



Sacrificial Love

"Love" can be defined in many ways. Christ's love for us is an unconditional love, and this is the love we are to seek in marriage.

by Matthew J. White

In my book, *Married to Jesus*, I tell the story of my *love* for Blue Bell® ice cream. "The best ice cream in the country" isn't sold up here in Ohio; so I long for our trips back to Dallas to visit my parents or when we drive down south to connect with my brothers in the Carolinas or Anne's sister in Tennessee. If you've ever tasted Blue Bell, then you know exactly what I'm talking about when I say, "I *love* that ice cream!"

But, what does loving ice cream have to do with marriage? It makes the point that "love" can take on many forms. I can love ice cream, or I can love my dog. I can love music and love the Cleveland Cavaliers. Love, then, can have different meanings depending on the situation or context.

Agape Love

The kind of love I want to discuss is the love that Christ has for us – the love that we're supposed to show our spouse every day. If, as Paul said in Ephesians 5:1-2, we are to "be imitators...and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God," what does that look like for me in my marriage and you in yours?

When Anne was pregnant with our first child, she had a rather awkward craving one night. I can't remember if there was something in particular that sparked the desire, but we were sitting on the couch one evening when, all of a sudden, she said she wanted a turkey salad. Now, we're not just talking about any old turkey salad; this had to be a turkey salad from Subway®. And, it had to have shredded lettuce. In fact, she told me that if the first Subway I went to didn't have shredded lettuce for some reason, then I'd have to find one that did! So, I hopped in the car in search of a shredded lettuce turkey salad from Subway.

Subway was not necessarily close to our house, so it was a bit of a task to respond to this request. I want to believe this was a very small example of what Jesus meant when he said, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13, NIV) Now, certainly, I wasn't laying down my life for my wife – I just went to get her a salad. But, by sacrificing my time and putting myself aside, I was showing love to her and hopefully giving her a glimpse of Christ in me.

Christ's love for me goes beyond my love for ice cream, sports or even friends and family. His love is a giving love. It is a sacrificing and selfless love. It is a love that shows itself in action. Romans 5:8 says, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Jesus loves us, not because we are attractive or share some interest with Him, but simply because He loves us. So, He made the ultimate sacrifice, giving up everything – all his glory, His life – to serve us.

The Greek word for this sacrificial love is *agape*. I like this definition of agape love:

*"Unconditional love that is always giving and impossible to take or be a taker. It devotes total commitment to seek your highest best no matter how anyone may respond. This form of love is totally selfless and does not change whether the love given is returned or not."*¹

Jesus doesn't expect anything in return. He loves me when I speak to Him daily, spend time in His Word and help an elderly person cross the street. But, He also loves me when I respond with a harsh tone to my kids, yell at the person who cut me off and don't feel like going to church on Sunday morning. His love is unconditional and is there even when I screw up.

No Keeping Score

So, let's go back to the Subway story for one more minute. Envision this: I say to Anne tomorrow, "Remember that time ten

years ago when I went to Subway to get you that shredded lettuce turkey salad? Why don't you run up to McDonald's® and pick me up a cheeseburger, just so we're even?" That sounds kind of silly, doesn't it? But, we live with that mentality in our marriage every day.

"I did the dishes, so you should bathe the kids."

"You got to go out with your friends last weekend, so tonight is my turn."

"Since you bought that outfit, I went ahead and got the tickets to the game."

Sacrificial, unconditional, agape love doesn't keep score. It doesn't matter how your spouse responds; if you want to love like Jesus loves, you have to put yourself aside. In a sermon entitled "What is Christian Marriage," Coty Pinckney said, "Agape is a love that gives, a love that does not demand or hold onto rights, but has the good of the other at heart. This is the love we need to work on in our marriage in order for our spouse to feel like he or she is married to Jesus."²

Copyright © 2008, Matthew J. White. All rights reserved. International copyright secured. Used by permission.

¹<http://www.ezilon.com/articles/articles/7675/1/God-is-Agape-Love>

²Pinckney, Coty. *What is Christian Marriage?* (sermon) Community Bible Church: Williamstown, MA, 1997.
