome. [ 'I love because of what I feel', as opposed to 'I love because of what I do'. ]

In the Bible, because it speaks to both the Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures, we see both of these manifestations of love expressed (feelings & actions).

To understand the real meaning of love, I believe we have to look outside of ourselves, and our humanity.

In 1 John 4 we read statements like; 'love is **of** God', 'God **is** love' and 'he who abides in love **abides in** God, and God in him'. (vss.7,8,16)

These statements give us a definition of love that we will never find in any dictionary, because they speak of 'love' being essentially a quality of God's character and being, and if we are to understand the real meaning of love then it can only happen in a relationship with God himself.

Of course, in the New Testament we have some wonderful passages on love, one of the most famous being 1 Corinthians 13. In this passage, in vss.1-3, we learn that everything we say and do must first be conditioned by, and stem from, love.

Then, in vss.4-8 it goes on to describe some of the essentials of this character of love:

patience, kindness, not envious, not boastful or proud, not rude or self-seeking, not easily angered, not scoring, rejoicing in truth, protecting, trusting, hoping, persevering, and unflinching in commitment.

This is an amazing list to define not only the character, but the scope of love. Then we go to a passage like Romans 12, and we get even a clearer picture of some of the essentials of this character of love:

sincerity (ie. no hypocrisy), abhorring evil (ie. detesting vehemently); holding fast to good; devoted; honouring others above self; zealous and diligent; fervent in the Lord's service; rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; steadfast in prayer; sharing with the needy; hospitable; blessing persecutors; empathy; living harmoniously; not proud, arrogant or conceited; doing what is right; and living peaceably.

When you read these two passages, side by side, how many of all these qualities of love are descriptions of feelings? Not many! Most of them speak of right attitudes and right actions - and all reflect the will and nature of God.

Therefore, when the Bible speaks of God's love for us, we do God a grave injustice if we assume that God simply has a warm fuzzy feeling for us that does not result in any committed action toward us.

In fact, throughout the history of mankind, God has repeatedly revealed and demonstrated His love for us in so many practical and tangible ways. When we read the Bible, we discover this time and time again.

The Bible is not just the historical record of the journey of the people of Israel; it is God's story of his loving commitment to humanity, particularly expressed in his relationship with the people of Israel. Sometimes, in this commitment to love, God may choose to correct or discipline us. This may not be pleasant for a season, BUT, it always leads to better outcomes in the end.

As the Apostle Paul urged the believers in the church in Rome, it is the example, witness and spirit of God's love that is so important. As believers, we must take hold of God's love and pray its outworking in our own lives.

Paul urged this, because he knew full well that our natural human tendencies are for self advantage, self-interest and self preservation. Paul knew that, in our own strength, our efforts to love others, especially the unlovely, will always be fraught with difficulties and hardship. Our success in truly loving others can only be secured as we seek the Lord and ask Him to empower and fill us with **His** love.

So, what can we learn today from all this. In John 3:16 we read, '*For **God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.***'

What we learn is that the greatest expression of love is in what we give - sacrificially.

There is a cost to love, and this cost is in the willingness to give. Sometimes this cost means the giving of our time; sometimes our energy and strength; sometimes our wealth and possessions; sometimes our hopes and dreams.

Whatever the cost, it is not love **if it is counted or begrudged**.

Because of Paul's own personal journey and experiences, he was able to give expression to this character of godly love in ways that many of us would find very difficult. So much of it we know, but so often struggle to express in words.

As Paul described this character of godly love, he said it must be sincere (vs.9). There is no place for hidden agendas in genuine love. It always seeks the right and good for others, because its source is from **THE ONE** who is righteous and good.

In vss.10-15 Paul then spoke of the affection and devotion of love that gives honour and preference to others **above self**. It is the bond of love that sees others as like family, not strangers. In love we are energised and enthusiastic; we are uplifted and strengthened; we are understanding and empathetic toward others, because our source of love is from God Himself, whom we delight to serve.

Here again, we see this wonderful emphasis on love being self giving, even sacrificial, not only unto death but even in our everyday living.

A number of years ago I heard of an old retired catholic nun in the inner city. The police came to her convent because they were concerned for a derelict man who lived in a shack near the Yarra River.

He was sick and could be heard coughing inside the shack, but no-one could get near him for the stench of faeces and vomit. The old nun volunteered to enter the shack and get the man out. She waded through the filth and stench, put her arms around the man and helped him out into the arms of waiting officers.

**This was sacrificial love.**

In vss.16-21, Paul cautions us about our attitudes and behaviour toward others. In love, he urged that we are to seek unity and harmony, and not fall into the trap of pride and conceit by demanding that our opinions are always right. True love leaves the door open for others to freely express themselves, as each one seeks the mind and will of God.

In love there is no place for revenge or retribution, but we are to seek peace and harmony (shalom) with everyone. As such, we are to make sure that our own behaviour, attitudes and actions reflect those of God himself.

I particularly like the injunction in vs.21, *'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.'*

The witness of God's character of love is one that enables us to be overcomers. It is because of **Him**, and through **Him**, that we can choose the way of love, not only to resist and stand against evil desires and intent, but also to defeat and stand victorious over evil.

We have been given, by God, such an amazing gift. His love is not only changing us from our unlovely carnal natures, but is enriching our lives in our relationships with others.

And here we have the crunch; this kind of godly love can only work in relationships. It is not self seeking or self gratifying; it always strives for the welfare of others ahead of self.

A few years ago a policeman was questioned about an award he had received. The enquirer said,  
“How can you be a policeman for fifteen years, dealing with the kind of stuff you deal with, and not lose your temper or use excessive force on anyone?”

The officer replied, “First, if I am called to break up a fight at a pub, I never say to myself, ‘there’s a drunk’. I always think, ‘there’s a man, someone’s husband, someone’s son, someone’s neighbour.’  
I try to think of him as a man, not a crime.

Secondly, the Bible says that a soft answer turns away wrath. So, whenever I walk up to the window of a car, I always try to speak a little softer than the person I’m speaking to.”

(Adapted from: Jay Kesler, in the sermon “Families That Succeed,” Focus on the Family Ministries)

This man had learnt how to put his love into action, as he truly cared for others.

As we close, I want to tell you about a 2005 Associated Press survey. It found that 70% of people felt the current generations were ruder than they were 20 or 30 years ago. They also found that many children and young people were among the worst offenders.

Experts at the time said that present-day parenting has more to do with training children to compete in school or at sports than teaching civility. As one said, “The pressure to do well is up. The demand to do good is way down.” (Adapted from: Judith Warner, “Kids Gone Wild,” *The New York Times* (November 27, 2005))

The character of love is not genetic or natural. It is not caught, but taught. It is not measured by how we encourage others to better achieve in this world, but by how we respond to them as someone precious to God. The character of love can only be expressed in relationships and always reflects its true author - God.

As we read in Psalm 100; ‘For the Lord is good and his love endures forever.’ (vs.5)

May we all learn, day by day, how to live in the love of God, and better reflect it to others. AMEN.