

726 *How Important Is Love?*

Phil Sanders

God's Answers to Life's Questions

Today we're asking the question, "How important is love?" Imagine with me that you have awakened in a world without love. It is a world where people don't care—and they don't care that they don't care. It is a world where offenses began fights and wars, because no one loved enough to forgive. It's a world where people were selfishly ambitious, stepping on others in climbing to the top, abusing others merely to survive. It's a world where the lives of old people and the unborn were cheap. It is a world where other people's lives are cheap as long as you get what you want. It is a world where people hardly marry, and those that did rarely stayed that way. It is a world where children had to fend for themselves. It is a world where people sat silent when evil took place, where protecting the weak was a waste of time. A world without love would be a world without hope and filled with all the ugly substitutions people find to take love's place. Part of what makes hell so terrible is that you can't find any love there.

The world is certainly an unloving place at times. At any time there are no less than ten wars going on somewhere in the world. Crime, abortion, prejudice, and pride still plague us. The world is sometimes very ugly, and trying to find love is not easy. It is not so much that people are hateful as it is they apathetic. The opposite of love is not hate; it is apathy or indifference. Apathy occurs when a person cannot feel and doesn't care. He may not even want to care; he want not want to feel. That's a terrible condition. Someone has well said, "Love will find a way, but indifference will find an excuse."

I want to remind you of an Old Testament story that is filled with indifference. You probably know the first part of that story, but I want to focus on the last part. Jonah was a prophet of God, and God told him to go and preach to the people of Nineveh. Jonah didn't care about the evil people of Nineveh, so he went down to Joppa and took a ship to Tarshish—the opposite direction. You'll remember that God caused a great storm on the Mediterranean Sea, and Jonah's ship was in great trouble. Because Jonah was at fault, he insisted they throw him overboard to save themselves. They were reluctant and finally did. God, of course, prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah spent three days and nights in the belly of the great fish. When the fish spit him up on the shore, Jonah was ready to go to Nineveh.

We start our reading from Jonah 3: Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you." So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish." When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

Jonah 4 says: But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?" Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city.

Now the LORD God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." And the LORD said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

Can you imagine what kind of heart Jonah had? He got angry enough to want to die! First, he wanted to die because God forgave the people of Nineveh. Then, he wanted to die because he lost his shade. Jonah wasn't thinking about the people of Nineveh, who didn't know God. He was thinking about himself. But God cared even for that wicked city, Nineveh. When they repented, He relented and did not bring the disaster on them that He had planned. God cares. Love for others is always far more important than our own desires and attitudes. We must learn to love.

Sooo. What does it mean to love? The word *agape* or *love* (primarily of Christian love) means such *concern or interest* in another that one is willing to sacrifice what is his own to do what is best for another. People are not "born lovers" any more than people are born chefs. They have to learn how to cook, and you have to learn how to love. You may have the deepest of feelings, but love is a verb, an act of heart and soul. Loving someone means that you have paid enough attention to the needs and desires of another that their needs and desires become more important than your own. The Scriptures teach us why to love and how to love. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 8:9, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich." Jesus left all the beauty, love, and grandeur of heaven to come and live as a common man, so that you could one day enter the joy of heaven.

When I graduated from high school, the prayer of *Francis of Assisi* was very popular. I loved it then, and I love it now. Francis prayed, "Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is doubt, faith. Where there is despair, hope. Where there is darkness, light; And where there is sadness, joy. O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek To be consoled as to console; To be understood, as to understand; To be loved, as to love. For it is in giving that we receive -- It is in pardoning that we are pardoned, And it is in dying to self that we are born to eternal life. Love is always focused on the object of our love, not ourselves. It is hard to do that in a generation so focused on the self. That's why I say we have to learn how to love.

Henry Drummond years ago wrote a book entitled, "The Greatest Thing in the World," in which he pointed out that love is the "*the highest good*." Many people want to be loved, but they do not understand the higher calling of loving others. Man reaches his noblest place by loving, not in being loved. Many people confuse infatuation or lust with love. Love is not so much a feeling as it is a mindset, a choice. We love because we choose to love. We can love others even when we don't like. Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Love is what makes us like God, our Father. God is, after all, love (1 John 4:8). And life without love is an empty pursuit. No one can claim to be a Christian if he does not have the love of God first and foremost in his life. The first commandment is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:37-40). Nothing is more important than this. In fact, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."

Love is just that important. Without it, we fail to be what God intended. Without love we are nothing. And without love we can gain nothing. Paul further defines love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." That is why it is so valuable. The only thing you will ever possess (besides your soul) and take into eternity is your love for God and His love for you. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:13, "So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." Love lasts. That is why in 1 Corinthians 14:1, Paul tells the Corinthians, "Pursue love." To "pursue" is to chase it until you seize it. To bear whatever cost it takes in time and effort to possess love (not to be loved but to love). If you accomplish every goal in your life but have never found the love of God, my friend, your life is still empty. How important is love? Love is the most important thing to your soul you will ever find. Pursue love. Don't let anything, anything, ANYTHING, keep you from the love of God.

To love God means that He is part of my everyday life. I will study and meditate on His word and pray to Him daily. I will praise Him and remember Him in every decision I make in life. Loving God means obeying Him. Jesus said in John 14:23-24, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words." Loving God means loving His words and keeping them. John spoke of those who claimed to know and love God in 1 John 2:3-6. He said, "And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says 'I know him' but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked." Love means taking action. It's hard to claim love if we say nothing and do nothing. 1 John 3:16-18 says, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth." Love means caring enough for my friend to tell him the truth about his soul; caring enough to keep myself free from sin; caring enough to take up a brother's burden as my own; and caring enough to sacrifice myself for a nobler cause.

Do you love God enough to obey the gospel? To do that one must believe with all of his heart that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. He must repent of his sins and turn completely away from them. He must be willing to confess with his mouth his faith in Christ as Lord; and he must be baptized in water so that his sins will be forgiven. My friend, do you love the Lord enough to serve Him all the days of your life, to keep His words? I pray that you do.

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