

From Self-interest to Love

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a three-week series

September 3, 2017

©2017 Scott L. Engle

1 Corinthians 13:11–13 (CEB)

¹¹ When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, reason like a child, think like a child. But now that I have become a man, I've put an end to childish things. ¹² Now we see a reflection in a mirror; then we will see face-to-face. Now I know partially, but then I will know completely in the same way that I have been completely known. ¹³ Now faith, hope, and love remain—these three things—and the greatest of these is love.

Romans 12:2 (CEB)

² Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God's will is—what is good and pleasing and mature.

Philippians 2:2–4 (CEB)

² [C]omplete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other. ³ Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others.

1 John 4:7–10, 19–21 (CEB)

⁷ Dear friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. ⁸ The person who doesn't love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins.

¹⁹ We love because God first loved us. ²⁰ If anyone says, I love God, and hates a brother or sister, he is a liar, because the person who doesn't love a brother or sister who can be seen can't love God, who can't be seen. ²¹ This commandment we have from him: Those who claim to love God ought to love their brother and sister also.

Romance, violins, flowers? Is that real love?

Jesus told us that all of God's teachings boil down to these two: Love God and love others. But what does "love" really mean? My ever-handy Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines love as "strong affection for another arising out of kinship or personal ties." Is that what Jesus meant?

Nope. Not by a long shot. If I had a "Jesus' Collegiate Dictionary," I'm sure that the definition of "love" would say nothing about affection; instead, it would be something like "putting the good of others ahead of your own." After all, it was Jesus who said, "No one has greater love than to give up one's life one's friends" (John 15:13) and "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). True love is setting aside self-interest for the sake of others. John Calvin got it right when he said "Now, if anything in our whole life is difficult, this is the worst."

One of my favorite modern-day tales about true love is the movie, *About a Boy*, based on the Nick Hornby book. It is the story of a bachelor named Will who comes to see just what Jesus and Paul were talking about.

Island living

John Donne once wrote, "No man is an island," but Will, a London bachelor, takes issue with that:

"All men are islands. And what's more, this is the time to be one. This is an island age. A hundred years ago, for example, you had to depend on other people. No one

had TV or CDs or DVDs or home espresso makers. As a matter of fact they didn't have anything cool. Whereas now you can make yourself a little island paradise. With the right supplies, and more importantly the right attitude, you can become sun-drenched, tropical, a magnet for young Swedish tourists.”

What does Will “do” on this island? Not much of anything. A scalp massage here, a meal there, and the days just glide by. Of course, Will has an advantage most of us don't; he lives off the royalties from his father's popular Christmas song. He slips smoothly through life, unencumbered and uninvolved. Will is quite skilled at resisting the occasional urge to help others, even if it's being godfather to his own niece.

Affluent and isolated. That's Will. It's his definition of the good life. Blind to the need of others? Well . . . not so much blind, just indifferent. Will thinks he doesn't need anyone. As he puts it, “The thing is, a person's life is like a TV show. I was the star of The Will Show. And The Will Show wasn't an ensemble drama. Guests came and went, but I was the regular. It came down to me and me alone.”

Alone. Until a twelve-year-old pest of a boy starts showing up after school to sit on the couch with Will and watch game shows. It takes a while, but even the king of island living slowly comes to realize that his life is richer because of Marcus. Even more important, Will comes to see that Marcus means something to him and he to Marcus. We could say that young Marcus teaches Will the true meaning of love.

True love

One of my favorite moments in the film is near the end. Marcus has decided to sing “Killing Me Softly” at his school's rock concert. He's doing it for his “mum,” having decided that it is the one gift that he can give her to bring her out of her depression, i.e., to give her new life. He goes to see Ellie, a much older girl on whom Marcus has a crush. She is the coolest girl in the high school and has taken the boy under her wing. Marcus asks her to accompany him when he sings the song in front of the entire song. She refuses, sensibly enough. She tells him that it would be suicide, social suicide. She obviously cares for the boy, but she isn't going to go that far.

As Marcus turns to leave, she tells him, “They'll crucify you.”

There it is. In a nutshell . . . sacrifice. love. cross. death. new life.

Marcus isn't an idiot. He knows what he is doing. By singing that song he will be sacrificing his life in his school . . . to save his mother. You see, he loves his mother and is ready to lay down his life for her.

Again, I doubt if Marcus is familiar with the book of Philippians. But when Paul writes that we are to put others interests ahead of our own, having the same mind in us that was in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:4-5), he could have had Marcus in mind.

Marcus, thanks to Ellie's friendship, had reached a level of social acceptability amongst his peers that he would have once thought impossible. Nonetheless, he is willing to lose everything to save his “mum,” even if only to gain a few minutes of happiness for her.

That's what love really is. Not the flowers or songs, not the sentiments or the longing looks. Love is the willingness to sacrifice for someone else, to give everything for another. To humiliate and even shame ourselves for the sake of another. That's love. That's Jesus.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

In the New Testament, love is not a feeling or even an idea. It is the concrete expression of Jesus' self-sacrificial death on the cross. “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for others.” (1 John 3:16) We look to Jesus' life to see what love really is. True love for God and neighbor is an expression of our repentance, transformation, discipline, and sacrifice. How can Jesus' example of sacrificial love transform our own notions of what it means to love others? How is your

love for others seen in your own concrete actions? How is your love for God seen in your actions? Do we ask enough of ourselves or is our love limited to that for which we can find some extra time and effort in our busy lives?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: The primacy of love

Monday, Leviticus 19:11-18 Living and loving as God's holy people.

Tuesday, Deuteronomy 6:1-19 Loving God, holding nothing back.

Wednesday, Matthew 5:43-48 God's law of love

Thursday, John 15:9-17 Jesus is clear: love each other!

Friday, Romans 5:12-21 How much does God love us? It is seen in the free gift to us of his son.

Saturday, Colossians 3:12-17 A portrait of the loving fellowship among believers.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Exodus.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

The current series: *Jesus Behaving Badly*

Coming in October 2018: A cruise to Israel with Scott & Patti

For more information go to www.scottengle.org