

## BodyLife Past Article Archive

### Why Settle for Anything Less?

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BodyLife • April 1996

The lone figure stood on the shore. They didn't recognize his form or his voice as he inquired about their catch, "You don't have any fish, do you?" The fisherman's worst torment when coming up empty.

"Try the other side," the voice recommended.

Only when they had cast their net on the other side and it came alive with a boiling sea of fish, did John put it all together. He'd seen it happen once before, on the day he and Peter had first met Jesus back on a dock in Galilee. "It is the Lord!"

Without hesitation, Peter stripped off his outer garment, plunged into the sea, and swam for shore. His friend was back and he couldn't wait for the boat to bring him to shore. There he finds Jesus had already cooked breakfast for them bread and fish.

It appears that the conversation is somewhat stilted. I'm not sure the disciples ever got comfortable with the Risen Christ who appeared and disappeared when they least expected him. No one challenged him as they ate in silent awe. Any word seemed too awkward so the silence hung in the air with the scent of cooked fish. Only when they finished eating did Jesus turn to Peter.

"Simon, do you love me?" The betrayed turns face to face with his betrayer.

"Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Peter's response is not flippant, it is measured. He doesn't respond with the word for divine love, agape, that Jesus had used, but with a lesser word, phileo, the companionship of friends. Jesus then tells him to tend his lambs.

You know the exchange. Jesus asks again and again Peter answers the same way. Finally Jesus ends with Peter's word, "Peter do you like me as a friend." And now Peter grieved at the third question answers in agony, "Lord, you know all things. You know that I like you."

### Looking for Love

"Do you love me?"

What god of any religion that has existed on the earth cares about being loved? False gods never seek love, only power. They rule with terror, demanding unquestioned obedience and inexhaustible rituals. This theme runs through the idols of the Old Testament, the gods of Greek mythology and the tribal deities of

people around the world. Human-made gods don't want love, they want subservience even if that means they plunder a man's riches and require the sacrifice of his own child.

But since they are man's own creation, they tell us far more about man's sinfulness than they do the intentions of God. Our Father is a God of love. It was love that inspired him to create a world and people to fill it. It was love that beckoned him earthward, to live as man among us so we might know exactly who God is. It was love that invited these men from fishing boats and tax booths into an awesome friendship. It was love that devised a plan for our salvation for which he would be the sacrifice. And it was love that held him through the brutal agony of the cross until our redemption was won.

His love had prevailed through it all. Was this the final test of the cross, not just that God loved us, but that the sacrifice itself might produce love in our hearts for him? For this was what God wanted with us from the very beginning.

So he turns to the one remaining who had just failed him the most. Peter, so confident that night that his love would prevail, boasted that he would die for his friend. But Jesus knew better. He knew the fear in Peter would overwhelm his faith, that by the next dawn Peter would be devastated by his greatest failure.

But if the cross was going to be worth anything, it would have to demonstrate God's love so completely, that it could usher a man from his worst failure into the fullness of the Father's love.

Could that be what Jesus was looking for in Peter? This was no quiz to prolong Peter's agony nor a three-point make-up test. It was an opportunity for Peter to discover the depth of love he really had for his friend, something he didn't even know himself.

Is that why he hesitated to use the word agape? Did he feel so unworthy to use Jesus' word because his failure might well have demonstrated otherwise? Maybe he wanted to use it, but hadn't felt he'd earned it. Nevertheless the question kept coming. "Simon, do you love me?"

Jesus wanted him to know that his failure was not a measure of his love. Perhaps Peter didn't understand it completely during this encounter. Perhaps this was just the seed, or maybe he couldn't grasp it until the fullness of the Spirit captured his heart at Pentecost, but we know he eventually got it. Whenever he refers to the love of God in his own epistles, phileo is no longer on his lips. It is agape and agape alone. Peter came to know not only the depth of God's love for him, but also his love for God.

## **Live the Love**

Love is the very essence of God's nature, and it is the means by which everything in his kingdom is transacted. He knew we were ill-equipped to understand that. Life in a fallen world is based around power, not love. We live by seeking to acquire the power or means necessary to guarantee our own

survival, happiness or safety. Often when we speak of love, we primarily understand it only in terms of what we get out of it a good feeling, a friendship or some other need met.

God's love is self-giving. It doesn't seek its own glory or advancement, and in fact makes one only more vulnerable in a hostile world. But this love is the most powerful force in all the world, able to transform the most broken lives and able to hold us through unimaginable pain.

Jesus lived in that love every second of his life, and in doing so he sought to share it with his disciples. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love." (John 15:9) All he asked them to do was stay in the love he had given them. He warned them: do it, and everything about their lives would bear fruit. Wander away and they would wither up and die.

His call to love was not just for them, but for all who follow him. That is the only basis for life in this kingdom. How do we do that. Here are three ways that can happen in each of us everyday:

## **1. Embrace His Love Every Day**

Do you remember the first day that you knew God loved you? Do you recall the euphoria, the wonder that the Almighty God who spoke worlds into existence even took note of you, much less genuinely cared about you and every event in your life?

If you are like most, that reality probably became clear to you in the midst of great pain or failure. But none of that mattered. His love captured your heart and everything about the world around you paled in comparison.

Every day was an adventure, and even through the most difficult circumstances you knew you were safe in his care and all your struggles were just a part of a larger plan of which you were now a part. God never intended you to leave that place. All he wanted you to do is remain there, or if you've left it, to return there. That's why Scripture calls it first love. We weren't meant to get on from there, but live in the joy of that love everyday.

Yet, isn't the record of most of our lives littered with great periods of time where we have wandered away from that love, and sought other motives to carry our spiritual life? Devoid of his presence we are hounded by fear, guilt and the delusion that we can earn that love by just trying harder. So easily we find ourselves living with love-substitutes. We double our efforts to be responsible, committed or disciplined. But those don't produce love, they were only meant to flow out of it.

In fact that's also the history of the church. In Abba's Child, Brennan Manning points out a disheartening trend:

History attests that religion and religious people tend to be narrow. Instead of expanding our capacity for

life, joy, and mystery, religion often contracts it. As systematic theology advance, the sense of wonder declines. The paradoxes, contradictions and ambiguities of life are codified, and God himself is cribbed, cabined, and confined within the pages of a leather-bound book. Instead of a love story the Bible is viewed as a detailed manual of directions.

If the Lord's love seems distant for you, draw back to him. Find a quiet place and rekindle your affection. Don't try to go on without it. God never intended you to live even one day outside the wonder of his love. And don't make the mistake of trying to earn it either. You can't earn points with someone who is no longer keeping score. Jesus already filled out your card with maximum points. You don't have to earn what he has already freely given; you simply get to receive it.

## **2. Let Love Be Your Only Motive**

"The love of Christ compels me," Paul, the apostle wrote in 2 Corinthians 5. Here was a man that rose to the pinnacle of the religious institution of his day before he came face to face with the love of Jesus on that road to Damascus.

He knew what it was to fear the disapproval of men, to conform his life to the strictest of codes trying to measure up, and the control he could exercise over others as a leader.

But the cross changed all of that. He knew he deserved to die in his sin, yet Jesus had taken his place. Paul concluded that he died with Christ and that his life was no longer his own. He had nothing to fear, nothing to earn, nothing to control. His life had been swallowed up by Jesus' love. There was nothing left for him to do but live every day only by what that love led him to do.

Everyday we are manipulated by host of motives, some of which even look godly. There are expectations people put on us, fears that drive us, appetites that lure us, and guilt that hounds us. But none of these are to control the life of the believer. All that matters now is love: his in us, and ours for him.

The next time you feel torn in any situation, retreat to this simple test: overwhelmed by gratefulness for what he's done for me and secure in his acceptance and care for me, what do I feel called to do? Paul allowed himself no other motive, and neither should we. That's the only motive that counts in this kingdom and the greatest gift of the cross.

Remain in my love. Without that kindled fresh in our hearts every day it is easy to find our spiritual lives sliding into an exhausting road of responsibilities and rituals. We will be busy doing a lot of things for God, but absolutely devoid of his life and his joy. Weariness will overtake us and our spiritual life will dry up.

## **3. Let His Love Flow Through You**

With every exchange Jesus admonished Peter to take care of his sheep. The love of God flowing in us will die if it can't flow through us. Having been so generously embraced by the Father, we will find it spilling over to others.

This love is the most powerful demonstration of God in the world. Jesus even took the Old Testament admonition, "Love your neighbor as yourself," to a whole new level: "Love one another as I have loved you." Having been loved, now we can love, both our brothers and sisters in Christ and those around us who are lost in the darkness.

I am convinced that we understand little of this incredible love. Yes, it forgives wrongs suffered, but not without honoring truth. Jesus could in one moment confront the false spirituality of the Pharisees at the same time he invited the prostitute into his kingdom.

So much that travels as love in the body of Christ today is simply trying to be nice even at the expense of dishonesty. We'll smile and feign love in someone's presence and take the freedom to tear them down in a conversation with someone else. God's love doesn't live in denial. It can take situations as they really are and transform them by his glory.

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This is the love God invites us to live in and with which we so easily lose touch. I realize that those who misunderstand love only as feeling will agree with much of what I've said, yet dismiss the conclusion as too idealistic. We need commitment and tradition, they'll say, because we won't always feel his love.

What has feelings do with love? His love for us and ours for him must transcend feelings and touch us at a far deeper level than the capriciousness of our emotions. But it is nonetheless real, all-encompassing and what ignites our hearts with his life.

Wouldn't it be better to rekindle the love, instead of pushing ourselves to greater responsibility? What effort of our own has ever led us into a greater touch with the Father's love?

We need only fall at his feet and receive what he has already given. In moments like that we can be captured by his love all over again. When that happens, we are truly full and truly free. He asked us to settle for nothing less. So whenever you lose touch with it, don't take another step until you fall back into his arms again, and again, and again.

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