

Sermon Title: Love's Definition, January 30, 2011 (Scripture is from ESV)

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 3:14-19

Introduction

Let me say a prayer before getting started...

Pray (Love!)

Terrible Teens...

A few weeks ago I spoke at joint prayer meeting and gave the message, "God Over the Darkness." After the message we had some ministry time and God's Spirit began to minister to many people across the room. I had my eyes closed for most of the time, but now and then I would look over the audience. Many people were receiving and being touched and blessed, but there were others who were, well, just sitting there and not feeling much. And I've noticed this at many past altar calls. That usually new believers or people who have just become sensitive to the Holy Spirit will feast upon the altar calls. They will get completely messed up. But as time passes for some of them, it doesn't seem as if the Holy Spirit ministers as powerfully to them or they aren't receiving like they once did. Those deep feelings of love from God that they used to sense or the tears they used to shed as God revealed Himself to them just aren't as common as they once were.

I was reflecting on this for a while after that night. I thought about how as a child I loved to receive love from my parents. My Mom would give me hugs all the time and I loved it. She would tell me she loves me and I would always respond the same. As a child love came easy and there was no shame about it. But as I became a teenager, something weird started happening to my mind, as it does with most teenagers. Suddenly I didn't want my Mom telling me she loved me in front of other people. Hugs or any showing of affection were no longer desired in public. I think my Mom knew this stage would come, so just as I was starting into it she set up a secret signal for saying "I love you" between us so I would never be embarrassed in front of people. It was a simple double tap on the cheek with the index finger. Something that other people usually wouldn't pick up on. So when I would be spending a ton of time with friends and we would see each other, it would be a subtle way of reminding me that she loves me.

It wasn't until sometime in college that I fully grew out of that stupid teenage stage of not receiving love so well. No longer was I ashamed to say "I love you" to my mom in front of a bunch of people and give her a hug. That secret signal was no longer necessary. Love once again came easy between us.

As I reflected on those memories I wondered if there is a stage in our walk with God where we struggle to receive His love. That like teenagers, our identity begins to form and get attacked and we aren't sure who we are or who we are meant to be. As children it was simple... just receive the love. But as we grow older and begin to seek for our purpose in life and question who we are, it becomes a little harder to receive the love. Just like my mom, God still has his arms open and is speaking those words of love over us, but for whatever reason it is harder to see or hear... or even to want to see or hear.

This has been something I've been chewing on lately. I know there can be a number of reasons why someone struggles to receive love or a touch from God, but I've found that

nearly all of them come down to identity: either a struggle with questioning one's own identity or a struggle with understanding God's full identity.

"Why can't you receive God's love?" "Oh, I'm a sinner. I'm not worthy." "God scares me. I fear He will try to control me." "I have other desires and want to fulfill them, I don't feel that God can truly satisfy me so I choose not to open myself to Him." "I haven't loved God so I feel distant from Him. He isn't near me."

All those reasons speak of false identities. The truth is that if we repent of our sins God forgives us our sins and cleanses us from all unrighteousness (1John 1:9). He forgives us our sins and remembers our wickedness no more (Jeremiah 31:34). Nothing can separate us from His love (Romans 8:37-39). The truth is there is nothing to fear. Perfect love drives out fear. And the truth is God has never left your side. He is Immanuel, God with us (Isaiah 7:14). And the truth is He desires to truly satisfy us (Psalm 37:4).

Intimacy... For What?

I believe as we are transitioning into a time of intimacy that God is wanting us to grow more mature in His love. That means we have to come out of our teenage years and our struggles with our own identity and God's identity. God wants to bring us into maturity of being able not just to receive His love freely again, but to also give His love freely. And it also means we have to understand just what exactly His love is and why He gives it to us. So today I want to share about the different definitions of love, and what love's true definition is.

In the Greek language there are a number of words for love, but three of them stand out above the rest. The words are: Eros, Philia, and Agape. I want to share a little bit about each of them.

Eros... selfish "love"

I'm going to start with the Greek word, "Eros." Eros has a lot to do with desire and passion. It is a very human love and it often refers to sexual love. It is where we get the word "erotic" from. Webster's dictionary defines eros as, "*The sum of life-preserving instincts that are manifested as impulses to gratify basic needs, such as sex.*"

When it comes down to it, Eros is a very selfish love. Eros poses as love for another but is actually love for oneself. It says, "**I love you because you make me happy.**" It sounds innocent, but the truth is it is evil. Eros foundation is some characteristic in the other person that pleases us, such as beauty, charm, or talent. So if that characteristic is taken away then there is nothing left, and it dies. This kind of love may give, but the motive in giving is always to receive what is wanted. To say that Eros is true love is to say a man and a prostitute have true love. A man with a prostitute fulfills the basic definition of Eros. He has his needs and she has hers. He gives her money. She gives him sex. Once they get their needs, love is over with.

In Greek mythology, Eros is actually the son of Aphrodite and is the god of desire and sexual love. In Roman mythology, his name is Cupid. That's right, Eros is that little naked winged guy with the arrows that is supposed to make people fall in love. He is usually portrayed in cute pictures or cartoons. But the truth is, he is a little demon that curses people with a false love... a love that causes someone to want another so much that they must have the person... but not for the other person's sake, rather for their own. It's a false love that causes people to say irrationally, "I must have you!" while not thinking of the other person's needs whatsoever.

Sadly, this world loves Eros. If you watch TV commercials or look at advertisements around the city, everything is centered around you and your own personal desires and satisfaction. Life is all about you! The media preaches that if you buy these products, then you will be happy. Or if you do these things to your body then people will like you and then you will be happy. It's all about your happiness, not about anyone else. It is this mindset that causes people to not want to marry but rather to cohabit with the knowledge that if ever the other person stops satisfying their needs, then they can leave because there is no true commitment. It is this false love that has enabled so many people to divorce without a second thought.

The sad thing is that even the Webster's dictionary of Eros shows that society accepts Eros as true love. Let me say the definition again: "The sum of **life-preserving instincts** that are manifested as impulses to gratify basic needs, such as sex." Basically the definition states that Eros is healthy because it enables us to gratify our basic needs, such as sex. It causes us to try everything we can think of to get the love we crave, but most of our efforts only backfire and further alienate the one whose love we seek. And so we learn by bitter experience that we cannot make someone love us when we have no concern for them.

Do you know how many times the love Eros is mentioned in the Bible? **Not once.** God would never want us to confuse Eros with true love. So what we have to understand is that if we like someone out of selfish reasons... because the person is nice to us, attractive, makes us happy, etc... that doesn't mean that we truly love the person.

The Next Level

This brings us to a higher level in the hierarchy of love, the Greek word "Philia," also pronounced, "Phileo." I think most of you know about this word since our church is named after it, ("New Philadelphia"), but let me still explain for those who are new to it.

Philia relates more to the soul than to the body. It's often a love to describe the loyalty and connection among friends and family. The closest word to it in English is "Friendship." Philadelphia is known as the city of brotherly love. This word is found in the Bible. God has no problem describing His love for us with this word. Turn your Bibles to John 16:27 for an example of God using the word philia.

John 16:27 – For the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.

The words love in that verse are all the word "Philia." Interestingly, this is the same word that Judas uses when he betrays Jesus. We know that he said to the Pharisees, "The one I will kiss is the man" (Matthew 26:48). The word for kiss in the Greek is actually the word Philia, or brotherly love. He basically says to the Pharisees, "The one I will show brotherly love to is the man."

This is also the same word that Peter uses when he responds to Jesus' questions, "Simon Peter, do you love me?" Each time he responds, "Yes Lord, you know I love you" (John 21:16). He is basically saying, "Yes Lord, you know I am your friend."

Philia is a higher level of love than Eros because it is a love that is involved with others rather than just yourself. There is a mutual connection that goes beyond simply meeting needs or desires. There is a mutual joy in the relationship.

I believe God has no problem using this word to describe His love for us because He truly does relate to us as friends and delights in our uniqueness. After all, He calls us His friends, and the word for friend in the Greek “Philos” is rooted in Philia.

But Philia is only used 21 times in the Bible, and only a few times is it God who is using it to describe His love for us. It’s not the popular word for love. Why? Because it is not the highest level of love. And that brings us to our third and final Greek word for love...

The Highest Level

The highest level of love is found in the Greek word, “Agape.” What is Agape? Turn in your Bibles to 1Corinthians 13:4-8a. I’m going to say the true translation and use the word agape instead of the translated word love.

1Corinthians 13:4-8a – Agape is patient and kind; agape 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. Agape bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Agape never ends.

A simple definition of Agape is, “Unconditional love.” It’s a love that demands nothing in return. Agape love is unselfish and uncalculating. It gives 100% and **never** expects anything in return. It’s a love that goes against human nature completely. It is the complete opposite of Eros. It is the definition of love.

1John 4:16 states, “God is love,” and the Greek translation really reads, “God is Agape.” The definition of love is both Agape and God. They are the same. We as humans are unable to love apart from God. But when we are able to show unconditional love, we are actually representing God with absolute clarity.

Please take these words in deep: **if God’s love for us is Agape, then that means His love is free and undemanding.** It’s the love the father had for the prodigal son. A love that gave no matter what. God is love. God is agape. So let me describe His love for you by reading 1Corinthians 13:4-8a again.

1Corinthians 13:4-8a – God is patient and kind; God does not envy or boast; God is not arrogant or rude. God does not insist on its own way; God is not irritable or resentful; God does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. God bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. God never ends.

Let me read that for you again in the NIV, which I know you are all more familiar with...

1Corinthians 13:4-8a (NIV) – God is patient. God is kind. God does not envy, God does not boast, God is not proud. God is not rude, God is not self-seeking, God is not easily angered, God keeps no record of wrongs. God does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. God always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. God never fails.

If your faith is in God, then your faith is in unconditional love. That as love never fails, God never fails.

If Agape is the love that we are expected to live by, then how do we receive it? Let me read a couple verses for you guys...

Romans 5:5 – God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

That verse really reads as, “God’s agape has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” We receive God’s agape love through the Holy Spirit. This is why when we feel the Spirit’s presence move through the room people often cry or laugh because they are being touched and filled by God’s agape love for them.

1John 4:19 – We love because He first loved us.

That verse really reads as, “We agape because he first agape us.” In other words, “We love unconditionally because He first unconditionally loved us.”

So how do you know when you are moving in Agape love? Whenever you are feeling love or compassion for something or someone without any thought of something in return. For example, if your heart is stirred or you cry when we pray for North Korea, then you are experiencing God’s Agape love for North Korea. When you are praying for North Korea you are never thinking of receiving anything in return from the nation. Your prayers are selfless and are solely for their good. And the beautiful thing is that **the more you release Agape love, the more you receive it in return**. Scripture is clear that we reap what we sow (Galatians 6:7). Jesus Himself says, “Give and it will be given to you” (Luke 6:38).

When we love others through God’s Agape love then we are actually demonstrating God to others. If you interchange the definitions, basically we love, we Agape, we God. We are demonstrating a love that is unworldly. The world without God only knows Eros love, selfish love. But whenever we demonstrate Agape, we are demonstrating who God is to this world.

So here we have the three main Greek words for love: Eros, Philia, and Agape. And for all people, love is a process. Maturing love involves growing from a state of receiving much and giving little toward a state of cheerfully giving everything and demanding nothing in return. It involves going from Eros to Philia to Agape. It involves going from a sinner living for yourself to the likeness of God living for His glory.

Back to Identity

Before I close I want to go back to the beginning of this message about how identity affects how much love we can receive. I want to ask you guys to think about how you feel God sees you. What do you look like when you stand before Him? What is the expression on His face as He looks upon you?

I want to share a story with you all that is a bit heavy, but will help you understand how God truly sees you...

Dad’s Visit to Heaven

Back in 2005 before I came to Korea my older sister was pregnant with her first child. Sadly though, at the 6 month mark, she miscarried. It was a tragic time and there was a need for a lot of healing. Before the miscarriage they already knew the baby was a boy and had named him Clayton.

A couple weeks after the miscarriage my dad had a dream. In the dream he was taken upwards. Then before him something like a sheet was lifted and he saw a place that was

bright white. He knew exactly where he was. He looked before him and there were three children happily playing on the ground together. My dad looked closer and he realized the boy on the left was my Grandpa Vic, who passed away years ago. My dad could see Grandpa Vic at all ages... as a little child, as a teenager, an adult, and also in his old age... but mostly my dad saw him as a young little boy. My dad looked at the young girl in the middle and realized she was his grandmother. And again, my dad could see his grandmother at all ages of her life, but mostly he saw her as a young, happy, little child. Then my dad looked at the boy on the right and couldn't recognize him right away, but my dad said the boy resembled both me and the brother of my brother-in-law. My dad then realized the boy was Clayton.

When my dad realized who he was, Clayton jumped up from playing and ran to my dad with the happiest expression on his face. He joyfully exclaimed to my dad, "It is so wonderful here!" And then my dad woke up.

My dad kept the dream to himself that morning and went to work. During the course of the day my dad spoke with his mother and she said to him, "I just know that Vic and little Clayton are up in heaven playing together." She spoke the truth.

How God Sees You

God gave my Dad that visitation to help provide comfort and healing to him, my sister, and the family as we were grieving. But as I have reflected on what my Dad saw I have been able to understand more clearly about how God sees us. Scripture states that God formed us in our mother's womb and that He knew all the days of our life before one of them came to be. God created time so He is not bound by it. He sees us from every part of our life. He knows what you will do tomorrow, what you will do in twenty years, and He knows exactly what you will look like decades from now. He knows us completely. He knows that sin and hurt jade us and affect how we see ourselves, but He sees through those things. God sees you as pure and His beloved child. Even at a young age you may have been violated or hurt or have done wrong, but God sees you from even before that. He knows who you truly are.

I want to ask you again to think about how you feel God sees you. And as you stand before Him I want you to see Him as who He truly is: "Unconditional Love." What do you look like when you stand before Unconditional Love? What is the expression on His face as He looks upon you and sees you as His child?

Minister as the Spirit leads