

## More Than A Valentine

This Friday is Hallmark's favorite day: Valentine's Day. It's all about love isn't it? "Love is in the air. Love makes the world go round. What the world needs now is love, sweet love." I like what Plato said about love. He called it "a grave mental disease." In other words, love will make you crazy. I believe it was the great philosopher Percy Sledge who said, "When a man loves a woman, can't keep his mind on nothing else, he'll trade the world for the good thing he's found. If she's bad, he can't see it, she can do no wrong, turn his back on his best friend if he put her down." Love can make you crazy so watch out this Valentine's day.

People say they are looking for love but a lot of folks don't know what it is they are looking for. What is love? You can let Hallmark define it for you in their sentimental cards. You can let Hollywood define it for you with their perverse approach to love and life. But we look to the bible to understand love. The Bible tells us love comes from God and more specifically that "**God is love.**" **1 John 4:8.** It is one of the most simple yet complete statements in the Bible.

Dr. Peter Kreeft (pronounced Krayft) wrote, "Love is God's essence. Nowhere else does Scripture express God's essence in this way. Scripture says God is just and merciful, but it does not say that God is justice itself or mercy itself. It does say that God is Love, not just a *lover*. Love is God's very essence. Everything else is a manifestation of this essence to us, a relationship between this essence and us. This is the absolute; everything else is relative to it."

We can't adequately define love apart from knowing God and his love. As Kreeft said, "this is the absolute; everything else is relative to it." If we are looking for love or trying to understand it, or express it, we have to look first to God. If we want to know how to love others, we have to look at God and his love.

We use the word love rather indiscriminately to point to all kinds of things. Our language doesn't allow us to fine-tune our love. Someone gives you a valentine this week that says "I love you" and we feel so good. So honored and happy and loved. Then that person says they love their dog and they love their new purse, or they love their new golf clubs or their new truck and they love donuts and pizza and you think, where do I fall in there? Hopefully somewhere between the dog and the donuts. How do you love me? How do I know you love me?

The Greeks had 4 or 5 words for love. Eros, Storge, Phileo, Agape. That would have

been helpful for us in our language wouldn't it? To be able to distinguish between loving donuts, our dog and loving our family. But we just have that one word – love. So how do I know what kind of love you are talking about when you say you love me? You love me like you love donuts? Or like you love that new purse? Or you love me like you love your new truck? You use it and then when it starts to show age and wear, you get rid of it and find a new one. How do I know what love is? What is our measure for real love?

The bible helps us understand. **“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” 1 John 3:16.** Here is the standard, the measure for what love looks like: Jesus Christ laying down his life for us.

Love may include warm happy feelings and butterflies in your stomach and sweaty palms and sweet, sentimental words on a valentine, but when it is all said and done, this is love: laying your life down for someone else. **Love is unselfish, other's centered action.** The apostle Paul said love does not insist on having its' own way, instead, it defers to another. Unselfish, other's centered. More specifically, love for us means submitting to and preferring God's way rather than our own. This is what Jesus illustrated for us when he submitted to the cross, praying in the garden, “Not my will but thine be done.” It was evidence of his love – his unselfish, other's centered action. This is what he did for us and we are to do this for others. Love is about laying down our lives for others. This is the top of the line in love. What did Jesus say? **“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” John 15:13.**

Love requires action. It demands more than words, it demands a living demonstration. It's not enough for me to think loving thoughts. It's not enough to tell someone I love them. They need to see it in action. How? By laying down your life for them. And how do we do that? Take a bullet for someone? Well that would be one way of laying your life down, but you could only do that the one time, probably. What did we say? Love is unselfish, other's centered action. I would suggest that any time you put someone else's needs before your own you are laying down your life in some sense. You wanted to go hunting but instead you spent the day shopping with your wife and playing with the kids – I would say you were showing your love by laying down your life for someone that day. That is unselfish, other's centered action. Or you went to the basket ball game instead of watching the Hallmark channel's Valentine extravaganza.

In some small way you are laying down your life for another. Preferring one another in love.

We know that **Love is the criteria for the Christian faith.** Over the years we have tried to set external criteria for what a Christian looked like. But what did Jesus say? **“By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” John 13:35** Here is the criteria. Do you want to see how we are doing as Christians? Look and see how we are doing at loving one another! We argue and fight with other believers over certain aspects of doctrine. Doctrinal truth is important, but **Love is the essential doctrine of our faith.** **“And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.” 1 John 3:23.** Do you want to know how to tell you are really born again and filled with the Spirit of Christ? John said, **“We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death.” 1 John 3:14.**

We use the wrong judgment, the wrong criteria to tell if someone is a Christian. We check to see if they carry the right translation of the bible, take a stand for and vote for the right political and cultural issues, speak right, use the right Christian jargon, look right, but none of these things made Jesus' list or John's list. It was about loving one another. If they don't love their brothers, then they are remaining in death.

**“God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in him.” 1 John 4:16.**

Love is essential to our lives as Christians. But it can't just be a Christianized form of valentine's day. It isn't just sentiment or lofty ideas. The love of God at work in us is unselfish and other's centered and real and practical. So instead of candy and cards, how about serving and caring and laying your life down for others in practical ways. Turn with me to what we often call the Love chapter of the New Testament, **1 Corinthians 13**, and let's see if we can make it plain.

Look at verses 1-3. Eloquence, gifts, knowledge, good works - none of it amounts to anything without love! Love is essential, necessary. It is the most excellent way. And all the cards and chocolate and flowers in the world won't amount to anything without the love that lays itself down for another. Here is what other's centered love in action looks like.

**Love is patient.** “Why can't she ever be ready on time? Where is he? He is always late for dinner! You've got 5 more minutes and that's it. You kids get down here right now! Hurry up! I don't have all day to stand around here waiting on you.”

Any of that sound familiar? Love is patient because it values the other person and recognizes that their needs and their time are as important as your needs and your time, (maybe even more so). Love values others so love chooses to be patient and understanding and helpful. We are patient with ourselves aren't we? Love others as you love yourself. Be patient.

**Love is kind.** "Oh no! Is he going to be at this meeting? I can't stand that guy. He is so obnoxious." "She is so smug. She thinks she is better than all of us, you can just tell. Do I have to sit by her?" "Do I have to do everything around here? Can't you get it for yourself? What, am I your slave?"

Love is kind because love understands the needs of others. Love takes the time and effort to look beneath the surface to find the wound that needs to be healed through loving kindness. Love chooses to express itself in ways that can be heard and understood by others.

Love is kind and merciful because love understands we too have received mercy. We love others because God loves us, just as we are. Love looks for a way to express itself in mercy and kindness.

**Love does not envy.** Love is not jealous. "I can't believe he won that. He probably cheated." "Can you believe she's dating him? Well I wouldn't date him if he were the last man on earth (Unless of course he asked me out...)" "Well, I don't care what you say, I wouldn't wear a diamond that big. It doesn't look right. It's just gaudy."

Love is not jealous or envious because love recognizes that God is my source. Love doesn't compare. "He got that and I didn't!" God is my good shepherd and I shall not want. The bible says he will withhold no good thing from those who walk uprightly. If God gave you something he didn't give me, then there is a good reason for it. Rather than being envious, love will rejoice at God's good mercy in giving to you and love will rest in knowing that God will supply my needs and do what is best and right for me at just the right time.

**Love does not boast or brag.** "I told you so. Yes sir, I told you I was right and you were wrong. Boy oh boy, you missed that by a mile didn't you? You'd think by now you would have learned that you just can't beat me...oh that's nothing, listen to what I did..."

Love doesn't brag because love has a healthy self image. Love doesn't need to put someone else down in order to elevate one's self. Love has a realistic view of God's grace, of where we came from, of where we are now and of how we got here!

**Love is not proud** - arrogant - not puffed up. “Well, obviously that doesn’t apply to me...they don’t expect me to live by those rules, after all, I’m....” “Hey, you ought to feel fortunate we let you come with us on this trip.” “Excuse me, you know I could be dating a lot of people but I’m with you so you’d better play it my way or I’m out of here...”

Love is not arrogant or proud because love values the worth of others too much to hurt them or put them down.

**Love is not rude** (it does not act unbecomingly - it does nothing that would pass the bounds of decency - it does nothing out of place or out of time - inappropriately. Love wouldn’t embarrass a friend or spouse. Love does not act rudely or unbecomingly because love acts in ways that are encouraging, comforting, that build up and not tear down.

**Love is not self-seeking.** It does not seek its own way. That means we aren’t manipulating people, looking for ways to get what we want or to get them to give us what we want. Love doesn’t have hidden agendas, instead, love desires to serve others and in so doing we are serving God. Love knows it is more blessed to give than to receive, to give than to get. Love looks for honest, real ways to serve others and not worrying about what we get in return. Love is unselfish, other’s centered action, remember. We aren’t seeking our own, we are seeking to please God and serve him.

**Love is not easily angered or provoked.** “Why are you looking at me like that? Like what? Like that! I’m not looking at you. Yes you are. No I’m not. Yes you are. Love isn’t like that: easily provoked.

“You came in here yelling at me. Yelling? I wasn’t yelling. Yes you were. No I wasn’t. Yes you were. No I wasn’t. Yes you were. Well, now I’m yelling! .....

“Do you have to do that in here? What? What you are doing? Can’t you do that somewhere else? How is this bothering you? It just is....”

Love is not easily provoked because love has confidence in the other person and the quality of the relationship. If the other person is irritable, there is probably a good reason for it so I will trust in the reliability of that relationship. I will look to help them and not hurt or hinder by being easily angered or provoked. Love is not thin-skinned. Love looks for a way to understand and an opportunity to help, so love will not over-react. Love will choose to act in ways that secure the relationship rather than giving in to rising emotions of the moment.

**Love keeps no record of wrongs.** It doesn't take into account a wrong suffered. Love keeps no books on insults or injuries. "That's the third time today you've done that. One more time and you're going to the moon, Alice." "That's the third time today you've done that." "Who is counting?" "Obviously I am, thank you."

You see, love doesn't hold grudges. Love chooses to forgive. Love chooses not to hate. Love chooses instead to show mercy, to extend mercy because we have received mercy. Love doesn't drag up the past. Love keeps the record clean, immediately forgiving when wrongs are suffered. Life is too short to carry around a grudge, to refuse to forgive others. By refusing to forgive, by keeping a record of wrongs, you are giving that person power over your life. Forgive, turn loose and move on in the Lord.

**Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.** Love never expects to find benefit or gain from wickedness. Love rejoices when truth wins out. Love feels bad when others fail or fall. Love takes no delight when evil triumphs.

**Love bears all things.** Love is all embracing. **Love believes all things.** Love believes in you when no one else does - love believes all things. **Love keeps on hoping** - love keeps cheering you on ("maybe this time you can do it"). **Love endures.** Love endures past the limit at times - "I just know you'll get it together. Don't quit. Don't give up. You can do it. You'll make it."

NIV says, "[Love] always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. **Love never fails.**"

This is how we are to love. It can be a challenge at times can't it? All of us have some unlovable people in our lives, but as we abide in his love, he will help us and he will love through us.

This is the challenge before us. But let me ask you another question: Have you ever been loved this way? Maybe so. Maybe not. But Jesus loves you in this fashion. His love is all embracing in its' scope. He has faith in you. His love believes in you. Maybe no one else does. Maybe no one else ever has. Maybe everyone else said you were a failure, that you were stupid, useless, that you would never make it. Jesus, who is love, says, "I believe in you."

Jesus keeps on hoping for you. He is telling you that you can do all things through Christ as he gives you the strength. Don't give up because there is always hope in Christ.

Jesus' love endures past the limit. He is willing to forgive you again if you will turn to him. He still believes in you, even now, today. This is how Jesus loves us.

Maybe you need to be healed by that kind of love and acceptance and forgiveness. Maybe you need to experience the kind of freedom and redemption that comes from being loved so perfectly and so freely..so completely. Come to Jesus and let his love enfold you. It is real love, beyond anything the world can offer. Thank God for his love.

Maybe you need God's help to begin to love others the way God intends. Perhaps it's time for you to commit to loving your spouse, your parents, your brother or sister, your children, your friend, the way God intends. It's more than a Valentine we need. It's more than a Valentine others need. They need love in action. They need that unselfish, other's centered love in action expressed through us. Let's devote ourselves to loving as Jesus loved.

Perhaps you've been looking for love but realize today you've been looking in the wrong places, or your definition of love was all messed up. Maybe you are dating someone and you realize today, that isn't love, that's abuse. You are being used, not loved. It's time to make some changes. It's time to raise the standard, to embrace God's definition of love.

**“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” 1 John 3:16.** For all of us, as human beings, as followers of Christ, as lovers of others, it's more than a valentine we need. It's time to embrace the bible's definition and love as Jesus loved.