

If You Love Me...

by D. Matthew Brown

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:35).

What is love? The word's meaning has become somewhat lost in Christianity today following the "love" craze of the Hippie Era in the 1960s and with the common misunderstanding of a popular Bible verse, namely John 3:16. The general consensus of both the world and Christendom is that love is a feeling--an emotional force that beckons the thoughts of colorful butterflies and singing birds when the person who is the object of the feeling is thought of. As with all feelings, this *love* comes and goes, which explains how hippies were able to go from sexual partner to sexual partner in the name of love. While you probably will not see too many who label themselves as Christians engaging in such hippie behavior, you will however probably find that many Christians do not have a clue as to what love truly is.

The misconception of love among Christians is due to many things (the secular culture, moral relativism, etc.), but one factor I believe is the misinterpretation of modern Christendom's favorite verse, John 3:16. In almost every English translation, the verse reads, "For God *so* loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." The misinterpretation comes in the word *so*. Most modern readers believe the verse says that God loved the world *so much*, as if God was "in love" with the world like a teenage boy is in love with the girl next door. However, *so* in John 3:16 does not express the degree of God's love for the world (for the giving up of his Son expresses that clearly enough), but the word *so* means *in this manner* or *in this way*. The English Standard Version is observant and gracious enough to recognize this common misunderstanding and to place this clear rendering in its footnotes: "For *this is how* God loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." In this clear rendition, the love of God is moved unambiguously from the realm of feeling and emotion to the realm of action and choice. God was not enthralled by some puppy love for the world to the point that he eventually said, "I can't stand it! I love you so much, world, that I will do anything to have you by my side," but rather God chose to act—chose to act before the world was created. It is really quite silly if one thinks about it, that the world in all its filthiness and rebellion could ever tantalize a holy God in some emotional fashion. The love of God therefore is clearly not the emotional love of the world, but it is an action derived from a choice that was to result in the adoption of many from the world as God's children through the imputation of the righteousness of Jesus Christ for the glory of God and the fulfillment of his

covenant.

This misinterpretation of love has had a devastation effect on Christianity, the most devastating of which is the emotional experientialists that are so common today. These Christians go about boasting that they are in love with Jesus, singing praise songs that are no different from secular loves songs except for they replace *boyfriend* with *Jesus*, and shouting mantras such as "Christianity is not a religion, it is a relationship!" While I do not want to discount the emotional aspect of Christian love, these Christians "love" God insofar as their feelings for him remain. However, when their puppy love for God fades or is tested by troubles, they leave God in the very same way that hippies left their sexual lovers for new sexual lovers, searching for someone or something else on which to place their affections. Jesus spoke of persons such as these in a parable:

As for [the seed that] was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away (Matthew 13:21, 22).

Sadly, according to this passage, Satan is able to bring about a false joy and love in God and the Gospel that is quickly discredited when tests and temptations come a person's way.

As with all things, error in a love for God descends to personal relationships as well. Have you ever wondered why the divorce rate among evangelical Christians is the same as the divorce rate among people of the world? Do you think that it could possibly be because modern evangelical Christians have the same definition of love as the world does? The problem with the world's love (and sadly, Christendom's love) is that it is the label of an emotion, not the love of God and the Bible. Just as the fake Christians who leave God when their feelings for him dissipate, Christian spouses are just as quick (if not quicker) to leave their spouses when their "in love" feeling disappears. When that feeling fades, they appeal to the higher authority of their emotions, saying things like "I must have married the wrong person," and "God would not want me to stay in a relationship where there is no feeling of love," all the while ignoring the fact that God hates divorce and that love is an action and a choice, not a feeling.

Have you ever been perplexed by Jesus' command to love your enemies (Matthew 5:44) and thought it to be impossible? If so, it is quite possible that you have misunderstood the meaning of love. Of course it would seem odd and difficult if Christ commanded us always to have pleasant feelings for our enemies, but that is not what he commanded. He commands from us an action—to love our enemies, and the Apostle Paul gives to us a clear definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13:

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 (4-7).

Do you think it odd that Paul would use so many words, both negative and positive, to describe love and not once mention that love is a feeling? Obviously, Paul did not see love as a feeling, but he saw love as an action, which clearly explains how we can love our enemies without ever desiring for them to be our best friends. This love also transcends our horizontal relationships to our relationship with God. Jesus did not say, "If you love me, you will feel warm and tingly every time that you hear my name," but he said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Again, not discounting the emotional facet of our love for God, but a love for Christ without faithful obedience is not love at all. Any person can feign some passion for God but only those who truly love God will live out their lives in faithful obedience to his commandments.

Love, as God defines it, is not easy. Unlike the emotional love of the world, the love of God pulls you away from yourself and forces you to esteem other people more highly than yourself and to surrender your interests and desires for the sake of another. This love never changes regardless of the relationship. Sometimes we enjoy the company of our siblings; other times we wish we were not related to them. Sometimes we desire to spend time with our friends; other times we would rather not see them for awhile. Sometimes we are madly in love with our spouses; other times we would rather not sleep in the same room with them. And sometimes we feel a closeness to God that causes us to desire nothing but him; but other times we feel so distant from God that we desire other people or things more than we do him. In times when our feelings make us desire to act contrarily to the way we should, we have two choices: either we can take the easy route of the world and despise those whom we should love, or we can take the difficult route of God and love those persons in spite of our feelings. Truly loving a person is never easy because all persons are sinful and have attributes that annoy and repel us at times, but praise God that he being perfect and holy chose to love us by dying on a cross when we are infinitely more annoying and repulsive to him than any person could possibly ever be to us! Beloved, let us therefore love greatly for we have been loved greatly, and let us cultivate good feelings toward others by continually having a grateful and compassionate heart.