



2020 Advent – 4th Week – God’s Definition of Love

This is the Fourth week in Advent, and it has been a joy to hear from 3 other pastors leading up to today. Mac Vaughn preached from Habakkuk, reminding us to **WRITE IT DOWN** and to realize that God is our **HOPE**. As believers, we are never to be hopeless, but rather to be people who rest in the hope that God is sovereign in our lives. Secondly we heard from Kelton Goudeau who took an in depth look at **FAITH**. Faith is believing God is Who He says He is, believing that He’ll do what He says He’ll do, and acting on that belief in our actions. Last week Pastor Chad McMillan took us through 10 steps to realize and receive **PEACE** in our hearts. This week we will look again at **LOVE** from God’s perspective. The word love (in Hebrew and Greek) appears over 400 times in the Bible.

When Paul wrote his precious Galatian church, he explained thoroughly what the deeds of the flesh looked like. Then, after doing that, he explained what a heart produces when it is filled with and submitted to the Holy Spirit instead of the flesh. Paul says, ²² *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:22-24, NASB).*

Notice that the first fruit of the Spirit is LOVE. This is not a coincidence. You see all the other fruits of the Spirit flow out of getting that first one right. True love, God-like love, is supernatural. It cannot come out of the flesh. It is born out of the Holy Spirit being active and alive in our hearts.

Matthew 22:37 = Shema = Hear

- Matthew 22:37 And He said to him, "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND."

Shema Yisrael at the Knesset Menorah in Jerusalem

Love is a big thing in the Kingdom of God. In Matthew 22 we read an account of a certain lawyer who was testing Jesus. He was, in fact, trying to catch Him in some sort of a Mosaic trap to incriminate Jesus. He asked, ³⁶ *“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” ³⁷ And He said to him, “YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.’ ³⁸ This is the great and foremost commandment. ³⁹ The second is like it, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’ ⁴⁰ On these two* commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:36-40, NASB).

It Really Is All About Unconditional Love

So if Jesus answered the lawyer in this way, it should cause us to ask how can we love God with the kind of love that He desires. What does it really mean to love God with all of our hearts, our souls, and our minds. And what does it mean to love our neighbor as ourselves?

English is horribly deficient in its definition of love. If you open the dictionary and look up love, you’ll find an entire page trying to describe it. When we use the word to talk about a romantic



relationship between two people, we generally are talking about an affection and attraction that we have for another. When we talk about it concerning friends, it's a devotion and affection we feel for the welfare of others close to us. It's wanting the best for others. We desire the best for them with all our hearts. Also, in English we use the word "love" to express how something might satisfy us or make us feel: I love pizza. I love sports. Or, I love Bluebell Ice Cream. Obviously, when I say I love Bluebell Ice cream and I love my wife I am talking about two different kinds of love. That's part of the confusion of English.

In the movies we use a term "falling in love" as though it is the objective or the "end all" in relationships. The "love" we see in novels and other fiction is just that. It is fiction. It is not real. It is attraction. The attraction can be unbelievably strong, but it shouldn't be mistaken for love. Most of us have been infatuated by someone where we can hardly breathe when we're in their presence. This can be exciting and fun to experience, but it would kill us if it went on for very long. And, it has little or nothing to do with God-like love.

In 2018 I told you all the story of how I met Sandy. It was all very fun and romantic, but I can honestly say that for the first 10-15 years of our marriage, my love for her was more centered on what I got out of the relationship instead of what I gave to her and poured into her. I was often sort of dissatisfied with this or unhappy about that in my marriage. It was because my love was primarily a selfish love. I am sure that sometimes it was the right kind of love, but myself just kept getting in the way. Along about the fifteen year mark, I decided to stop trying to change her and to accept her as she was. I decided that I needed to learn more about loving her and others.

When Jesus answered that lawyer, He was quoting the ancient Hebrew call to faith that God revealed to Moses. It is called the *Shemah Yisrael* (Means: Hear Oh Israel). In fact, it is the very call of faith that I heard when I was 15 years old or so from the front of St Thomas' church in Houston. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, I was convicted of my selfishness, and my life changed forever. I have continued to understand it in a deeper way as the years have gone by.

In Hebrew the word used in the *Shemah Yisrael* is the word

LOVE - אהבה (ahavah)

Some Christian writers have tried gramatically to tie the word to the verb "to give." Various scholarly lexicons and such do not support that viewpoint. Whether the verb to love in Hebrew is tied to giving or not, loving is all about giving. And it is about giving in an unselfish way. In the full biblical sense, love is loving God and others like He loves us; unconditionally and without expectation. Those are opposite motivations and emotions than what we experience when the old man, the carnal man, takes over our thoughts and emotions. The old man within us yearns to be loved and accepted, and it is only through the love of God that we can experience true love and acceptance.

This **Shemah**, this call to love, should be a major game changer in the heart and mind of every believer. This should be the mission statement of our lives. To understand this more deeply, it helps to restate the **Shemah** something like this, “You shall give and offer and devote yourself to the Lord your God with all of your heart (your emotions), with all of your soul (all of your personality and resources), and with all of your mind (all of the intellect God gave you). AND....you should give, offer, and devote yourself to others you come into contact with the same way you give, offer, and devote yourself to your own interests (author’s paraphrase).” That is an unselfish kind of love. So, as you can tell, in God’s thinking LOVE IS ALWAYS PRINCIPALLY FOCUSED ON HIM AND ON OTHERS.

We cannot love God unless we devote ourself and surrender our hearts to Him. In both Hebrew and Greek the words for heart refer to the physical organ within us, but they also refer to the center of our emotions. We must submit and surrender our emotions to God. That would include our worry, our anxiety, our fear, our bitterness, our anger, our jealousy, and our hatred along with a multitude of other emotions. Giving Him our soul (neck, breath, personality) is to give Him all that we are. It is our soul (**nephesh**) that interacts with others while we are here on earth. Finally, we must give Him our mind. There is not a great distinction in Hebrew between our emotions and our mind.

Our lives are given to us as a gift from God. We can take that gift and each day say “Lord, I offer my emotions, my personality, my thinking, my all today to You. Precious Father, use me for your work here on earth.” That is giving of ourselves. This will involve a whole lot of removing of ourselves and our priorities from the throne of our lives. It will require submission to Him and a willingness to do what He asks us to do. That’s the crux of what we studied in Galatians Chapter 5 as a church.

This **ahavah** kind of loving is also what goes on between us and others. The loving by us of those around us should be characterized by our attention, our sacrifice for, and our devotion to loving them for their benefit. Loving others God’s way is to love others without expectation. The odd thing in God’s economy is that we seldom receive our blessing from the same person to whom we give our selfless love. This is radically different than the so-called “loving” that goes on in the world, which usually involves giving to get something back from the person to whom you’re giving. The world is totally lost when it comes to real love, God’s kind of love. If you look to the world to understand love, it only offers confusion. And we know from scripture that God is not the author of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33).



The 70 scholars who are believed to have translated the Hebrew Bible into the Greek Septuagint used forms of the word **agape** to translate **ahavah** or **chesed**.¹ It was a love that expected nothing in return. It was a God kind of love. It was a love that went against all human understanding. That is the kind of love they saw in Jesus. That is why people are still talking about Jesus 2,000 years later.

¹ **Chesed** (חסד) speaks of the kindness or love between people, of the devotional piety of people towards God as well as of love or mercy of God towards humanity.

Look on the second line below at the word on the far right. It is *αγαπήσεις (agapeseis)*. That is how ahavah was rendered in the Greek translation.

εξεληθόντων αυτών εκ γης Αιγύπτου 4+ άκουε Ισραήλ
in their coming forth from [the] land of Egypt. Hear, O Israel!
 κύριος ο θεός ημών κύριος εις εστί 5+ και αγαπήσεις
[The] LORD our God [Lord one is]. And you shall love
 κύριον τον θεόν σου εξ όλης της καρδιάς σου και εξ
[the] LORD your God with [entire heart your], and with
 όλης της ψυχής σου και εξ όλης της δυνάμεώς σου
[entire soul your], and with [entire power your].
 6+ και έσται τα ρήματα ταύτα όσα εγώ εντέλλομαι
And [will be these discourses as many as I give charge
 σοι σήμερα εν τη καρδιά σου και εν τη ψυχή σου 7+
to you today] in your heart, and in your soul.

The story of two people meeting and marrying one another may be a warm story to hear, but it pales in comparison to God giving His Son (Himself) as a sacrifice for many. What manner of *agape* must God have to call you and me His children (1 John 3:1)?

If you'll indulge me for mixing languages, listen to the below rendering of familiar scriptures.

*For God so **agaped** (loved unconditionally) the world that He gave His own Son that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16, author's paraphrase). This is My commandment, that you **agape** one another as I have loved you (John 15:12, author's paraphrase). Greater **agape** has no man than this than that he lay down his life for a friend (John 15:13, author's paraphrase).*

A love relationship often starts between a boy and a girl or a man and a woman with a little spark, a small interest. That may be where you are right now with God. You might have a spark of an interest in God. You might have a fascination with Him because you see His goodness and His mercy, or you see Him working through others. You ponder him. You meditate about Him. You ask yourself if He is real, and if so, could He possibly really love you in a personal way. He does. When you see Him working in and through others, build on that little spark of interest by loving Him back. Realize it is your heavenly Father loving on you. *"¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."* (James 1:17, NIV). This doesn't mean that we don't thank those who are used as willing agents of God's love and compassion, but our ultimate gratitude should always be focused on the Lord. It is He who takes care of us. We love Him because He first loved us.



<3 #LifeLearnedFeelings

Now let's talk about this business of loving others as ourselves. When you give to others, are you keeping score? Do you run a tally in your mind to see what you might get back? Do you ever fall into that trap of thinking, "I have given so much to this church and I am unappreciated." If you do, you may not be loving at all. Why? Because you're "loving" to get something. Do what you do because you love Him and you want to serve His body here on earth. If you find yourself thinking, "I did this and this and this for them and they didn't do anything for me," you're probably thinking the wrong way. When we "give" expecting, we aren't really giving at all. We're trying to make a good trade. We're expecting a return on our investment. We're keeping score. We're running a tally. When others love you with *agape* love, realize it is God loving you. They are merely a vessel. You are a similar vessel when you selflessly love others.

Finally, we're to love our neighbor as ourselves. Notice the requirement to love yourself. So, this means to stop putting yourself down. Realize you're unique and special and that God has only made one version of you. This text is telling us that we can't love others until we truly love ourselves. You are loved and accepted in God's eyes. The likes of you will never appear again in the universe. So, celebrate you because He loves you, and realize you are precious in His sight. We know this because even while knowing that we are all sinners, Jesus died for each of us (Romans 5:8).

Scripture tells us that "God Himself is love." What an incredible thought. God is perfect love. When we're filled with the Holy Spirit and submitted to the Holy Spirit, we can, in a tiny way, be an expression of that love. It can go beyond our capacity as humans. Scripture also tells us that true love is from God (1 John 4:7-8). We love Him and others because He first loved us. The more you fall in love with God, the more He will love others through you, and probably the more He will love you through others. Don't be confused by this thing called love. It is not a feeling, but an action.

Don't be confused by the world's definition of these things. Base your life on what God's Word says. Stop fretting about love and allow God to love you and allow Him to love others through you.

³⁷ Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:37-40, NIV).

Now, let's all go and do likewise.

Let us pray!

Union Grove is one of the oldest Baptist communities of faith in the State of Texas dating back to 1844. Pastor Faber McMullen may be reached by email at uniongrove362@gmail.com or by snail mail at: 15301 FM 362, Navasota, Texas 77868. Tel: 936-825-1227 (Edited and proofed by Amanda Fryday Neese- Webster, Texas.) All financial gifts to this ministry are tax-deductible as a 501 (c) (3) Corporation.