

On Love

JOHN ANDREW GALLERY

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Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you.

— Luke 6:27

Love one another as I have loved you.

— John 15:12

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

— John 15:13

Love your neighbor as yourself.

— Mark 12:31

Whatever your religious orientation, or even if you have none, it is possible to appreciate the insights of Jesus of Nazareth and learn from his teachings. One of his most challenging teachings is about the meaning of the word “love.”

The Greek language has three words for the one English word “love:” *eros*, meaning romantic or sexual love; *philos*, meaning brotherly love or friendship; and *agape*. *Agape* is the word used throughout the gospels when Jesus refers to love. It is generally defined as an unconditional, boundless love for all creation. Many people feel that is the essence of his teaching—that we should love one another unconditionally. While this is true, his conception of love and what it means to love one another is quite different from the normal understanding of that word. For him, love has a more tangible and practical meaning as can be seen from the statements and stories in which the word is used.

Jesus’ most well-known and most challenging statement about love is “love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.” This statement provides a definition of love that is consistent throughout the gospels. The structure of the first half and the second half of the

sentence is the same, making it clear that the word love means to do good. Interchanging the words—do good to your enemies, love those who hate you—doesn't alter the meaning of the sentence in any way.

Love, therefore, is not a feeling or an emotion: it is an action, a positive action directed toward another person. This is not to say that there aren't other forms of love that involve feelings and emotions; there are, but that is not the challenging idea of love presented in this and other statements. The fact that we are directed to do good to our enemies—knowing that we are naturally inclined to do good to our friends—makes it clear that the willingness to love, to do good, is not influenced by the person who is the recipient. We extend good deeds to friend and foe alike. This idea is well put in the *Hua Hu Ching*, a Taoist text attributed to Lao Tzu. It says:

"The first practice is that of indiscriminating virtue: take care of those who are deserving and also equally take care of those who are not."

The fact that we are advised to do good to others regardless of who they are suggests that the inclination to do good comes from our own character, from the nature of who we are. It is similar to the Buddhist concept of "loving-kindness"—a word that means a desire for the well-being of others that comes from the heart and is demonstrated in visible acts. The ability to do good and

to extend loving-kindness comes from within; it is the result of an inner change that is manifested in our behavior toward others. Neale Donald Walsh puts this in an interesting way:

“When you decide ahead of time that your inner state of being is going to be peaceful, understanding, compassionate, sharing and forgiving no matter what the outer moment brings, then the outer moment has no power over you.”

Doing good to our enemies because that is the nature of who we are also suggests that we do so without expecting anything in return. The fact that we are willing to do good does not provide assurance that our enemies will be willing to do the same for us. Our actions may not change their feelings or behavior at all; that is fine and irrelevant. To do good to your enemy is to do so because you want to, because that is the nature of who you are and not because you are expecting to gain anything in return or even that you expect your actions to have an influence on your enemy’s actions. Perhaps it will over time, but that is not the guiding motivation.

The idea that love is an action is also reflected in the story of Jesus’ conversation with Peter at the end of the gospel of John. He asks Peter, “Do you love me?” using the word *agape*, meaning do you love me in a boundless, all encompassing way. When Peter responds he uses

the word *philos* as if to say, “I am your friend, of course *I like you.*” Jesus repeats his question and Peter responds in the same way, each using a different word for love. When Jesus asks for the third time, he uses the word *philos*. It almost seems as if he realizes he has tried and failed to make Peter understand the larger dimension he means by the word love and so has given up trying. However, after each time Peter answers—even after the last—Jesus says, “Feed (or tend) my sheep.” He seems to be suggesting that even to love only as a friend is still an action; show that you love me by taking care of the poor and marginal members of society to whom my teachings have been addressed.

Jesus gives a further indication of what he means by love with the phrase “love one another as I have loved you.” This phrase forces us to look at Jesus’ relationship to his disciples and ask what it meant for him to love them, that is, to do good in relation to them. The most vivid and radical expression of his love is described in the gospel of John’s version of the last supper. The disciples have entered an upper room of a house somewhat secretively to share the evening meal. After the meal is over, when the other gospels have Jesus blessing bread and wine, John’s gospel describes Jesus doing something dramatically different. Jesus removes his robes, wraps a towel around his waist, and begins to wash his



disciples feet. Peter objects, but Jesus says that if Peter is truly to be one of his followers then he must allow his feet to be washed. He does and Jesus proceeds to do all the rest, including Judas.

In this case to do good is defined as serving another. Jesus takes the lowly position of a servant, kneeling on the floor and doing a menial task. Elsewhere he frequently talks about the need to be willing to be a servant: “If any man desires to be first, the same shall be last

of all and servant of all.” Here love is not simply doing a good deed, it is serving the needs of another—a positive action that puts another’s needs first.

The idea of putting the needs of another first is found in other spiritual traditions as well. One of my favorite examples is a Muslim story told by al-Ghazali. Two Muslim men are preparing to start a journey. One says to the other (I am paraphrasing), “This journey will be difficult and we will only be successful if one of us leads. It does not matter to me if you or I lead so you decide.” The second man thinks this over and concludes that allowing the other to lead will be a generous act and will earn him good favor in the eyes of God. So he says, you lead. At that the first man goes over and picks up the other man’s pack as well as his own. “What are you doing?” the second says. “You said I should lead.” When they reach camp for the night it is raining so the first man sits outside in the rain holding a stick to support a cover over his sleeping friend. And so it goes throughout the journey, illustrating the first man’s willingness to be servant of all, to show love and do good by putting the other man’s needs ahead of his own.

Service to others is the highest good, the truest expression of love.

The phrase “greater love hath no man than this, that he would lay down his life for his friends” often

seems to me to be misunderstood. For many the phrase “lay down one’s life” is thought to mean a willingness to die. This hardly seems consistent with the overall character of Jesus’ teachings, which celebrate life. For me “lay down your life” means to be willing to set the direction and activities of your own life aside for a while in order to assist another person move ahead with his/ her life. A servant puts another’s needs first, ahead of his own. He stops whatever he may be doing when called upon for assistance. A friend who does good for another does the same—she sets aside her own interests, the activities she is currently engaged in and even puts the direction of her life on hold temporarily in order to help another. The definition of love offered by the psychologist Scott Peck captures this idea well. He says:

“Love is the will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another persons spiritual growth.”

At one point Jesus points out that the Jewish law says, “Love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself.” He goes on to say (I paraphrase again) “How can you say you are following the law when your brother has filthy clothes and is hungry and you have a fine house and nice possessions?” The implication is clearly that if you truly loved your neighbor you would be doing good by sharing your resources with others less

fortunate. Once again love is an action, a positive action that goes beyond merely giving assistance to include sharing your resources as well.

Although the parable of the Good Samaritan is given as a response to the question “who is my neighbor” it provides a compelling illustration of the practical application of all these ideas about the meaning of love. The story is familiar enough not to need repeating. If we look at it step by step as an illustration of what it means to love this is what it shows.

1. The Samaritan comes across a man in need. Although the story does not identify him as Jewish everyone who hears this story, both now and I imagine then, assumes the man to be Jewish. Thus, the Samaritan helps—does good for—someone he knows hates him, someone who sees him as an enemy and someone he may see as an enemy, too.

2. The Samaritan cleans his wounds, gives him clothes, puts him on the donkey and takes him to the inn. In providing this assistance the Samaritan is serving the needs of the other man. He lays aside his own life—that is, he delays whatever journey he is on himself, he takes a side-trip to the inn that he wasn’t planning on making and he gives over a good deal of the day he expected

to spend traveling to assist the man, all the while setting his own activities and intentions aside.

3. The Samaritan pays the man's expenses at the inn. Thus, not only does he do good by sharing his time and his abilities in caring for the man, but he also shares his resources with someone in need, someone who at the time at least is less fortunate.

4. Lastly, the Samaritan does all these things without expecting anything in return. He continues on his journey without leaving his name and he may or may not believe that the Jewish man, his enemy, would thank him—that is irrelevant to him and not a motivation for his actions.

Thus, the Samaritan consistently acts from his own inner conviction that helping others to the fullest extent he can is the right thing to do, regardless of who they are.

When William Penn said "let us see what love can do" he did not sit at home and think fond thoughts about the Native American population of his colony. He put his beliefs into action: he went out and signed a treaty with them that respected their interests and established a basis for peaceful co-existence between colonists and Native Americans that lasted for seventy-five years. He took a positive action and did good to people who were at least strangers if not enemies.

So, the next time you hear yourself using the word love think of what it truly means. Understand that it is not simply a nice feeling or an emotion, but concrete, practical action as illustrated by the parable of the Good Samaritan and summarized quite succinctly in the *Hua Hu Ching*:

“To practice virtue [to do good, that is, to love] is to selflessly offer assistance to others, giving without limitation ones time, abilities and possessions in service whenever and wherever needed, without prejudice concerning the identity of those in need.”

Then, try to follow the advice given to Nicodemus, the man to whom the parable of the Good Samaritan was told:

“Go thou and do likewise.”

ILLUSTRATIONS

Jesus Washing Peter's Feet

Ford Maddox Brown, 1852-56

When Ford Maddox Brown exhibited his painting of *Jesus Washing Peter's Feet*, it created such a controversy that he was forced to modify it and add robes to the figure of Jesus. The modified version (first illustration) is in the collection of TATE BRITAIN, which has released the image to Wikimedia Commons. The image of the original version (page 5) is a contemporary interpretation of what the original looked like based on Brown's sketches.

QUOTATIONS

The King James Version of the New Testament

*Hua Hu Ching, The Unknown Teachings
of Lao Tzu*

Brian Walker

HarperSanFrancisco, 1995

The New Revelations, A Conversation with God

Neale Donald Walsch

Atria Books, 2004

The Road Less Traveled

Scott Peck

Simon & Schuster, 1998

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Andrew Gallery lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he is a member of the Monthly Meeting of Friends of Philadelphia of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). This essay is based in part on his book, *Living in the Kingdom of God*, which describes John's ideas about the core teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. More information about John and his spiritual writings can be found at www.johnandrewgallery.com.

This essay, in a slightly different form, was originally published in the December 2011 issue of *Friends Journal*. www.friendsjournal.org

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