

“More than ‘Nice’”

Philippians 1:9-11

October 18, 2009

One of the words in the English language that I dislike the most—are you ready for this?—is the word *love*. That sounds terrible, doesn't it? Please understand that it's not that I'm against love itself! But so often the word seems to mean so little.

I'm glad that last month Greg Giles preached for two weeks on the subject of God's love. That is a subject that needs to be studied. What does it really mean that God is love? Greg's sermons, I think, went a long way in answering that question.

When it comes to the practice of love between human beings, there can be a lot of distortion and confusion too.

What is love? Today love is so often reduced to the idea of being *nice*. To be loving means that you are *nice*. You smile a lot, and you never hint that anybody might be doing something wrong. Because that is not *nice*! Instead you always try to make people feel good. Be positive and accepting and affirming. Because approaching people in that way is *nice*. That's what love is. Love means that you are above else *nice*.¹

Is that what love really involves? Is it just a matter of being *nice*?

I have nothing against being *nice*, but I don't think that we should reduce the idea of love to *niceness*. You don't have to think about the subject a great deal to realize that love and *niceness* are not the same thing. If you have ever had a two-year-old in your house, you know that you cannot always be *nice* to that child. If you always try to make that child feel good so that he or she never cries—if you never say “no” to a two-year-old, you will soon have a two-year-old tyrant running your house! The most loving thing to do with a two-year-old is to teach that child gently but firmly that in life you do not always get what you want. If you don't teach your child that lesson, you have not been a good parent. You may have been *nice*, but you have not been loving. Love is more than being *nice*.

So what is love? What does it mean to love another person? We need to think about what love is and what it isn't. We also need to think about how we are going to love. Love is not something that happens automatically. It's not like breathing. We would all like to think that it is. We want love to be something that overwhelms us and magically produces good feelings and good deeds. But as anyone who has ever changed a little baby's dirty diaper knows, love is not necessarily fun. Sometimes it requires hard choices and unpleasant tasks.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, we find a short but instructive prayer. It is easy to read this prayer quickly and then move on in Philippians, but we need to slow down and look at it carefully. It is more than just a prayer. It also describes the various ingredients that go into genuine love.

⁹ And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰ so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God. (Phil. 1:9-11)

¹ D.A. Carson, *Love in Hard Places* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), 12.

The Mental Ingredient

The first ingredient Paul describes in that prayer is what I would call the mental ingredient of love. “Love,” he says, “should abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight . . .” (Phil. 1:9). There is that mental ingredient that goes into love.

Over the years I have collected definitions of love. I have a lot of them in my file. I’ve worked on composing my own definition too. This is what I have come up: *Love is the desire and the choice to do what is best for another person without demanding anything in return.* A key part of that definition is *doing what is best* for the other person. Paul mentions that same thing in verse 11: “. . . so that you may be able to discern what is best.”

That’s not easy. Sometimes it is hard to know what is best. I think of college students living together in an apartment. After a while they notice that one of them is not going to class. Instead he or she is staying up late every night watching movies and then sleeping so late during the day that your friend never gets to class. What should be done in that situation? What is the most loving thing to do for your apartment mate? When do you talk to him or her about the problem? Should you contact the parents and tell them what is going on? What is the most loving thing to be done in that situation?

Paul mentions both “knowledge and depth of insight.” When we face difficult situations that call for loving responses, we need insight and wisdom. I think of that famous story of the Prodigal Son that’s found in Luke 15. The son demands his share of his father’s inheritance, and he takes it and goes over to a distant country and squanders it.

One of the most surprising things about this story is that the father lets his son take his money and go. I can just imagine what happened a few days later. Some well-meaning person came up to him and started to criticize him. “If you really loved your son, you wouldn’t have given him the money. If you really loved your son, you’ll follow him and try to talk him out of what he’s doing? What kind of a father are you?”

There does come a time when the most loving thing to do is to let a person go. It’s a gut-wrenching experience. It hurts to see people you love make stupid choices. You lie in bed at night wondering if you have done the right thing. But sometimes you have to let people experience the consequences of their choices.

The father of the Prodigal Son must have had a remarkable “depth of insight” because Jesus says that the son eventually “came to his senses.” That’s the phrase that Jesus uses (Luke 15:17). He “came to his senses.” He realized that he was living in a foolish and harmful fashion. The father’s love paid off, and the young man’s life turned around.

Love has that mental ingredient that is so important. If we are going to genuinely love someone we need what to do in each situation, we also need to know when to do it. Timing is such an important part of love. We need “knowledge and depth of insight.”

Lately I’ve been reading a book called *When Helping Hurts*. The subtitle is *How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor or Yourself*. The authors of the book point out that people think about poverty in different ways. We North Americans usually think of poverty as just the lack of money and material things. The solution to poverty is simple: just get more money to the poor! But this book points out that if you listen to poor people around the world you’ll hear them talk about their shame and sense of inferiority. They talk about powerlessness, humiliation, fear, hopelessness, depression, and isolation. All those things play a part in poverty.²

² Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 53.

I think back to an experience here in our church many years ago. At Christmas someone gave the elders a check for the Benevolence Fund and asked if it would be a good idea to give that money to a particular single mother in the church who didn't have a lot. That sounded good to me and the elders. Doesn't that sound loving? So the elders passed the gift along. That was an easy decision. The woman came me after she got the check. She was truly grateful, but she also wanted to ask me some questions. "Why did I get this money? I didn't say that I was in need. Who is it that thinks I'm so poor that I need this kind of gift? Does this person think that I'm not providing sufficiently for my children?"

Do you hear those questions? The gift was intended to be a simple act of love. It wasn't intended to be anything other than that. But to the woman it produced some feelings of inferiority and helplessness.

So how do you love someone? Genuine love is not just a gush of emotion. Genuine love is not just a matter of good intentions. It requires the mental ingredient of "knowledge and depth of insight."

The Ethical Ingredient

Look at what else Paul mentions. ". . . so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness . . ." (Phil. 1:10b-11). Notice those words—"pure," "blameless," and "righteousness." There is an ethical ingredient that goes into love.

That is the ingredient that is missing from most of today's talk about love. If you talk to someone about what is right or wrong, then watch out! You will immediately be branded as judgmental and intolerant! You should never imply that someone is doing something wrong. That's not nice!

It may not be nice, but it may be the most loving thing to do.

I think of the instructions that we find in the book of Proverbs. That Old Testament book says, "Whoever rebukes a person will in the end gain favor rather than one who has a flattering tongue" (Prov. 28:23). Isn't that true? It's great to hear things from people that make you feel good. We all like that. But it's the person who will level with you about something important that in the end you value the most.

There is an Indian proverb that goes like this: "The one who has a good friend has no need of a mirror."³ That captures the idea too, doesn't it?

Proverbs 27:6 puts it this way: "Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy" (NASB). Isn't that memorable? "Faithful are the wounds of a friend." It is better to say what really needs to be said than settling for just being *nice*.

There has to be that ethical ingredient to our love. If you and I are going to genuinely love another person, we are going to care about the way that person is living. We will not automatically agree with and support everything that person is doing. That doesn't mean that we should become busybodies who go around and straighten out everybody else's lives. No! And there is definitely a place for support and affirmation and acceptance. Yes! But sometimes if you genuinely love another person you will need to say something to that person that he or she may not want to hear. Your questioning of that person's behavior may not be well received. That person may turn against you and level some accusation against you. But will you love that person enough to go ahead and say what needs to be said anyway? Out of love for that person will you take the chance of being ignored or rejected? Will you love another person enough to risk that? (And will you and I allow other people to love us by pointing out our faults?)

³ Quoted in John R.W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eermdans, 1982), 272.

The Spiritual Ingredient

There is a lot more that goes into true love than what we usually think about when we hear the word *love*. There is the mental ingredient of love. We need to be wise enough to know what to do and when to do it. There is an ethical ingredient that needs to be a part of our love. Love cannot be reduced to simply being *nice*.

Paul also indicates that there is a spiritual ingredient to love. Remember that verses 9 through 11 do record a prayer. “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more . . .” When Paul talks about righteousness in verse 11, he is praying that the Philippians will be “filled with the fruit of righteousness *that comes through Jesus Christ*” (emphasis added). Genuine long-lasting love is going to require more from us than that which we can produce by our own effort.

I think of a man who lived back in the nineteenth century in England. His name was Ashley Cooper, but he is most often known as Lord Shaftesbury. Ashley was born into an aristocratic family, but his parents didn’t show him much affection. He was raised by the housekeeper. She was the one that took care of his daily needs, and she was the one who would tell him stories from the Bible and who taught him how to pray. She instilled in him a simple but strong faith in Jesus Christ.

At age 25 Shaftesbury was elected to Parliament. His goal was to one day become the Prime Minister of England. But at age 32 two men came to him and asked him to lead the effort to protect children from being forced to work up to sixteen hours a day in factories. Would he introduce child protection laws in Parliament? At first Shaftesbury was hesitant, so he talked it over with his wife. She encouraged him to take on this responsibility, and so he did. Little did he know that it would take fifteen years to get the needed legislation through Parliament. Then he took on a new cause. He introduced legislation to protect children from working in horrendous conditions in coal mines. During his lifetime Shaftesbury devoted himself to other causes as well. He wanted to protect chimney sweeps, so he introduced legislation outlawing the practice of having small boys climb up chimneys in order to clean the soot out of them. It took him thirty-five years to get that legislation passed. Lord Shaftesbury also worked to bring clean water to cities and provide for better drainage of sewage. He also worked hard at reforming the church, and he helped sponsor evangelistic meetings as well. Lord Shaftesbury is a real hero of the faith.⁴

But listen to something that he once said. It reveals the key to his perseverance. “No man,” he said, “can persist from the beginning of his life to the end of it in a course of generosity . . . unless he is drawing from the fountain of Our Lord Himself.”⁵ It would have been so easy to have given up. The struggle to change the nation seemed impossible at times. But Shaftesbury kept on fighting until he had achieved his goal. But he had learned through all his battles that he needed to draw his strength “from the fountain of our Lord Himself.”

If you and I are going to love other people—if we are going to do more than just an occasional good deed for someone else—if we are going to love others day-in and day-out for the rest of our lives, we need a Source that is beyond ourselves. We need that spiritual ingredient that Paul prays for and that Lord Shaftesbury had come to depend upon.

May God teach us how to love, and may he give us his Spirit so that we will never stop loving!

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on October 18, 2009 by Dr. Frederic M. Martin.

⁴ John Pollock, “The Poor Man’s Earl,” in *More Than Conquerors*, ed. by John Woodbridge (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 245-251.

⁵ Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 381.