

What Love Is — And What It Is Not

Ministry · February 2006

Everything Done in Love — The Charge of 1 Corinthians 16:14

First Corinthians 13:13 closes with the famous triad — faith, hope, love, and the greatest of these is love. And 1 Corinthians 16:14 draws out the practical conclusion: let all things ye do be done in love. Everything. Not some things done in love and other things done in duty, or in obligation, or in prudence. Everything. And the love the apostle means is not the emotion that goes by that name in everyday human speech. That emotion is not absent from Scripture, but it is not what Paul means here.

Natural human affection is real and honourable in its place. But it is unstable. It rises and falls with circumstances, with reciprocation, with how we feel on a given day. What the apostle calls love is something else — something that has God as its source and that seeks the good of its object regardless of what comes back.

Isaac and Rebekah — Love That Devolved

Genesis 24 is a love story. Isaac saw Rebekah coming across the field and led her into his mother Sarah's tent, and she became his wife, and he loved her. And the deeper story behind the chapter — Abraham sending Eliezer to find a bride for his son, the Holy Spirit's drawing of the bride to the bridegroom — is one of the great types in all of Scripture. But natural love, even in a godly man, does not sustain itself.

Genesis 25:28 shows where things went: Isaac loved Esau because venison was to his taste. Not because Esau was the man of God's choice, not because Esau had

the character that pleased the Lord — but because Esau supplied fresh venison. Rebekah loved Jacob, for her own reasons. The natural affection of the wedding day had become a divided household, each parent preferring a different son for entirely natural reasons. This is what human love comes to when it is not grounded in something higher than itself. If I love my wife because she makes excellent pumpkin pie, the love of God is not in it.

Ruth and Boaz — Love Without the Word

The book of Ruth is the great love story of the Bible. And yet the word love appears only once — in the women's word to Naomi at the very end: thy daughter-in-law who loves thee has borne him. The relationship between Boaz and Ruth is never described in terms of mutual affection. What we see is something different: a man occupied with the rights of the redeemer, concerned for the welfare of Ruth and her mother-in-law, not worried about his inheritance, not troubled by Ruth's lineage as a Moabitess descended from Lot's sin. He left grain for her deliberately. He protected her in his fields. He moved quickly to act as kinsman-redeemer before anyone else could. None of that is described as love. And yet it is the most complete picture of the love of God in the Old Testament.

What Boaz showed was love that sought the good of its object without regard for self. He had nothing to gain. He risked his estate. He took a foreign widow and made her his wife. That is the love of God — not what makes me feel good, not what returns to me what I have given, but what seeks the genuine good of the one it loves regardless of cost. And Boaz is of course a type of the Lord Jesus, the kinsman-redeemer who had no concern for Himself when He became our redeemer.

Elijah and Moses — Love That Does Not Feel Good

Two more love stories that do not at first look like love stories at all. Elijah prayed fervently that it would not rain in Israel. James calls him a righteous man

— not a lover, a righteous man. But why would a righteous man, who loved God and loved God's people Israel, pray for drought? Because he understood that God's discipline upon a straying nation was an act of love toward that nation. To leave them comfortable in their idolatry was to leave them in it. To bring hardship was to bring them the possibility of return. Elijah prayed for drought not because he was a hard man who enjoyed the people's suffering but because he loved God and he loved Israel, and he knew what God's love required in that moment.

In Exodus 32, Moses came down from the mountain and found Israel in the sin of the golden calf. He stood in the gate of the camp and said: he that is for Jehovah, let him come to me. And the sons of Levi came — and Moses told them to go through the camp with their swords. Three thousand people died that day. Was that love? Every son of Levi who walked through that camp with his sword was dealing with his own brother, his own friend, his own neighbor. Judgment is God's strange work — it is not natural to do, it does not feel good, it does not produce the warmth of human affection. And yet those sons of Levi were displaying love for God, faithfulness to Him, in one of its most demanding forms.

Let all things ye do be done in love. — 1 Corinthians 16:14

The Corinthian assembly had a wicked man in their midst who was known publicly, and they had not dealt with it. Paul told them to put him away — to remove him from any connection with the Lord's table. Some would say, that is not loving. But what is more loving: to leave a man in unchecked sin, or to act with the faithfulness of the sons of Levi and deal with it for God's sake, and for his? The apostle's charge was clear: do everything in love. And that love is love for God and love of the truth — not the sappy reciprocal emotion that says, if I deal with this harshly, he might leave.

They Have Not Received the Love of the Truth

Second Thessalonians 2:10 describes those who will be deceived by the coming lawless one: they have not received the love of the truth that they might be saved. There is a love of the truth — not merely a knowledge of it, not merely an obligation to it, but a love. And its absence leaves the soul defenceless before every plausible-sounding deception.

We live in a world designed to prevent that love. The modern media environment is built around constant stimulation — every screen surrounds its content with a dozen more things competing for attention, every platform is engineered to keep the eye moving. Who, in that environment, sits quietly with a Bible passage and meditates on what it means, turning it over and asking what the Spirit has to show there? But this love of the truth is what keeps the soul. Not duty, not habit alone — love. A desire to know more about this person, this word, this God.

We love because He first loved us. That is the only origin of any real love in the believer — not a moral achievement but a response to what God has shown us. He loved us when there was nothing lovable in us. He waited until He could righteously show it, and then He showed it at the cross, where the Lord Jesus gave Himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savour. That word to — not just for us, but to God. It was to God first. The love of the Lord Jesus on the cross was primarily love for God and for His glory, and the display of that love righteously was what also covered all our sins. Had not one sinner been saved, that love for God would have been just as real, just as complete.

Faith Which Worketh by Love — and the Walk That Follows

Galatians 5:6 contains an expression found nowhere else in the New Testament: faith which worketh by love. Faith is simple trust in what God has said. But when God gives faith, He gives with it the capacity to love — because we could not have loved before, not in the divine sense, not until He first loved us. And that

love becomes the moral power for the whole walk. Abiding in Him is faith working by love.

Ephesians 5:1–2 draws the conclusion: be ye therefore followers of God as dear children, and walk in love as Christ also has loved us and has given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savour. This is the standard. Walk in love as He loved. That means sometimes casting out what does not belong in the temple. It means sometimes praying for drought. It means sometimes walking through a camp with a sword. It means doing everything — faithfulness, discipline, correction, service, worship — with that love which seeks the good of its object and the glory of God, regardless of what it costs and regardless of what comes back.

Hebrews 12:5–11 reminds us: whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth. No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous but grievous — nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby. Nevertheless — afterward. Those two words carry a great deal. The chastening is real, it is grievous, it does not feel good. And afterward comes the fruit. The love of God is in it from beginning to end. May it be in ours as well.