Understanding Love

The word love in the modern sense seems to be a very mixed bag, meaning very different things to different groups of people. To many secular people, the term love could mean one of three things depending on the context. The first, the one that Christians should believe love’s only meaning to be, is when someone says “I love you” to a very dear friend or to their spouse with whom they share a deep and rich want for the other person’s best interest. The second type of love in the secular sense is a perversion on the first. This occurs when someone says “I love you” to a friend or to someone with whom they feel in love with, but none of the selflessness is present. The third type of secular love is not even a real type of love, but merely a synonym for tolerate or accept, this takes the form of “Love everybody”. The way in which our society expresses love has gradually, and more recently very quickly, departed from the first meaning and gone to the second and third.

Jesus instructed us to spread love saying, “love your neighbor as you love yourself”, often called the “Golden Rule”. Love in this sense only holds meaning if we understand love as it was meant to be, in the true and selfless form. An amazing analysis of love and particularly how it applies to the Golden Rule can be found in C.S. Lewis’ Mere Christianity Book 3 Chapter 7 “Forgiveness”. In short, he examines how we love ourselves in many different ways, and how we can apply that to how we must love others. Firstly, we do not always like ourselves, its easy to feel anger or disgust at our own actions. Secondly, we understand our own faults and are aware of the evil we are capable of. None of us are perfect and we, hopefully, would not dare to claim it or look past the bad that we do or try to paint our bad as good. Finally, as humans we keep our best interests very close to our hearts. We want ourselves to be loved and to be in the best possible state. People who truly love themselves will be willing to put themselves in uncomfortable or uneasy situations if they know that it will better them as a whole.

From this we come to understand a few key things about how Jesus wants us to love others:

1. We must love those we do not like, for truly loving someone does not mean you find them pleasant.
2. We must love those who do evil things, we must recognize the dignity every person holds regardless of the bad things they do. (This does not mean we condone their actions)
3. We must act in what is truly in the best interest of others, not simply what makes others happy.

1. The first point is a difficult hurdle for many of us to tackle. We all can almost instantly think of a person who annoys us to no end, someone who simply has to exist for us to be so angry that we want God to simply make them disappear. While it might be more difficult, especially for the prouder of us, we can imagine that WE are that person for someone else. Yes, each one of us annoys someone else to no end. To them our mannerisms are like nails on a chalkboard and we may not have even of ever done anything actually wrong to this person. We undoubtedly want this person to love us, to have our best interests in mind and to want to lift us up closer to God. We recognize that we are made in God’s image and likeness, so why shouldn’t this person want the best for us? Similarly, why should we not want the best for the people whom we do not like? Every single person we meet has a slice of God and his love in them. When we look into their eyes and feel nothing but anger and, hopefully not but very possibly, hatred, we are staring at one of God’s most prized possessions and saying, “You are not worth the effort and discomfort it may cost me to love you”, we look at God and say, “This creation of yours is not worth my effort”. Ouch, think of how many times we have looked at God and said these terrible things, the many times on which we have spat on his holy creations. We must treat each person we meet, each child of God, with the dignity they deserve and love them as God did when he first formed them. Think of how much effort and love God put into our creation, he put just as much effort into the creation of every person he met.

Jeremiah 1:5 Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you.

2. The second point is very similar to the first but does raise some unique questions that the first does not. Let us say that we perfectly accept the first point, and we love people we do not find pleasant, but only if they are objectively good people. We run into a similar dilemma as the first point where all people are made in God’s image and likeness with the same dignity as every other person. Ultimately our goal is to join a perfect union with God in heaven and to live like Jesus did. Initially, remembering this helps us to love people who do bad things somewhat frequently or people who have done a handful of major evils. I have found myself and many others run into another roadblock when he considers people who perform extreme amounts of evil. Think of Hitler, Stalin, and every other dictator or person who has disregarded the humanity of others for their own gain in mass. The first thought we may have when coming across these people is “Surely \_\_\_ is in hell, for God must have punished them for eternity”. Frankly, my first instinct would be to agree with that statement, but we have to remember God is love. Not God loves infinitely, but God in of himself is love.

God wants absolutely nothing more than for every single one of his creations to spend eternity with him. While Heaven and hell could, and likely will, get its own section written, I will talk about them in short. Heaven is where God welcomes us if we chose to allow him into our lives. Hell is where God allows us to go if we chose to reject him. We ultimately chose where we end up, God will not force us to love him, and he will not force his love on us. God being love in of himself welcomes all who ultimately chose to accept him into their life, no matter how many or how grave their sins. There is no amount of sin that God is unwilling to forgive, if a person at the end of their life truly rejects all of their sins and accepts Jesus Christ as their savior, I nor any other person can say they do not deserve a place with God in heaven. As you read this, you may ask “So you are saying even Hitler could have made it to Heaven?”. I will respond to this with that God being love forgives all that is truly asked to be forgiven, and I have no place to limit his ability to forgive. Banking on this “loophole” and planning on living a life of sin and repenting on your deathbed is a slippery slope at best. While I believe this topic deserves an analysis of its own, in short if you follow that line of logic, how could you truly repent at the end of your life? You essentially lock yourself into a state of saying “God you have to forgive me now of everything that I did because I say I am sorry now” and trying to claim power over God has historically never worked well. In summary, our goal is perfect union with God and to live as closely to Jesus and how he lived. We must love all endlessly even if they are not sorry for the evils that they commit against us. God is love, and in order to achieve union with him, we must also be love.

Matthew 19:21-21 Then Peter approaching asked him, “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus answered, “I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times.”

3. The final aspect of love is what would be considered the most backwards from the common culture of the modern age. The idea of accepting the personal decisions of others or being tolerant of other’s lifestyles as long as they do not immediately affect you is core to being a loving person in today’s secular world. Phrases like “You do you” and ”My truth” exemplify this twisted idea of love the secular world holds, as long as we do not cause others to go through any difficulty, we are loving people. This mentality could not be farther from the love that Jesus showed to the people that he came across every day. Jesus called those he met to live a holier life, yet never did he force them to follow him. Take the story of the rich man that asked Jesus about how to enter the kingdom of heaven (Mark 10:17-25). A rich man who wanted to know how to enter the kingdom of heaven came to Jesus and asked him what he must do to enter. Jesus told him the commandments he must hold, and the man replied saying he kept them all. Jesus then challenged him and told him to sell everything he had and to give it to the poor, then the man could follow him. The rich man got up, and left Jesus because this was too hard to swallow.

Jesus did not hold any punches when it came to how he chose to share the truth and love of his father with this man. Notice how he did not say “Give away some of your belongings and follow me”, Jesus was challenging the greed of the man’s heart and calling him to a life of holiness. Jesus knew this was a difficult ask of the man, think about how hard it would be if Jesus came to us today and say, “Sell everything you own right now”. I do not know about you, but I imagine I would ask Jesus if that was really necessary. It is hard to relinquish control of our lives to God, but he knows that our salvation comes through lovingly challenging us to live in a way only obtained through the difficult path. It is also important to notice how Jesus acted after the man turned away. Jesus did not go back on what he said and offer an easier alternative, or apologize for offering such a difficult task, he stuck to his guns. Anything less than the brutal honesty that Jesus offered would be second rate, and not the full love God has in store for us. Likewise, we must offer truth with love to those we meet. If we sacrifice the truth of God in favor of an easier path, we not only put others down the wrong path, but we are selling them a false image of God and his love. We must also not force others to accept the struggle. All we can do is model Jesus by preaching the truth and walking with those who accept it and hoping for a change of heart for those who reject it.

Matthew 7:21Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.