

## LOVE IN ACTION

5-14-06

I Cor. 12:31b-14:1a

### INTRODUCTION

Leo Buscaglia was one of the great motivational speakers at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a professor at the University of Southern California. Love was his major theme. He tells of being on an airplane from Los Angeles to New Jersey. When he took his seat, the man next to him made it obvious he was irritated at having anyone sit next to him. He told Buscaglia that he'd hoped to have room to spread out. Within moments, they heard a baby cry. "Great!" the man exclaimed under his breath. "I hate babies on airplanes. We'll have to listen to that child scream for five hours!" When the stewardess gave her standard safety speech, this man turned to Buscaglia and said, "I hate stewardesses; they are nothing but glorified waitresses hoping to meet rich men!" When she announced the lunch menu later in the flight, he proclaimed, "I hate airplane food; it's made from rubber." When she advised there was an area at the rear of the plane reserved for smokers (this was a long time ago, when there was a smoking section), this man said, "I hate smokers; they should be shot!" At this Buscaglia felt he needed to offer some rebuttal and offered, "All of them? I know some nice people who smoke." With greater resolve the man replied, "I hate smokers— all of them!"

Then he turned to Buscaglia and asked, "What do you do?" He answered, "I am a professor." The man said, "Really, what do you teach?" Buscaglia replied, "Mostly I teach courses on relationships, how to treat one another and how to get along. Basically, I teach about love." Buscaglia's seat mate then replied with absolute sincerity, "I'm glad to meet someone who shares my values!"

I'm sure all of us would tout the importance of love in all of life. And, most of us feel like we're pretty loving people. But, like Buscaglia's fellow passenger, we need a more objective measure of how we're doing. You can probably think of people who fit in the category of Buscaglia's seat mate who are clueless as to how critical, angry, and judgmental they are. They feel they are loving people. We need an objective measure to evaluate ourselves by. It is indeed an important issue, standing at the core of what it means to be a Christian, for 1 John 4:7-8 says,

*Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.*

This morning, we're going to think through what this love should look like in practice for us, using the definition of love God gives us in 1 Cor. 13.

Mother's Day is a good time for us to reflect upon love. For many of us, the best modeling of love in our lives has been our mothers. And, even if your mother didn't do that great a job, we all seem to instinctively know how it should have been. It is a good beginning place to understand how love is to work in our relationships.

As the song says, "Love is a many splendored thing..." But it is also a much confused thing. We use the word in so many ways. I love pizza and I love Polly. Yet we would hope my love for pizza is not the same as my love for Polly. Polly can always hope she gets to the level of my pizza love... (just kidding). Love is engulfed in pop psychology, myths, and nostalgia. It often gets so diluted that it loses the power to change our lives and the world in ways it was meant to. I want to focus on the meaning of love in our relationships with other people.

The Greek language of the New Testament helps us in understanding love. There were three main words for love in that day. *Eros* referred to the kind of love I give to satisfy my desires and fulfill my appetites. We get the word "erotic" from it, but it is not restricted to sexual love. It refers to any love that grows out of need and desire. Then there was *phileo*, the love of friendship—brotherly and sisterly love. The third word for love was *agape* which wasn't used much by the Greeks because it was so rare in human experience. But now, in Christ it was suffused with new meaning and became the primary usage of the New Testament writers. *Agape* is demonstrated in God's sending His Son to die for our sins. It is a pure and selfless love— not to satisfy God's needs. It is unilateral in that it is given without thought of response.

I Corinthians 13 gives us the most perfect description of this kind of love ever written, this *agape* love.

## LOVE ACTS

There are no shortcuts to loving relationships. Our society treats love as something that "just happens." We "fall in love" and we "fall out of love." There's little we can do about it. This is undoubtedly one of the most destructive lies of our age. Love is a verb, meaning it is an action word, something we do. The famous Christian psychiatrist, Dr. Karl Menninger said, "We do not fall in love, we grow in love and love grows in us." It means sacrifice, giving of ourselves, and serving one another. Feelings are nice, but they have little to do with the reality of love. Proper actions recapture the true feelings of love. Remember, love is shown in what we do. While it is true of all the words for love, it is especially true for *agape* love.

The first thing I want you to notice in the list of love's qualities in 1 Cor. 13:4-8 is that feelings hardly are not mentioned. We're talking about actions here.

*4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*

*8 Love never fails.*

While love may seem abstract and ethereal, it manifests itself in very concrete attitudes and actions. J. B. Phillips did one of the early translation/ paraphrases of the New Testament. I especially like what Phillips did with this passage and have long used it as a Scripture reading in the marriage ceremony I use. It's on your bulletin insert. Let's read it aloud, together.

*Love is slow to lose patience,  
it looks for a way of being constructive.*

*It is not possessive;  
it is neither anxious to impress,  
nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance.*

*Love has good manners and does not pursue selfish advantage.  
It is not touchy.  
It does not keep account of evil  
or gloat over the wickedness of other people.  
On the contrary it is glad with all good men when truth prevails.*

*Love knows no limit to its endurance,  
no end to its trust, no fading of its hope;  
it can outlast anything.  
It still stands when all else has fallen.*

*In this life we have three lasting qualities:  
faith, hope and love.  
But the greatest of these is love.*

*Follow the way of love.*

In this chapter, we see that some of the most spectacular things we can do are worthless if they are not done in love. We can have all wisdom to understand all mysteries. The most marvelous, powerful spiritual gifts may be ours so that we even have the power to move mountains. We have the spiritual insight to know God's will and declare it. Even if you give the ultimate gift of your life in service to God, not even turning back before the flames of martyrdom, we gain nothing— it is all worthless if it is not out of a heart of love. You see, only if our hearts are filled with love, will these things be without ulterior motives and not be self-serving. Otherwise we will be doing things, using God's gifts for our own glory and gain.

### **THE DISEASE OF SELF-LOVE**

I'm sure we all can confess we need to be more loving. We all agree love is the key to healthy relationships. Certainly our world would be a lot better with more love. If we are convinced of the need, the value and the solution, why aren't we more loving? The short answer is, we are too filled with ourselves. Self-centeredness is incompatible with loving relationships, twisting everything into what I can get, not give. There is no outflow, no sacrifice. And without that, there can be no good relationships. Relinquishment, letting go of self is crucial to all healthy relationships.

Marriage and family give a good human-level illustration of this. When we find the person we want to marry, that love motivates is to seek the joy and satisfaction of our beloved before our own. No sacrifice seems too much for that person. Even guys who seem totally out-of-touch with their feelings go to great lengths to talk about their feelings for their girl. They can be found at the card racks in the store trying to find just the right expression of love to share. Behaviors

change in wonderfully positive ways.

When we have a baby, again love's powerful transformation is seen. It means we won't always get to sleep when we want or go where we want, when we want, and do what we want. Many alter their career goals to better provide time and care for this child. And, before we get that kid launched and on their own, we'll pay out hundreds of thousands of dollars. Given all that, you might think, "Why on earth would you ever want to have a baby?" Yet, most of us would say we experience life at its best, at its deepest in marriage and in having a family.

But, unfortunately, we often pull-up short in these areas as well. After the initial blush of love fades, we get focused upon our needs and trying to make life work the way we want it to work. It happens in our marriages and with our children. And certainly it is true in our other relationships.

I sometimes have couples come for marriage counseling, saying, they just don't love each other like they used to. The feelings just aren't there and they've drifted apart. They're thinking divorce and that fulfillment will come from finding "the right person." I often ask them if they'd be willing to try an experiment for one month. I ask them to think of five things they would do each day for the other person *if* they loved him or her. I invite them to use their imagination— five little things: a hug, a kiss, an affirmation, an act of service not asked for. I ask them to not evaluate their feelings, just do them each day for a month. Generally, I get a look like, "You've got to be kidding! I don't feel like it." And here's the really sad thing. I can't remember any couple over the last couple of decades I've been issuing that challenge ever saying, "Yes, we could do that. We'll commit ourselves to that for the next 30 days." It seems just too hard and like too much sacrifice. But, I'm convinced, based upon God's Word and other experience, after 30 days, a flicker of feeling would begin returning to their relationship. Feelings will follow actions in love.

C. S. Lewis explained this principle like this in Mere Christianity.

"Do not waste your time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor. Act as if you did. As soon as you 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."

I remember when I first read that (I believe I was in college), I tried it. I found it wonderfully freeing to forget about my feelings and just do what I imagined love would do. And even more wonderful, it worked. I could act my way into the feeling. Such acting is not hypocrisy, it is being obedient to God's Word— His command to love. Such acts of obedience give birth to the reality in our hearts.

Looking again at the list from I Cor. 13, almost all of these qualities of love demand a letting go, a relinquishment of ourselves. They involve a decision to act in a way different than we may feel.

It's because of our self-centered hearts we need God's help. He is able to get inside our hearts and

change us. Before we come to God and receive Jesus Christ as Lord of our lives, self is in charge, reigning on the throne of our hearts. And, while we may sometimes do selfless things, mostly our lives are centered in what's good for us. Most giving and the outflow of love is for what we get back. But, when we surrender our hearts to Jesus and ask Him to be Lord, we put Him at the center, subordinating our needs to His desires. And, this relinquishment allows us to become truly loving from the inside out. *Agape* love is a fruit of Jesus' indwelling life. To use Paul's phrase in Rom. 5:5, "His love is shed abroad in our hearts." So we are filled with a love from Christ that is not our own. And His love is totally selfless. We begin to love with the love of the Lord.

When we are running short of love for the difficult people in life and for the pressing needs of others, it is a call to prayer. We need to turn to the Lord and offer our hearts to Him first for a fresh infilling of His Spirit which is His love. Then, we need to put whatever thoughts He gives into action.

With love, we begin to see in new ways. As Martha Beck observes,

“Whoever said love is blind is dead wrong. Love is the only thing that lets us see each other with the remotest accuracy.”

A little boy was telling his friend,

“When I get older, I want to wear glasses just like Grandma wears. She sees so much more than most people. She can see when people are hungry or tired or sorry. And she can see what will make them feel better. She can see what I meant to do even if I didn't do it right. She can see when I'm about to cry and knows what she can do to make me feel better. I asked her one day how she could see so good, and she said it was the way she learned to look at things when she got older. So, when I get older, I want a pair of glasses just like Grandma's so I can see good too.

Mother Teresa whose life teaches us so much about *agape* love, said,

“It is easier to love the people far away. It is not always easy to love those close to us. It is easier to give a cup of rice to relieve hunger than to relieve the loneliness and pain of someone unloved in our own home. Bring love into our home, for this is where love for each other must start.”

## CONCLUSION

A wealthy, stylish European woman was on a safari in Africa. The group stopped briefly at a mission hospital for lepers. The heat was intense and the flies were everywhere. She noticed a missionary nurse kneeling in the dirt, tending the pus-filled sores of a leper. With disdain, this wealthy woman remarked, “Why I wouldn't do that for all the money in the world!” The nurse quietly replied, “Neither would I..”