

## PURE LOVE

Several years ago, a comedy team by the name of Mike Nichols and Elaine May did a comic album called "Love."

One of the cuts was entitled, "A Mother's Love," and it consisted of a telephone conversation between a Jewish mother and her grown son.

The mother began the conversation by saying, "Michael, you never call me."

He answered, "But Mom, I called you just last week!"

"You only did that because feel like to have to," his mother said. "I can tell that you don't really want to."

"Yes I do, Mom," he said. "I really like talking with you."

"No you don't," she said, "in fact I don't think you love me very much at all. You don't appreciate all the sacrifices I've had to make for you!"

"Yes I do, Mom, I really do!" her son protested.

"Well," his mother said, "you don't act like you do, and all I can say to you, Michael, is that when your children grow up I hope they treat you just as badly as you treat me. I hope they never call you and you have to worry about them all the time just like I worry about you. And that, Michael, is a mother's prayer."

Love takes a lot of different forms.

But of all the forms it takes, a mother's love for her child is about as pure and selfless as love can get.

Even hardened criminals have been known to say that they love their mothers.

There are many kinds of love.

We love our country, we love music, we love our pets and we love the Browns.

Well, we love our pets anyway.

We use the word “love” to describe our feelings about all these things, even though they are very different kinds of feelings.

I love my wife and I love a good steak dinner, but not necessarily in the same way.

In the original language of the *New Testament*, the Greek language, there are four different words for love, each describing a different kind of love.

Three of them are human kinds of love which God has programmed into us so that we will be drawn into good relationships which are the foundation of a civil society.

The fourth, however, is a divine kind of love that comes to us directly from God.

The first kind of human love was called *storgay* in Greek.

*storgay* is the love that members of a family feel for one another: parents' love for their children, children's for their parents, sisters and brothers love for each other (at least after they've grown up).

*storgay* is family love.

The second kind of love is called *philia* and it refers to the bond of friendship that close friends have for each other,

It's the feeling you have for someone you've known since you were children or for the friend you have breakfast with once a week.

*philia* is affection

The third kind of love is called *eros* and it refers to the powerful attraction that draws men and women together.

Not only physical attraction, but the deep longing we feel for a soulmate—someone with whom we can share our secrets and spend our lives.

*Eros* is romantic love.

Each of these three kinds of love gives us a taste of heaven and of God, who is the source of all love.

And each kind of love starts out pure and undefiled.

The little boy's love for his mother is as pure as his mother's love is for him.

The loyalty of friends to one is wholehearted and without reservation.

And the lovers' euphoria, the crush you had on a member of the other sex in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, is intense and beautiful.

Each of these three kinds of love shows us that it is possible to love in a selfless way, to care as much for someone else as we do for ourselves.

But we live in a fallen world where sin infects our thoughts and words and actions, and this includes the way we love each other.

Being loved by someone can become more important to us than loving them.

We start thinking of love as a means of gratifying our own selfish desires rather than as a way of serving our beloved.

Family love can become controlling and oppressive and we want to flee from it.

Love between friends can become infected with jealousy or resentment.

Romantic love can devolve into lust, indiscriminate self-serving sexual desire.

Each kind of natural love contains within itself the seeds of its own self-destruction.

If natural love is not redeemed by supernatural love it tends to sicken and perish, taking its host along with it.

And that brings us to the fourth kind of love, a love which the Bible has much to say about: ἀγάπη (agapay) love, or divine love.

ἀγάπη love is love that is focused entirely on the beloved.

It is a love that doesn't merely *feel*, but *acts*—a love that puts others first and serves them for the sake of serving them—not looking for a return on its investment.

It is unconditional love that is *free of the need to be loved in return*.

It is hard for us to comprehend this kind of love.

Our notions of love are so infected with selfishness that it's hard to imagine a love that is fulfilled simply in the giving of itself.

But love is exactly that: a love which loves simply for the sake of loving.

It's a love that finds its perfect expression in Jesus Christ, who died loving and forgiving those who tortured and killed him.

Imagine, for a moment, holding your precious child up against two boards nailed together, allowing spikes to be driven through his wrists and ankles, and then leaving him there to suffer and die.

You couldn't do that. But God can—and did—because his love for you is that great.

It is a love offered freely and without cost in the hope that you will pass it along to others.

A mother's love for her child comes close to this.

Mothers love their babies not because of their behavior but in spite of it.

How many times have you been next to a screaming baby in a restaurant or on an airplane and thought, "Only a mother could love that baby?"

Newborn babies do two things: the demand to be fed and they sleep.

But God has designed mothers to love their babies and so they do with a love which is as close to selfless love, love as natural human love can get.

In spite the physical agony of childbirth, in spite of sleepless nights spent in rocking chairs, in spite of cleaning and diapering and trips to the doctor and worrying over fevers—the mother loves her baby.

And this is the love that shapes civilization, because each one of us is to a great extent the product of a mother's love.

A poet once wrote, "The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world."

And yet, and yet...even a mother's love is not perfectly selfless.

A mother soon acquires the need to be loved by her child, and if that love is not forthcoming, it can cause her anguish, so great is her need.

Like all the other forms of natural love, even a mother's love contains the need to be loved back.

S□□□□□ says: "I did so much for my children and now they never call!"

Fi□□□ says: "I loved my friends when they needed me; now where are they when I need them?"

E□□□ says: "It's hard to kiss the lips at night that chew you out all day long."

These familiar sentiments are solid reminders that our natural love for family, friends and lovers is filled with selfish need, and only if it is converted into □□□□□□love, unconditional love, can we love them as Christ has commanded us to do.

But how in the world can we learn to love unselfishly?

How do we learn to love others unconditionally—as Christ loved us?

The Bible's answer is that **we learn to love unconditionally by learning how to be unconditionally loved.**

We learn to give by learning how to receive.

This isn't as easy as it sounds, because if anything is more difficult for us than learning to love unconditionally, it's learning to receive unconditional love.

We're comfortable with natural love because it makes us feel valuable and it's something we can repay if we choose.

Children delight in being loved by their parents because they know they give their parents joy.

Friends delight in the affection of their friends because they can show affection in return.

Lovers delight in being loved by their beloved because they can show love in return.

But unconditional love, which testifies only to the joy of the lover in the act of loving, and which is accompanied by no need on the part of the lover to be loved in return is mortifying to us because *it has nothing to do with our value, and there is nothing we can do to earn it or repay it.*

That is why we would rather believe that God loves us because we are loveable rather than in spite of the fact that we are not.

Just as an obnoxious child can become convinced that he is lovable because his mother loves him, we can be persuaded by God's love that we are lovable, rather than obnoxious.

The thought that we are loved in spite of what we are is unthinkable.

And that is why the only way we can believe it is through repentance and faith.

Repentance teaches us how unlovable we really are and faith teaches us that God loves us anyway.

That He should love us makes no sense in our terms, but the gift of faith, created in us by the Holy Spirit, enables us to believe the clear Word of God; *"God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

Through repentance and faith we learn that God loves us with an everlasting love that neither results from His need nor depends upon our worthiness.

He loves us because, "God IS love."

In an ideal world, this would not be hard for us to believe.

We would understand and accept the fact that God is the source of all love and that the love of God is all that we need.

This would set us free to love each other without any need for recompense.

Love would be bounty, not investment.

And the good news I have for you this morning is that by faith, we already live in this ideal world.

By faith we receive the love of God and the love of God can flow out of us to others, like an abundance of water runs over the sides of a glass.

You and I have been transformed into good trees that produce good fruit.

We are branches whose character is determined by the character of the vine.

We have been shaped into conduits through which God's unconditional love can flow into the world,

So we thank God for his pure and unconditional love for us and pray that He will help us practice it toward others.

Amen.

