

I’m going to begin with a public service announcement. To whom it may concern: You have 11 days left until Valentine’s Day. You probably don’t want to forget. When you dig into the history of Valentine’s Day, not everything is crystal clear, but what we can say is that it has definite Christian roots. It seems there were several Christian leaders named Valentine or Valentinus, and many of them were imprisoned or martyred for their faith. That could come across as kind of a downer. I suppose that depends on your definition of love, and your understanding of what love is willing to do.

“Love” is one of those words that is notoriously elastic—it can stretch in many different ways, depending on the context. You’ve got romantic love, which is often described in terms of a roller coaster ride. Something else is being expressed when a parent says, “I love my kids.” When your friend says, “I love you,” it’s similar, but a bit different. And then the word can simply be used to mean we really enjoy something, like “I love ice cream.” One thing I’m afraid of is that Christian people hear statements like “Love one another,” and they get the wrong idea. They think, “I could never have warm, fuzzy feeling for that person over there.” But that misses the point. Where we tend to think of love as a feeling, the Bible talks about it as an action; a conscious decision to look away from self and to look to the needs of others, and to work towards meeting those needs.

This is precisely where the apostle Paul goes in 1 Corinthians 13. Here Paul provides us with a detailed definition of a specific kind of love. In the Greek language, it is called “agape.” It is completely unique to the New Testament, which makes sense, because the source of it is the unique person of Jesus. It can sometimes be a struggle to come to grips with agape love, because it’s rather different than the emotional, possessive love at the heart of a million pop culture stories and songs. But Paul calls having and giving agape love a “more excellent way.” Why? Let’s check it out.

Listen again to what Paul says love is (or is not): Love is patient and kind; love 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. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

Now that is quite a list. There may be parts of it that you are attracted to. Even so, if you take it seriously, it becomes immediately challenging. Paul is saying that this is what agape love is...or what it is not. That means if there’s something going on in a relationship that is the opposite of what is described here, something is off. Impatience or mean-spiritedness—not love. Jealousy or bragging—not love. Arrogance—rudeness—not love. Irritability or resentfulness—not love. Love rejoices in truth. Love can always be counted on. Paul is painting a picture and keeps adding details that show ‘love’ is the will to do what’s right for someone else.

There's a twist here that we need to realize: when Paul describes love in 1 Corinthians chapter 13, he's really talking about how Christians should love each other and everyone in their world. Although this passage has become a standard wedding text, these words are not first and foremost about the love between husband and wife (though they certainly apply). Loving others—doing the right thing for another person—is what Paul calls a “still more excellent way” to live. More excellent than what? The preceding chapter in this letter was all about spiritual gifts. Paul says that there is something more excellent and more valuable than possessing spiritual gifts. That “something” is: having and giving agape love. This love includes feelings but is not controlled by them. This love is a deliberate choice. It is a commitment to care—even when I don't feel like it. In fact, I am called to love people even though they are unlovable, unbearable and undesirable. Why? Because there are times when I am unlovable, unbearable, and undesirable—and God never stops loving me.

The truth is, we can only harness this type of love in our connection with God. He is the pioneer in providing this love to the world. The most famous Bible verse of them all says: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” God's will to do the right thing for his creation caused him to sacrifice his own dear Son—parents, please imagine what it would be like to exchange the life of your child for anyone else's (sounds impossible, doesn't it?)—but this choice shows just how valuable you are to him. Jesus' commitment to care for His creation led him to the cross, and Hebrews 12: 2 says that Jesus, “for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame...” The joy set before Jesus was the joy of knowing that his death and resurrection were going to set things right. His joy was in knowing that after going through the terrors of hell and death, you would belong to Him, and that made it worth it.

At the heart of agape love is sacrifice. It is sacrificial love that has saved you from destruction. It is sacrificial love that can save others through you. It is seldom easy to love this way, but it is possible. It is the most powerful force in the world. It is the more excellent way.

What are some things you need to let go of, in order to give yourself more fully?

Who needs to be loved by you this way?