

BOB
LEPINE

Love

Like you

Mean

THE HEART OF A
MARRIAGE
THAT HONORS GOD

Foreword by Gary Thomas

It

BOB
LEPINE

*Love
Like You
Mean*

THE HEART OF A
MARRIAGE
THAT HONORS GOD

Foreword by Gary Thomas

It

BH
PUBLISHING
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Copyright © 2020 by Bob Lepine
All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America

978-1-5359-9673-0

Published by B&H Publishing Group
Nashville, Tennessee

Dewey Decimal Classification: 306.81
Subject Heading: LOVE / MARRIAGE / EMOTIONS

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is taken from the English Standard Version (ESV). ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

Also used: New International Version (NIV). NIV® Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Also used: The Message (MSG), copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson

Also used: New American Standard (NASB), Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation.

Also used: King James Version (KJV); public domain.

Cover typography by Kristi Smith, Juicebox Designs

It is the Publisher's goal to minimize disruption caused by technical errors or invalid websites. While all links are active at the time of publication, because of the dynamic nature of the internet, some web addresses or links contained in this book may have changed and may no longer be valid. B&H Publishing Group bears no responsibility for the continuity or content of the external site, nor for that of subsequent links. Contact the external site for answers to questions regarding its content.

To My Church Family at
Redeemer Community Church in Little Rock
You have modeled for me what it looks like for a local church
body to love one another well.

Acknowledgments

There have been many who have contributed to this book. Most of what you will find helpful in these pages comes from the immeasurable way so many of these people have shaped my own thinking about what the Bible teaches about love and marriage.

In 1992, I sat in a conference room with Dennis Rainey, who asked me one of his trademark questions: “Does marriage and family make you weep and pound the table?”

I told Dennis that theology is what makes me weep and pound the table. To the extent marriage and family is on the heart of God, I said, I am passionate about it.

What I didn’t realize in 1992, and what I’ve come to realize in the years since, is how much marriage and family is on God’s heart. Dennis’s own passion for these matters has been a key part of helping me see the centrality of marriage and family to God’s plan for humanity. During our more than twenty-five years of working together on *FamilyLife Today*, Dennis was both a friend and a mentor. His life marked my life and marked much of what you’ll read in this book.

This book has also been shaped through the years by the hundreds of people who I’ve been fortunate enough to interact with as radio guests on *FamilyLife Today*. Clearly there are too many to name. But having recorded more than six thousand programs, those guests have been the instructors who have helped sharpen my understanding of God’s design for marriage.

Along with the radio guests whose fingerprints are on these pages, I am indebted to my friends and colleagues at FamilyLife—too many to name—who share a common passion for bringing practical, biblical help and hope to marriages and families all around the world. Special thanks are due to long time teammates Christy Bain, Tonda Nations, Mike Clowers, Emmitt Fowler, Michelle Hill, Mark Ramey, and Keith Lynch.

It's also a great joy and privilege for me to be partnered together with the new hosts of *FamilyLife Today*, my friends Dave and Ann Wilson. Their tireless desire to point people vertical—to Jesus—has challenged and inspired me.

In 2008, God led a small group of men and women, along with my wife and me, to help plant a new church in our city. Our vision was for a church where people would take the Bible seriously, where worship would be heartfelt and passionate, where people would be connected with one another in grace-based, Christ-centered relationships and where individuals and families would live their lives on mission by loving and serving others. I assumed the responsibility as the primary teaching pastor at Redeemer Community Church.

Since the beginning of the church, I've been yoked together in ministry with an amazing group of men who have shared the joys and burdens of local church leadership. This book owes a great debt to these men—Tom Arnold, Tim Friesen, Matt Gurney, Rick Houk, Jim McMurry, Mike Morledge, John Dietrich, and Curtis Thomas. Mark Rens, who graduated to glory in 2011. We all miss him still.

The congregation at Redeemer is an amazing group of people who love Jesus and the gospel. I am a blessed pastor to be

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

called to serve these wonderful people. And I'm grateful to God for preserving the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace in our church all these years.

This book has introduced me to new friends—the skilled team at B&H Publishing that has helped give birth to this work. Andy Whisenant, Jenaye White, my editor Taylor Combs, and my literary agent Erik Wolgemuth were key members of that team. I'm also indebted to Robert Wolgemuth who kept asking me over the years, “When are you going to write your next book?” Here it is.

On a practical level, so much of what I've learned about love has come from the people closest to me. My five children—Amy, Katie, James, John, and David have been a source of great joy and pride to me as their father. The Bible says there is no greater joy than to know that our children are walking in the truth (3 John 4). These five children, their spouses, and my nine grandchildren, have demonstrated love for their mom and me and for one another in ways that has made my heart soar. I love you all.

Finally, the words on the pages that follow would be hollow and theoretical if they had not been forged more than forty-plus years of marriage to my wife Mary Ann. On our wedding invitation, we included 1 John 4:19: “We love because he first loved us.” Our love for one another has deepened and grown sweeter through the years. More than anyone, she has shaped my understanding of what it means to love sacrificially and generously.

Soli Deo Gloria!

Contents

Foreword	xv
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Everything Minus Love = Nothing	9
Chapter 2: An Odd Place to Begin: <i>Love Is Patient</i>	25
Chapter 3: The Thing That Is Better Than Life Itself: <i>Love Is Kind</i>	45
Chapter 4: It's Not All about Me: <i>Love Is Humble</i>	59
Chapter 5: It's My Way or the Love Way: <i>Love Is Generous</i>	77
Chapter 6: Keep Calm and Keep Loving: <i>Love Is Unflappable</i>	105
Chapter 7: It's Never Right to Do What's Wrong: <i>Love Is Virtuous</i>	131
Chapter 8: The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing But: <i>Love Is Honest</i>	151
Chapter 9: Be a Bulldog: <i>Love Is Tenacious</i>	177
Chapter 10: Filling Up and Pouring Out: <i>Love Never Fails</i>	199
Notes	215

Foreword

I met my wife when we were kids. By the time we married, we had been in the same Sunday school class, we had been on church camping trips together—including a fifty mile canoe trip—and I had mopped the floors at Herfy’s Hefty Burgers while she laughed and didn’t believe me when I insisted I usually got to cook the burgers. We sat in early morning college classes together, including an excruciatingly boring linguistics class that Lisa, of course, excelled in, and had been through the calendar several times: a day spent playing in the snow at Mt. Baker, autumn walks in the leaves surrounding Sehome Hill Arboretum, spring bonfires on Bellingham Bay, and summer evenings in our respective hometowns. We had gone to watch the state high school cross country championships (which Lisa didn’t think was a date but I did). We had been to numerous church services and Campus Christian Fellowship meetings. She had encouraged me when I was shocked and saddened and processing it by volunteering at a Keith Green memorial concert together. Put all of this together, and I had seen Lisa in just about every context you could see someone in. And yet . . .

And yet on our wedding day, she just looked so different.

Watching her walk up the aisle, I wondered, *how could someone so familiar be so excitingly new?* It wasn’t just that she was wearing more makeup than usual (she’s not much of a makeup person, to be honest; she has a natural beauty all her own). I had

never seen her in a wedding dress, never seen her walking up a church aisle to join her hand in mine and, after a few heartfelt promises, kiss me on the lips and say those wonderful words, “I do.”

I got a little bit of the same feeling reading Bob Lepine’s *Love Like You Mean It*. I’ve read so many marriage books I’ve almost become inoculated against their advice. The “Christian marriage book” has practically become a trope. But I was challenged by virtually every paragraph of Bob’s marvelous book as if I was reading a Christian marriage book for the very first time.

For instance, rarely has an author grabbed me right off the bat like Bob does here:

Nobody knows who said it first. But the statement is still true. “Everybody wants to go to heaven. But nobody wants to die.” The premise of this book is similar. Everybody wants a marriage that is filled with love. But nobody wants to die to self.

The entire book is wise, seasoned, and mature. You can tell Bob has spoken to many couples and heard from the church’s leading and most cherished authors, because he takes the best of them, and then elevates their advice to the next level. That’s what I found so amazing about this book.

Another thing that struck me is that because this book is essentially exposition (going through a Bible passage word by word), it carries a power and conviction that so many books simply lack. This isn’t a book that comes about from clever marketing gimmicks, or seeks to repackage familiar content with stylish

FOREWORD

or hip language, or that is based on Bob's opinion of what marriages need today. He draws on a very familiar passage (1 Cor. 13:4ff) but makes it sound and feel astonishingly new—just like Lisa looked to me on our wedding day.

Most marriage books begin and end with what the author thinks is most important: communication, conflict resolution, sexual intimacy, finances, parenting, and so on. *Love Like You Mean It* begins and ends with God's definition of love, and that's what makes it so powerful. In the end, if we pursue love and grow in love (as God defines it) most conflicts, communication struggles, sexual issues, financial concerns, and so on, can be addressed in an entirely new way with an entirely new power from an entirely new platform.

Even if you've read every marriage book published in the last twenty years, you'll still find new inspiration, encouragement, challenge, conviction, and God-breathed hope and wisdom in this fine work. That's why I'm so delighted to recommend it to all believers who want to look at marriage and love—two very familiar words—and rediscover both of them in an entirely new light: God's light.

Gary Thomas

Author of *Sacred Marriage* and *Cherish*

Introduction

*N*obody knows who said it first. But the statement is still true. “Everybody wants to go to heaven. But nobody wants to die.”

The premise of this book is similar. Everybody wants a marriage that is filled with love. But nobody wants to die to self.

God created each one of us with a deep longing. We yearn to be fully known and fully loved at the same time. We were created, not to live in isolation, but to be connected to others. Each one of us wants to have people in our lives who “get us,” who cheer us on, and who fill in the gaps in our lives. At our core, that’s the kind of love we’re longing for.

That’s the promise that marriage holds out to us.

The first man, Adam, was alone in the garden. After everything God had made up to that point, he proclaimed, “It is good.” But when God saw Adam without a partner, God said, “It is not good. I will make a helper for him.” And after a divine surgical procedure involving the removal of a rib, God fashioned Adam’s suitable helper. Then, in his final act of creation, God took the two and made them one. In doing so, God gave the man and the woman a taste of the same kind of perfect fellowship and love that the three Persons of the Godhead have always experienced and enjoyed. They experienced unhindered, unbroken love.

Most of us expected that a loved-filled marriage would be easy to achieve. Maybe you’re not yet married or dating, and you

expect that when you find your perfect match, your love for one another will grow automatically deeper and deeper. Or maybe you're recently married or about to be married, and your passions and emotions are easily stirred. At this point in your relationship, love doesn't seem to require any effort on your part. That's why we call it "falling in love." Love just happens naturally, the way we see it happen in Hallmark movies.

The Bible has a word for the kind of love all of us are longing to experience in a marriage. The word is *oneness*. In Genesis 2:24, God tells us that when a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, the two become one.

But the kind of perfect "oneness" love that Adam and Eve experienced as a married couple in Genesis 2 didn't last long. Their rebellion against God in Genesis 3 changed everything for them, including their experience of marital love.

And if you've been married for any length of time, you've undoubtedly experienced some of what they experienced.

Most of us at some point are so captivated by the strong emotions associated with romantic love that we miscalculate the impact our sin nature has on our quest for perfect love in marriage. We think marital love will be easy and come quickly. But what we think will be easy turns out to be a lot harder than we expected.

Most of us bring with us into marriage a fairly shallow, superficial view of what love is. We learn about love from rom-coms, Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters, and a sixteenth-century playwright in England who introduced us to a pair of "star-crossed lovers." When you mix movies and novels and poetry and pop songs into a stew pot, what you get is an emotionally

charged, exciting mixture that over the years has come to be known as “love.”

And that’s a problem.

For generations now, men and women have understood that the love shared between a man and a woman is both the foundation for a strong marriage and the source of the deep joy that holds us together in the holy bonds of matrimony. But somewhere along the way, we lost sight of the qualities that define the kind of love that is necessary for a marriage to be what it was designed to be.

As a result, we hear people today saying absurd things like, “I love you, but I’m not in love with you.” Which, translated, means “I think you’re a decent, nice person. And I have some feelings for you—some kind of concern or care. But I don’t feel the spark or the delight I think I’m supposed to feel. I felt it once, a long time ago. But I’ve lost it.”

We have husbands today who wonder why they aren’t as attracted to their wives as they are to the cute young woman who shows up at work looking pretty, smiling and laughing at their jokes. And we have wives who wonder what happened to the funny, charming, cute young man who used to spend hours just talking to her and looking deeply in her eyes.

Now, with two kids and two car payments and college debt and full-time jobs and no time just to chill with each other or with friends, husbands and wives who once felt sparks of passion whenever they were together now find themselves feeling empty and lonely and bored, wondering where the love went.

This book is for those who are there. Or for those who think they might one day be there. Or for those who want to avoid ever being there at all costs.

The truth is, in these cases, the love didn't evaporate. It was never really love at all.

We've been sold a bill of goods about what love is. Like products advertised on late-night television that look amazing but never revolutionize our lives the way they promise, we are duped into thinking that when we exchange vows to love one another until death parts us, we're signing up to receive a lifetime supply of passion and affirmation and attention and care.

In fact, if we're really honest, most of us got married because of how our spouse made us feel when we were together. We liked the feeling. So we said, "I'll move in and wear a ring and share a house payment and have kids with you—as long as you keep making me feel that way."

Deep down, we don't get married so that we can love someone else. We get married because we fall in love with the feeling of being loved. Most of us get married to get, not to give.

Meanwhile, we have right in front of us the whole time the portrait of the kind of rugged, committed love that may not sell a lot of movie tickets or romance novels, but that sustains marriages in good times and bad. Some of us even had the description of this kind of rugged love read at our weddings. With friends and family assembled, someone opened a Bible to 1 Corinthians 13 and started to read what sounded at the time like love poetry. They read about the tongues of angels and noisy gongs. They read about bearing all things, believing all things,

hoping all things, and enduring all things. In the midst of our big day, it all sounded wonderful and magical.

But if we had been listening carefully to what they were reading, we would have heard a description of a kind of love and loyalty that, as songwriter Rich Mullins said, goes deeper than mere sentiment. A kind of steadfast, enduring love that is the most commonly mentioned attribute of God in all of Scripture. A kind of self-sacrificing, self-denying love that Jesus defined as the “greater love” (John 15:13) and that he demonstrated for us by dying in our place (Rom. 5:8).

I like romance and passion as much as the next person. They are the seasoning that makes a marriage relationship vibrant. There is a reason people talk about “spicing up” a marriage. Romance and passion add a zest and joy that bring delight and desire to marriage.

But the foundation for a marriage that endures is not passion and desire. It’s love. Real love. The kind of love that the apostle Paul described for everyone who was part of the church that gathered in the ancient city of Corinth. These were passionate, impulsive new believers whose pagan background was mixed together with a newfound zeal for God. The outcome of that zeal without knowledge was problematic.

So Paul wrote to this young church to teach them about a kind of love they didn’t understand. A kind of love that was just as unknown in their day as it is in ours.

While the Bible’s description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 did not have the husband/wife relationship as its focus, this portrait of genuine love perfectly describes and defines the kind of love that God has in mind for every married couple.

This book is my attempt to get us back on track when it comes to understanding what real love is and how we live it out in marriage. If you're looking for quick fixes and superficial adjustments you can make that will cause love to flourish in your marriage, send this book back and ask for a refund. What we see in Scripture is that the kind of deep love for which our souls long does not come through tweaking. It's a long, slow, rigorous process.

But what the Bible promises us is this: the kind of greater love found here is the pathway to joy. It's the real thing. It's the kind of love that will bring real, deep-down, soul-level contentment. The imitation love that the world is peddling will never get you there. It will spring up and fade quickly. Real love takes time. It takes work. There are no shortcuts. But in the end, it's the only love that satisfies.

My hope is that this study of Paul's definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13 can help us learn to love our spouse in a way that goes farther and deeper than momentary sparks of passion or romance.

And my hope is that as you take time to ponder and consider the characteristics of the bold, rugged, genuine love described in 1 Corinthians 13, you'll think on these things with a soft, humble, teachable heart. And that as you read this book, you'll read it with the prayer from Psalm 139:

Search me, O God, and know my heart!

Try me and know my thoughts!

And see if there be any grievous way in me,

and lead me in the way everlasting!

(vv. 23–24)

INTRODUCTION

My hope is also that the elements of genuine love found in 1 Corinthians 13 would increasingly become the elements of genuine love that you aspire to as you get married or that you manifest in your marriage now. I hope you're ready to go on a journey that's designed to help you become a more loving spouse—a journey that will, in the process, strengthen and deepen your love for your mate and revolutionize your marriage.

It's time to understand what real love looks like.

CHAPTER 1

Everything Minus Love = Nothing

*Y*ou can have a nice marriage without the kind of “greater love” that the Bible describes. But there will always be something missing. And it won’t be a marriage that glorifies God.

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. (1 Cor. 13:1–3)



It didn't take long for me to be smitten.

I met my wife, Mary Ann, when we were both college students at the University of Tulsa. We were at a weekend retreat together with three or four dozen other students, and we were in line for dinner. Something sparked a conversation between the two of us in that food line, and I noticed that some kind of endorphin rush was happening.

Sounds cheesy, I know. But that's what happened. I liked her smile. I liked her spunk. And I remember liking the way she looked in the red T-shirt she was wearing. I said to myself that night, *I think I'd like to get to know her better.*

Within two months we were dating, and I was carelessly tossing around the "L" word without any regard for what it really meant. To me, saying, "I love you," to someone was essentially the same as saying, "I enjoy your company and I like the way I feel when I'm with you and I hope you'll stop dating other people and agree to date me exclusively so I can keep feeling this way until I get tired of you." I was clearly attaching a shallow meaning to a deep word. But I wasn't alone. I obviously had a lot to learn about what real love is. Thankfully, the Bible gives clarity in, among other places, the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 13.

What's surprising to me is how many husbands and wives have stood before God and witnessed and pledged their undying love to one another without thinking carefully about all that they are signing up for. And it's equally surprising how many people talk about "falling out of love" or no longer being "in love"

without considering how the Bible defines what they say they're falling out of.

I think it's time for husbands and wives to read the fine print. Carefully. It's time to look at exactly what you're signing up for when you promise to love someone exclusively for the rest of your life.

It's time to re-up, to dig deeper into the Bible, to begin to understand and apply what the Bible says about love.

Talk Together

1. If you are married or in a relationship, what is one way your understanding of love has changed since the relationship began?
2. Read 1 Corinthians 13:4–7. Tell your spouse which of the qualities of real love listed in the passage is a quality he or she is living out in your marriage.



I know it sounds odd, but I think I actually remember the first time I read 1 Corinthians 13.

It was not in church. It was not during a quiet time. It was not at a wedding.

It was in a head shop.

Some of you have no idea what a head shop is. That's because you are not a child of the sixties. I am. In fact, in the fall of 1968, when Otis Redding was sitting on the dock of the bay and Grace

Slick was telling us all to feed our heads, I had just matriculated to Nipher Junior High School in Kirkwood, Missouri, after a storied career at Henry Hough Elementary School.

Nipher was about two and a half miles from where I lived. Each morning, we carpoled to school, with different moms doing the driving. But when school was out at 3:25 each afternoon, we walked home. Can you believe that? I had to walk two and a half miles from school to my house every day! Carrying my books! Under my arms! (We didn't have fancy backpacks when I was a boy!)

The good news is that the path home took me right by the Dairy Queen. I would regularly stop for a \$.45 cent Old Fashioned Chocolate Ice Cream soda to sustain me on my long journey.

How old do I sound right now?

Sometime during my junior high years, a new store opened just past the Dairy Queen on Kirkwood Road. I don't remember the name of the store. It may not have had a name. Didn't matter.

It was a head shop.

If that's a new category for you, here is how Wikipedia defines a *head shop*:

A head shop is a retail outlet specializing in paraphernalia used for consumption of cannabis and tobacco items related to cannabis culture and related countercultures. Products may include magazines (e.g., about cannabis culture, cannabis cultivation, tattooing and music), clothing, and home décor (e.g., posters and wall hangings illustrating drug culture themes such as cannabis, jam bands like The Grateful Dead, psychedelic art, etc.).¹

I was a clean-cut suburban boy who didn't know much about cannabis culture or psychedelics beyond what I had seen on TV or heard about on the new FM rock music radio station that everyone had started listening to. So I was not part of the target market for the new head shop. But I was curious.

So one day, after polishing off my chocolate ice cream soda from Dairy Queen, I worked up the courage to go inside. I remember that in the middle of the afternoon, the store was dark, like they didn't want you to see what was for sale. There was some funky jewelry. A lot of fringed leather jackets. Incense. Rolling papers and other smoking paraphernalia. Lots of black lights and florescent posters. Hendrix. Joplin. Peter Max.

And that's where I first read 1 Corinthians 13.

The first eight verses of the chapter were hanging on a poster on the wall that was right next to another poster that proclaimed, "You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and stars, you have a right to be here."

An odd setting for displaying one of the best-known chapters in the Bible, right?

The reason there was a poster for 1 Corinthians 13 in a head shop in 1968 is because there was widespread confusion then, as now, about love. The year 1967 had already happened and had become known as the Summer of Love. The Beatles had told us that "All We Need Is Love." And we were just months away from the Woodstock Music and Art Fair on Max Yasgur's farm in upstate New York that promised us peace, love, and music.

But the love that was being promoted in the sixties was not the same love that the apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote his letter to an ancient church that was infected with the pagan

spirit of their age. When Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 13, he wrote to a church in a culture where the definition of love had more in common with Woodstock than with Jesus.

Kind of like where our culture is today.

Talk Together

1. How do you think most people in our culture define love today?
2. Do you think Paul wrote to the Corinthian church about the characteristics of real love primarily to inspire them? To inform them? To correct them? Explain your answer.

Paul wrote this letter to this church in this culture for a reason. In chapter 13 in particular, he was communicating two overarching themes. First, he was making it clear for his readers that love is at the center of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. A loveless Christian is an oxymoron. It's a contradiction in terms.

And second, Paul wanted to drive home the message that God's definition of love is radically different than what most of us think of when we think about love. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 13 to contrast the way the people in the church in Corinth were associating with one another with what he describes as the "more excellent way" (1 Cor. 12:31). The Corinthians related to one another through their gifts, abilities, and strengths. They valued others based on how gifted the other person was. Some gifts earned you more honor than others.

Paul spent 1 Corinthians 12 talking about the value and importance of spiritual gifts. He explained that Christians need to love one another and that we all benefit when we are using the gifts God has given us not for our own glory, but to encourage and serve one another.

But he also pointed out how having a wrong perspective on spiritual gifts can destroy relationships. Gifts without love, he said, are nothing but a lot of unpleasant noise.

The “more excellent way” Paul advanced in 1 Corinthians 13 is a way of living that puts self-sacrificing, self-denying concern for and care of others at the center of relationships. Jesus said that at the core of everything in the Bible, there are two commands: loving God and loving others. Those two priorities are the “more excellent way” that should drive every aspect of our lives.

To capture the attention of his readers, Paul used a unique word: *agape*.

If you’ve been a Christian for any length of time, that Greek word—*agape*—is a word you’ve no doubt heard. Theologian J. I. Packer says the word “seems to have been virtually a Christian invention—a new word for a new thing.”² In fact, apart from about twenty occurrences in the Greek version of the Old Testament, the word *agape* is almost nonexistent in Greek culture before the New Testament.

Packer says, “Agape draws its meaning directly from the revelation of God in Christ. It is not a form of natural affection, however intense, but a supernatural fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). It is a matter of will rather than feeling (for Christians must love even those they dislike—Matt. 5:44–48) . . . It is the basic element in Christ-likeness.”³

John Stott defines *agape* love this way: it is the sacrifice of self in the service of another.⁴ This kind of love, he says, is a servant of the will, not a victim of the emotions.

And Alistair Begg says that what we're talking about when we talk about *agape* love is not "coziness, affection [or] predisposition on the basis of attraction." *Agape*, he says, is a spiritual discipline.⁵

Think for just a minute about how these ways of thinking about love will recalibrate the way we interact with one another in marriage. The vow to "love, honor, and cherish" your spouse is not a vow to *feel* a certain way about your spouse for a lifetime. Instead, it's a vow to choose to act in a certain way toward your spouse for a lifetime. It's a vow that you promise to keep "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health for as long as you both shall live."

Back in the sixties the "free love" movement wasn't about *agape*. It was about *eros*—a different Greek word that refers to romantic or sexual love. The same was true in Corinth. The Greeks saw sexual love as the highest expression of love for another person.

And that way of thinking about love is still part of our culture twenty centuries later. We think about love today in terms of passion, romance, and sex, not in terms of self-sacrifice or placing someone else's needs ahead of our own.

The apostle Paul was not the first to use this new idea of *agape* to correct misguided cultural ideas about love in his day. Jesus gave his disciples a helpful way of getting to the core of what *agape* looks like: "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

And John the apostle reminds his readers that Jesus didn't just talk about what *agape* looks; he lived it. "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us" (1 John 3:16 NIV).

Agape love is one of the defining characteristics of Christianity. Sacrificing yourself to serve others is not at the center of any other world religion as it is with Christianity. And that was certainly true in Paul's day. The Greeks, the Romans, and the ancient Middle Eastern pagan religions made no claim that their gods were loving or that they commanded people to serve them by loving others.

In our day, where *eros* love has become the common understanding of what love means, an *agape*-centered Christian marriage gives us an opportunity to show a watching world that we serve a God who defines love differently, who demonstrated for us what self-sacrificing love is all about, and who empowers us to supernaturally, sacrificially love one another.

Talk Together

1. If it's true that "a loveless Christian is an oxymoron," is it also true that a loveless Christian marriage is a contradiction? Explain why or why not?
2. Talk about John Stott's statement that love is "a servant of the will, not a victim of the emotions." Is that true for you?



This “more excellent way” of love that the apostle Paul describes for us in 1 Corinthians 13 is revolutionary, not just for marriage, but for all of life. It’s at the center of how we are to function as God’s children.

That’s what these verses tell us. God, in Christ, pours his love into us. He loves us with an everlasting, steadfast, and enduring love. And as the recipients of his love, we are to be a conduit of his love to each other.

In other words, God loves us not simply for our own benefit, but so that as we are filled up with his love for us, we can pour out his love to one another.

Paul begins his description of this “more excellent way” of love in 1 Corinthians 13 by listing a number of abilities or activities that we would commonly associate with spiritually mature people. The picture he paints for us in the first three verses of 1 Corinthians 13 is a picture of people who would be recognized in any era as being spiritual standouts. A cut above everyone else. He peppers his prose with exaggeration and hyperbole to drive home his point.

And then he delivers the knockout blow.

A person who loves others with self-sacrificing *agape* love, Paul writes, is more faithfully following Jesus than someone who is exercising his or her spiritual gifts absent of *agape* love.

Here’s the formula Paul is proposing:

Extraordinary giftedness – *Agape* love = Nothing.

Let that sink in for a minute.

Paul says you can do everything right in life, in marriage, in seeking to serve God, and if there is no *agape* love at the center of it all, you have nothing. You don't have something "less than." You have nothing. You have exactly zero.

What that means for marriage is clear. You can be a responsible, charming, attractive, fun-loving successful, intelligent, respected individual, admired and esteemed by everyone. You can be, by all standards, an ideal spouse. But if your marriage is not fueled by a strong and durable commitment to sacrificially love your mate, it's not a Christian marriage. It's a façade.

Phil Ryken says we need to keep in mind that "no one will hear the gospel from the life of a loveless Christian. People just hear 'bong, bong, bong, clang, clang, clang.'"⁶ And no one will see the gospel in the life of a loveless marriage.

Are you gifted and using your gifts in your marriage, but without love? Paul says what you're doing amounts to nothing.

Do you have knowledge and understanding of Scripture, but lack love? Paul says your knowledge is worth nothing.

Do you have great faith, trusting and obeying God, but no love? Your faith is worthless. It's nothing.

You starting to see a pattern here?

But Paul doesn't stop there. He goes so far as to say that not every act of self-sacrifice or self-denial is a demonstration of *agape* love.

Do you think it's possible for someone to give away all he or she has out of self-interest? Is it possible that the motivation for self-denial can actually be self-serving? Or to put a finer point on

it, is it possible to have a self-centered motivation for putting the interests of your spouse ahead of your own interests?

In 1997, TV mogul Ted Turner announced that he was giving a gift of \$1 billion to the United Nations to support humanitarian concerns. His gift was detailed in an article entitled “Ted Turner: The First Man of Philanthropy.” Here is in part what it said:

He has a philanthropic soul and has always been an incredibly generous benefactor. His most astounding single grant was \$1 billion to form the United Nations Foundation which works in concert with the United Nations, to serve global humanitarian needs through verbal, non-violent resolutions.⁷

The article that praises Turner as a man with a philanthropic soul can be found online at [Ted Turner.com](http://TedTurner.com).

I don't know Ted Turner's heart. And I am not his judge. But as this online article indicates, it's possible to give away a lot of money with at least some of the motivation being that everyone knows what a generous guy you are. At the very least, there is a smidgen of self-interest mixed in with Ted Turner's philanthropy.

Some people give away lots of money to ease their conscience. Others give away lots of money because they think a life of poverty will please God. The apostle Paul says if you give away all you have and you are motivated by something other than love, here is what you have earned for yourself from God: Nothing.

The most radical extent to which Paul takes this argument is that even those who are willingly martyred for their faith may

have wrong motives. Martyrdom was a present reality for the Christians to whom Paul was writing this letter. And the apostle wanted to make sure that none of his readers would embrace the false idea that martyrdom for your faith is a sure ticket to heaven.

So, here's the picture Paul paints. If you are someone who is gifted, eloquent, bold, full of faith, full of understanding and insight, generous, and committed to the extent that you are ready to give your life for your faith, we might assume you are a solid, committed follower of Jesus. But without love, everything else is N.O.T.H.I.N.G.



What is it that defines, more than anything, the person and ministry of Jesus? After all, he did all the things Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians. What were the miracles? The faith? The martyrdom?

Read back through that last paragraph. Some words are missing . . .

You know the answer. It's the love. His love for us. He went to the cross not as a martyr but as a savior. He went to lay down his life for his friends. He went to rescue us. He went because of his great love for all who would die to self and follow him.

And in order for you to be a dispenser of the kind of love described in 1 Corinthians 13, you have to first be a receiver of God's love for you. You have to recognize that you have lived a life in rebellion against God. A life focused first and foremost on yourself. Your life has been committed to you.

And the Bible says that while you and I were still in a state of being committed to our own self-interests, God demonstrated his great love for us in this—Christ died for us.

What does the hymn say? Jesus emptied himself of all but what? *Love*. He bled for Adam's helpless race. "Amazing love, how can it be, that thou, my God shouldst die for me."⁸

The character qualities that define *agape* love listed in 1 Corinthians 13 are not some kind of self-improvement checklist. They are descriptors of the kind of love that God has for us, and that is produced by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of those whose lives are being transformed.

The more we realize the depth of God's love for us, and the more we meditate on how we are recipients of God's grace and love for us, the more we will begin to grow in grace and love for others.

Your marriage will only be built on a foundation of *agape* love if both of you are growing in your understanding of God's love and grace for you.

The kind of love the Bible describes in 1 Corinthians 13 is not essential for a couple to have a happy marriage. That statement may shock you, but it's true. There are plenty of couples who have negotiated a workable arrangement in marriage that is mutually satisfying. Adjustments are made, basic desires are met, and everyone is comfortable with the setup.

But God's goal for us in marriage goes far beyond comfort and mutual satisfaction. God's goal for marriage is that we would taste something deeper, something sweeter, and something more glorious in our marriages. He wants us to experience the kind of joy that the Father, Son, and Spirit have always known from long

before the world began. He wants us to experience the profound joy that comes from a kind of oneness that is only found in him. And the only path that leads to that kind of soul-satisfying oneness and joy is the path where the kind of love described here is being cultivated and is flourishing.

When that happens in marriage, we'll know a kind of joy and contentment we've never known before. And God will be exalted in the process because we'll be showing to everyone around us that his ways are perfect and right and true.

Talk Together

1. Have you ever known someone who showed some evidence of spiritual maturity but who lacked love? And have you ever known someone who lacked elements of spiritual maturity but whose life demonstrated sacrificial love for others? Compare those two lives.
2. When did you begin to understand the reality of God's love for you? What role did your understanding of your own sin play?