

Love in Paul's Gospel of Grace

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Preacher: Marvin Wiseman

[0 : 00] And there can be no question about that. The greatest of these is love. Love is stronger than death.

And death is pretty strong. Love has been described as that which makes the world go round. And indeed it does. Because if you think about it from the standpoint of procreation and the perpetuation of the human species, it is all connected with boy meeting girl and what they call falling in love and marrying and reproducing themselves in their offspring.

It just perpetuates the human cycle. And in fact it is in obedience to what God said about multiplying and replenishing the earth. So we have done so to date to the tune of about, what, five billion people.

That's a lot of souls. It is that which makes the world go round. Keeps things going. Keeps things humming. Keeps life interesting. And keeps parting such sweet sorrow.

When boy meets girl, they are often spoken of as having fallen in love. And that's a curious expression.

[1 : 28] I'd like to talk about it for just a little minute. What is this business about falling in love? You know as well as I do that there is a very shallow kind of very inadequate definition of love that circulates out there in our culture.

And it's probably been around from time immemorial. And it's a very superficial, inadequate kind of definition of love. And it's hearts going pity pat and walking on cloud nine and all of this stuff.

And it's all emotion. And it's a euphoric feeling. And it is, well, it's real. But it may not have real substance behind it.

And only time will tell. Because sometimes it's a very easy thing to confuse infatuation with real love.

But the Bible talks about love in so many places. In fact, it is one of two words that is used to describe God. And it's the only term that is used like this where John says God is love.

[2 : 47] It isn't merely that God loves. But God is love. The only other designation of a quality like that that is attributed to God in that way has to do with his holiness.

He is referred to as the thrice holy deity. Holy, holy, holy. Lord God Almighty. Isaiah refers to it. And it's repeated in the book of the Revelation. But this concept of love, as the Bible uses it and wonderfully defines it from the passage that we just read, that talks about what love doesn't do and what it isn't as well as what it is.

But perhaps the best definition of love that I've ever heard of a biblical definition of love, and this is the agape variety. I'll explain that in a moment.

It is the care and the concern and the provision toward the object of one's love.

[3 : 55] This love is a verb. It is a doing word. It is an action word. It is an act of the will. It may be accompanied by, and often is, with emotions.

And that's fine. But if it is emotion only, it won't last. It has no staying power. Because emotions can be very fickle things.

Emotions have to do with what we are experiencing at the time. Whether good, bad, or whatever, our emotions come into line in connection with that.

But biblical love, the agape love, which is concerned only for the best interest of the object of one's love, transcends the emotion thing entirely.

It is activated by volition. It is by the will. We love because we choose to love, not because we feel like it.

[5 : 01] Because sometimes you don't feel very loving towards your mate. Sometimes they may do something that just drives you to distraction. And you wonder all kinds of things like, what did I ever

see in him or her?

And you just become really angry sometimes. But if you have the agape love in place, it will recover. And you will find that it has real staying power.

And this is because it is not rooted in fleeting emotions and how you feel. And by the way, this is where most of the world is. And this is why most of the world suffers from damaged relationships or ruined relationships.

Because they try to get more mileage out of pure emotion than what it was ever intended to provide. And it disappoints them.

It lets them down. It doesn't have any staying power. And I don't want you to think that I'm knocking emotions because I'm not. There are terribly important things. Life would be so boring without them.

[6 : 10] In fact, life wouldn't even be life worth living without emotions, without feeling, without the euphoric atmosphere that goes with being in love. And we talk about falling in love.

Do you really do that? Yes, I think so. And let me explain what I mean. Last Sunday, this is an unfortunate illustration, but it's a very poignant one.

And she isn't here this morning. She was here earlier and had to leave. And I suspected it was because she was kind of stoved up and not feeling all that great. But Barbara Henderson fell last week right out front here as she got out of her car and was coming to the 9 o'clock hour.

She found a patch of ice and slipped on it and was just down in a nanosecond. And we insisted on calling the squad. And she went in for x-rays in the ER and the whole nine yards.

They kept her overnight. And she is still undergoing treatment from that. But she fell. So, what do I mean by this? I mean, she didn't do that on purpose.

[7 : 30] She didn't say to herself, you know, I think when I step out of my car, I'll fall flat on my back and bang my head. No, she did it quite unintentionally.

So, when you fall in love, I think it means that was not the intent. You didn't plan to do that.

Sometimes, it just happens. And it's more like a lack of planning and a lack of deliberation and a lack of intent.

But nonetheless, it happens. And I think that's why we call it falling in love. Because it wasn't intended. You know, if the police are called out because somebody is on the ledge up on the 50th floor and they're threatening to jump, and they're going to try to talk him down, they're generally not too terribly concerned that this man is going to fall.

Although that is a possibility, too, if he's kind of erratic and gets too close to the edge. But what they're really concerned about is him jumping. Because if he jumps, that would be intentional.

[8 : 47] That's volitional. He planned to do that. And that's maybe a crude illustration. But it gets the point across the difference between falling and something else.

Planning. A jump is planned, intended. A fall is not. Nobody ever falls on purpose. We fall accidentally.

We fall because we couldn't help it. We just fell. And sometimes that's the way it is. When boy meets girl and the chemistry gets going, they may have been just friends.

But something happens that neither of them can fully explain. And they just maybe didn't plan it that way, didn't intend it that way.

But the next thing you know, they end up loving each other. And that is a beautiful thing. This agape love is in contrast in the New Testament to what we would call phileo love.

[9 : 54] And we've looked at these in times past over the years. And we've put them on the overhead for you. But I won't belabor that point now. But phileo love is the love of kin.

It is brotherly love. And it is the love, it is the word from which our word Philadelphia comes. And we know Philadelphia is the city of brotherly love.

And if you know a man by the name of Philip, that's taken from the Greek. And that's a word that comes from the Greek word love or love of the brethren.

This is the phileo. And then there is astorge love. And astorge love is the love that a mother has for her children or that parents have for their kids or that the kids have for their parents.

It's a familial love. It's called astorge. Astorge. And the New Testament talks about in the latter times, in the latter days, there will be mothers without natural astorge.

[11 : 08] There will be mothers who do not have a natural love for their children. And you read about these every day. And you hear them expressed every day on the media.

Terrible cases of child neglect and child abuse that comes from mothers and fathers. It is mothers without natural affection, natural affection.

But the love that surpasses all of the loves is the love that God designates as agape love.

And the verb is agapao. And it means to love in such a way that one's concern is only for the best interests of the object of that love.

It is the complete opposite of selfishness. It is a giving of yourself to meet the needs and concerns of the object of your love.

[12 : 12] And let me tell you something. It's the most beautiful thing in the world. There is nothing that compares with this. The greatest expression of that kind of love is in that familiar passage, God so loved the world that he gave.

And I've often said, you know, you can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving. You just can't do it.

You cannot love without giving. And that little Greek word in the English language is just rendered so, God so, S-O, God so loved the world.

I just love the expression of that in the Greek because the Greek New Testament renders the word hutos. Hutos. What does that mean?

In English, it means in this manner or in this way. And it's a beautiful thing to contemplate because what John was telling us in that beloved text is not that God loved us this much, in that his love in any way, shape, or form ever changed or modulated.

[13 : 43] His love never grew. God's love never became more than it was at any other time. So, it is not a matter of degrees of God's love or the amount of God's love.

It is rather the kind of God's love. The manner in which he loved. So that it is a quality factor, not a quantity factor.

And it is God loved in this way. God's love was of this kind or this nature that he gave his only begotten son.

So never think of God's love as starting out here and building or increasing or growing as time went on. God loves with the full totality and capacity of his being.

And it is never diminished. It is never increased. Because nothing about the deity changes. He is the Lord. He changes not.

[14 : 56] His love is extended toward us in ways... Well, let's look at the passage. We have been floating around in Paul's epistles. And we have been in Galatians and we have been in Ephesians.

But I do not know of any place that says it any better than this. Ephesians chapter 2. Remarkable passage. Just, well, the whole book is remarkable to be sure.

And the apostle is reminding the Ephesians of what they were before they came to Christ and how desperate their plight was, even though they didn't know it.

And I'm sure that for the most part they didn't know it. And you know, the vast majority of people today who are right now, as I speak, in the process of perishing, don't have a clue.

It would never occur to them that they are on the edge of a very dangerous precipice. But they are.

[15 : 55] And they don't know that. And one of the goals of the gospel is to reveal that to them. And when Paul writes to them, he reminds them of what they were before Christ came in.

You were dead in chapter 2. You were dead, dead toward God in your trespasses and sins. In which you formerly walked according to the course of this world.

That's all they could do. That's all they had. They didn't have anything else to work with. The world does just what comes natural to the world. It is the world.

That's all it is. Hey, don't expect people of the world to conform to your Christian standards. They have neither the interest nor the ability.

And that's something that we believers need to keep in mind. Particularly when it comes to the area of politics. We become so exasperated because the world is so stupid.

[16 : 54] And they don't see it the way we do. That we forget. We, at one time, used to be part of that outfit. And we were just as out of it as they were.

We were just as unknowing and as ignorant and as uncaring as they were. So, I'm not trying to excuse the world for its behavior. But I am trying to explain it.

They are only doing what comes natural. They are only living the only kind of life they know how to live. And if anything, we should feel supreme pity for them.

For what they do not know. And for what they could know. And Paul writes to these people at Ephesus. And he reminds them of the pit from which they have been digged. And he says, Because that's all you could do.

[17 : 56] That's all you knew. You just lived your life. And that's the way it came natural to you. That's all you knew. Among them, we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh.

Paul the apostle is saying, Hey, I used to belong to that crowd. I know what I'm talking about. I used to be in that crowd. That's exactly where I was.

We too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh. Indulging the desires of the flesh. Well, what about the spirit? Ah, who cares about that? Don't worry about that.

Just live. Eat, drink, and be merry. For tomorrow we may die. We don't even know if we have a spirit. And if we do have, so what? No big deal. Do whatever feels good. Do whatever pleases you. That's the attitude they have. Don't expect them to have anything else. That's all they know. To them, that's standard operating procedure. Desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

[19 : 09] And then, as I've delighted in pointing out so many times, the next two words change everything. But God.

But introduces an opposite point of view. There is a major contrast that is coming, that is set up with this little three-lettered conjunction.

But, this, he reminds them, is what you were. This is what you were locked into. This was what you did, and this was all you could do.

And you were destined to follow that for the rest of your life, if there was not some kind of dynamic force from the outside, injected into your situation, that changed everything.

And that's where the gospel comes in. That is that dynamic force. That is that foreign ingredient that invades the human soul, called the gospel.

[20 : 12] The good news. The good news is, you don't have to be what you've always been. But God, being rich in mercy. And why was he rich in mercy?

It was because of his great love with which he loved us. Great love with which he...

The word in the Greek is mega. We're familiar with that term now. We've anglicized. We've got mega this and mega that. The Bible talks about mega love.

This is God's great love with which he loved us. And, we could also refer back to Romans 5 and verse 8, I think it is. God demonstrated.

God commended. God put on display his love toward us in that while we were yet sinners.

[21 : 19] Christ died for us. The reason Christ had to die for sinners was because there isn't anyone else that he could die for.

Those are the only people there were. The sinners. So, Christ died for sinners. And then, Paul goes on there in that Romans 5 passage and talks about how some people would be willing to give their life and have given their life for another person.

Doesn't happen often, but we all know of cases where someone sacrifices themselves that somebody else might live, especially in war time and situations like that.

But the text goes on to say that God sent Christ to die not for his friends, but for his enemies.

God now that is news. When dog bites man, that's not news, but when man bites dog, that's news.

[22 : 30] This is news. This is good news. This is the only good news that in the final analysis really matters.

All other good news may be good and I wouldn't deny it, but compared to this, this is the only good news that really matters. Because this is the good news that has the power to radically transform a life and one's destiny.

This is powerful good news. You realize this good news, this gospel that we've got to proclaim, that has been around and clarified for the last 2,000 years, while it is, I've often said, it is the world's best good news and it's also the world's best kept secret.

Because there are, I am convinced, there are precious few people out there that really understand the gospel, the good news, what it is, how it is to be applied, why it is so critical and important to them.

Very few people understand that. They've heard bits and pieces about Christianity, they've heard bits and pieces about churchianity, they get negatives and positives through the media about Christians, about their desirability and their lack of desirability, and Christian hypocrisy, and

Christian valor, and they get the whole gamut, but very, very seldom do they ever hear the good news in such a way that they are able to act upon it.

[24 : 17] And that's what I call evangelism. When someone has been evangelized, it does not mean they have been saved.

It means they have had the gospel explained to them, and they understand it, and all that is lacking is for them to act on that good news.

When they act on that good news, by believing on the Lord Jesus Christ and receiving him as their Savior, then they are regenerated.

So, if we are successful in evangelizing someone, that simply means we have been able to explain the gospel to them in a way that enables them to understand it and make an intelligent decision, should they choose to do so.

And many times, people may go a long time before making that decision. I've known of people who have heard and understood the gospel years ago, but just never made a decision because they didn't want to.

[25 : 42] They didn't want to. They wanted to maintain what they believed was control of their own life. But do you know something?

You don't control your life anyway. You only think you do. you make your plans and you put things on your calendar, but you're not in control.

It just makes you feel good to think you're in control. It's an illusion. You're not in control. Let me ask you this. Were you in control the day you got fired from your job?

Were you in control the day you got hired? were you in control when you got the foreclosure notice on your house? Were you in control there?

Was Barbara in control when she took a fall out here in the parking lot? Are you in control when you get a telephone call informing you that a loved one is near death?

[26 : 59] Are you in control then? truth be known you're not in control of much of anything and neither am I because as we go through life there are so many things all around us that influence and color and change and radically upset as the old saying goes the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.

we draw up our calendars and we make our plans and we get it all set and we care for the details and we cross the T's and dot the I's and we're all ready to go and boy everything blows up.

Where'd that come from? I hadn't planned on that. It's because you're not in control. There is probably less that we are actually in control of than what we would like to think.

but you know what? It makes me feel good to tell myself I'm in control. I'm running the show here. I make my decisions.

I'm the captain of my own destiny. Master of my own fate. I'm the boss here. What I say goes blah blah blah. That is all a bunch of hokum. It's all just inflated ego talking.

[28 : 18] That's all. But we just like to think you're not in charge of anything. Are you in control when you have an accident at Fifth and Main that totals your car upon which the insurance just lapsed the day before?

Are you in control there? Nah. It's only an illusion. We're just not in control. But let me tell you something. Jesus Christ really is in control.

And he's the only one who is. So when you give yourself to him, you are taking yourself out of this uncertain venue where you have no control and you're just big enough to recognize it.

And you place your case in the hands of the only one who does have control. let him call the shots. And you know what you do? You lean back, relax, and enjoy the ride.

He's in control. It's the only way to go. That's traveling first class. And it all begins with the recognition of this marvelous gospel that God loves us in such a way that he incarnated himself in human flesh and became one of us and lived among us and took upon him a body that was capable of eating and drinking and walking and talking and dying and dying and dying.

[30 : 09] I'm sure glad that love is stronger than death and it is. And in that third day he rose again we are told for our justification.

and when you identify with that message and you put yourself at God's disposal through receiving Christ as your Savior he makes you a new creation in him.

If you can get past the hard part of the gospel trusting Christ is the easy part. And I've explained to you the hard part. The hard part, well, look at what Paul said the hard part is, I think.

It's in Acts chapter 17. The pulpit then, okay?

Maybe my batteries quit. Love is stronger than death but not stronger than batteries. When they quit, they quit. See?

[31 : 15] You see? Here's a perfect illustration. When I was here speaking with this lapel mic, you know what? I thought I was in charge. But I wasn't.

I mean, what an object lesson. Here, the batteries just go, you know, they're gone. And the batteries say, hey, Marv, you're not in charge. I'm in charge, and I just died. So, but fortunately we've got another system here, and we'll just switch over to you.

The hard part of this gospel, as I was mentioning, is what Paul described in Romans 17 when he is talking to what I think we could call the philosophical intelligentsia of the earth.

And you've got to remember that he was in Athens. And if you know anything about the history of Athens, you know that this is where all the brains were in the world.

I mean, these guys were philosophers that could think the kind of thoughts that most of us can't even contemplate. These were the real brains. I don't know that they had Nobel Prize winners back in that day, but if they did, these fellows would have no doubt qualified.

[32 : 19] And as Paul gets together with all of these Athenian philosophers there on Mars Hill, he says in verse 30, and I haven't time to go into the text in any depth, but he just, in delivering his message, he says that God, God having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now, and there is another word of contrast, as opposed to the way it was before, before God overlooked a lot.

Some texts render that God winked at. he overlooked the times of ignorance, but in contrast to that, those times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all, everywhere, should repent.

And there's only one thing that anybody can ever repent from, and that is the knowledge and understanding of whatever the item is, but they were wrong.

You were wrong. You had it wrong. Again, I thought I was in control. You see, I have to get back here. When we are wrong about something, we can go a long, long ways without realizing that we were wrong.

We don't know we're wrong, but we don't know we're wrong. That's called ignorance. Ignorance. And someone has said very wisely, I think, we are all ignorant, only about different things.

[34 : 10] But we're all ignorant. And when we are wrong and don't know it, that's a sad plight to be in.

and we try to stamp out this thing called ignorance. And we try to use education to do it. Because the only cure for ignorance is knowledge and information.

So we place a great premium upon educating people out of their ignorance. So you learn and you process things.

when you hear information that is designed to bring you out of ignorance and into understanding and knowledge and appreciation, if you are a thankful person, you will be grateful for that.

And you will appreciate what you have learned and you will appreciate those who have taught you. You will be grateful to them. And if you're really stupid, you will turn a blind eye toward the information and reject it.

[35 : 31] One of America's great philosophers, John Wayne, otherwise known as Duke, said, life is hard hard.

And if you're stupid, it's a lot harder. Stupid means hearing something that could and would educate you and dispel your ignorance, but you prefer to remain in the ignorance.

Now, that is stupid. That is stupid. There isn't anything else to call it. It is a willingness. And Peter talks about these people. In one of his epistles, he says, for of this, talks about the world being destroyed by the flood, etc.

He said, for of this, they are willingly ignorant. What a horrible position to be in. I mean, I have been so ignorant and so dumb about so many things, but it wasn't because I wanted to be just because I was.

And I didn't realize that I was until I got some information. So, repent means to change your mind.

[36 : 52] And the reason you change your mind is because you have received information that requires you to make a rational decision and change your mind.

This is what I've always believed. But, this information says I was wrong.

That's not true. And my believing it didn't make it true. I was wrong. I have to acknowledge that.

Now, I don't know about you. but I have never done anything as difficult as that. Because I have got this thing ingrained within me that's called an ego.

And I love it. I feed it. I protect it. I guard it. the male ego is the most formidable thing that God has to overcome with his gospel.

[38 : 13] It is so painful to me to say, you know what? I was all wrong about that. I was all wrong. I need to change my mind because now I've gotten information that requires me to do so.

So I can either be stupid and dig my heels in and say, I don't care what the, this is what I've always believed, this is what I'm, or I can say the information warrants my admitting that I have been wrong.

Paul says God commands all men everywhere to repent, to acknowledge that they have been wrong. And that is so tough to do. You think not, you just try explaining this gospel to a few people. Well, I'm not that bad. Well, my grandfather was a circuit-riding preacher, and blah, blah, blah, and on, and on, and on, you know, it's just, and all of this is self-justification, trying to make what we have believed legitimate and acceptable.

And this gospel comes in, and is contrary to all of that, and it says that it is not of works, but solely as a gift of God's grace.

[39 : 34] Do you realize that you have to humble yourself to receive a gift, something you didn't earn, and you didn't pay for? You have to humble yourself to do that.

if you're going to work for someone, and you put in your 40 hours when it comes time to collect your paycheck, you can walk right up to the paymaster and stand there and put on a bold front and put your hand out and receive that paycheck and you've got no compunctions about it at all.

You earned it. You deserve it. You worked for it. You paid your dues by being there and putting in the work and now you get paid for it. That's the way it's supposed to be. But to receive something for which you did nothing, isn't that below your dignity?

I mean, you don't want to do that. that would require humbling yourself to let somebody give you something that you don't deserve and didn't earn.

How could you feel good about that? That's where this gospel of grace comes in. It is a gift. And you can receive it, but you get no credit for having done so.

[41 : 10] In the sense of reward, it is just a gift of free grace. And you have to humble yourself to take it. And you have to admit that you were wrong before.

And when we preach the gospel, all we are doing is giving people information that gives them a reason to change their mind. It doesn't happen easily.

usually doesn't happen quickly, and it usually happens if it does, only with repeated hearings, because the spirit of God takes the truth of the gospel, and it begins working on us, and wearing us down.

And finally, finally, we get it. It penetrates, and we can embrace it. And it's all provided because, but God, this great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses and sins, has made us alive together in Christ.

By grace you have been saved. This is not only a Valentine's Sunday message, this is a Sunday message for any Sunday. This is just marvelous.

[42 : 28] It's the greatest expression. The cross of Jesus Christ is the greatest demonstration of God's love that's ever been poured out upon an undeserving world. When you see in your mind's eye that limp, languid body of Christ hanging on that cross, you just tell yourself there is a perfect picture of God's love, also of God's justice and God's grace.

marvelous. Father, we cannot begin to really appropriate and understand these truths as we would like, but we look forward to a time when we can.

We'll know them so much better than we do now. Understand the implications so much better than we do now. But right now, our understanding is adequate enough to communicate it to others.

Thank you for the privilege being able to do that. And we recognize that the world at large out there is not really looking for or pining after our good news.

And many times they don't even recognize it or receive it when we proclaim it. But through repeated hearings, your love comes to the fore and can just wear away that human ego that would reject and rebel so that men and women can be properly overwhelmed by the love and the grace of yourself.

[44 : 11] For any who may be here today, for whatever reason, who may never have really embraced Christ as their Savior, perhaps because they haven't adequately understood it, we trust

that they understand more now than they did.

And if they know enough to make that commitment, we are so grateful that the Lord Jesus stands more ready to receive and to forgive with open arms than what they do even to come to him.

So, dear friend, if you are here this morning, boy or girl, man or woman, and you've never really finalized this thing with the Son of God, this is your opportunity.

If you want to acknowledge to God right now that whatever it is that you believed before, you just recognize it to be wrong. It isn't what you said you require.

And as best as you know how, with your questions and fears and doubting and all the rest, would you be willing to say, Lord Jesus, I know enough to know. I can't make it on my own and I'm through trying.

[45 : 23] I want this Savior who died for me in my place to come into my life. I want to turn everything over to him. I want him to be in control.

I want Christ and his salvation. Lord Jesus, here I am. Thank you that you're willing to take me. Do with me whatever you please and I will be a loving, obedient servant.

Thank you for dying that death that I wouldn't have to die. Christ's wonderful name we pray. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.