

## **Love: What Is It?**

A sermon by Rev. Grant R. Schnarr

What is love? The Writings say that everybody knows that love exists, but find it difficult to define what love is. If you think about it, there are so many different kinds of love. There's romantic love. You see that on television, read about it in books today, and see it in the movies. There's love for children, parental love. There's love of self, love of goods, and love of possessions. There's a love to God, a love to the neighbor, a love of life. There are so many different kinds of love. The Writings say that if you want to take one all-encompassing definition of love it would be this: that love is the life of man. Love is life and life is from God, so it follows that God is love itself.

If you think about that- God being love itself- life itself flows into us with this love, and that's what gives us life in this world, gives us motivation. We can also see that whatever we love in our life we put in front of us, we pursue it, and we follow it. What we love within, deeply within, we build our life around. It is very much a part of our existence, this love. So it is that this love is our whole life.

Now we are also told that the more we learn to love the neighbor genuinely- that is, to try to bring God's life or His love into ourselves and to share it outwardly with others- the more we truly begin to live for the first time. This is because with this love comes a genuine life from the Lord, a feeling of self, a feeling of aliveness.

So how do we learn to love our neighbor? And what is this love to the neighbor? Christ defined it this way,

"It is the essence of love to love others outside of oneself, to be one with them and to render them blessed from oneself."

Three things are listed here to help us: 1) to love others outside of oneself, 2) to want to be one with them and 3) to make them happy.

We can better understand this if we look at the nature of creation and why God created us. God, being love itself, desired someone, something outside of Himself, that He could love, that He could benefit; someone who would have their own identity; someone who could take that love and return it back to Him. And so God breathed into the nostrils of man the breath of life, which gave man a

feeling of self life. He gave man the feeling as if he were God in his own right. He gave man the opportunity to take that love and bring it into his heart and to express it to his fellow men. This is why God created us apart from Himself, gave us our own identity, our own sense of self life. He gave this to us so that He could love us, so that He could be with us in the world.

You know it's not as if some day, if we are very good people, we'll be absorbed back into God, into the Godhead. That would do away with the purpose of why God created us in the first place. The more we learn to bring God into our lives, bring love into our lives, the more we feel that identity, the more we feel as if life is our own, and the more we feel we are alive. So God created us apart from Himself.

At the same time He wants to be one with us through our choices-through our choices in our daily lives, through what we make of our ourselves we bring the Lord into ourselves. We bring in His goodness, His life. We do this in service to others. We do this in changing those things that are wrong within us, that block it out, putting them down, putting them away, opening up the way so that the Lord can come in and be one with us. And so He says,

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in to him and sup with him and he with me."

And then there is the third part of love, to render someone blessed outside of himself. When we learn to bring the Lord into our life, to lead a good Christian life, then the Lord can flow into us. And with that goodness comes happiness. That's what creation is about. The more we follow the Lord's ways, the more we follow the order of life that He has set up for us, the more goodness, and with it joy, comes into our life. Happiness and goodness are one and the same thing. So the Lord can bless us through our choices, and can make us happy.

We don't have to see this only in creation, we can also see this in our daily lives- this effort to conjoin, this effort to be one with people. Perhaps you remember when you were a child, picking up a puppy for the first time, or a little kitten, and holding it tight, and trying to be one with it, to bring it in. You just couldn't get any closer. The

same is true as we grew older with the friendships we first started to develop when we were teenagers, exploring friendships for the first time- something deep, something more meaningful. We wanted to share the inmost secrets of our heart with someone, and share the depth and breadth of what it means to be a human being; to have an intimacy with someone who we could be with, who would understand us, whom we could help in their life- that effort for conjunction.

And can we not see it in a man and a woman, a husband and wife, two people who come together in an effort to be conjoined, not just on a physical level, but within; to be one in thought and affection in all things of life- not to lose identity, but rather two identities coming together to create one identity, a new identity that only the two of them can create. To come together, to have all these delights, can create a friendship between a man and a woman, that can bring, within, spiritual delights.

And then in a marriage relationship, with a commitment that can be brought down into the ultimate physical, where sexual relationship becomes an ultimate of that love, and where we can bring that love into this world in a way that we could not do otherwise, the Word says,

“ In the beginning He created them male and female, and for this cause shall a man leave his father and mother and cling unto his wife, and the two shall be one flesh, wherefore they are no more two but one.”

How very different this is with a person who has made a life of selfishness. Selfish people, unlike those who have tried to give, build a universe around themselves where they become the center of the universe as it were, and everyone and anything that is around them, becomes a tool that they can use. True, they do love people, but only those people who are close to them. Those people who serve them, they love. As the Writings say, "To the degree that someone serves the selfish person, that selfish person loves them." The friends of a selfish person become pieces of property more than anything else, things that they own, things that they can use, rather than people they can help, give to and share with. Selfish people are ones who develop relationships simply for what they can get out of it for themselves. So they take rather than give.

An example of this is a man who chooses a partner of the opposite sex because of what she looks like, simply because she is a status symbol, and he wears her as though she's a piece of clothing and discards her as soon as she gets old and worn out, or if he finds a better one. Does that happen today? It does.

Another example is people who choose friends, not because of what's inside of them, not because of what they can do for their friends, but because of how much money they make; or whether they have status; or whether that person will help them get a job or keep a job; or to get in with the right crowd. Do these things happen today? They do.

It's pure selfishness, and people who build a life on self, desire that everyone around them serve them. The Rev. Erik Buss in his book *THE ART OF LOVING*, states,

"A selfish person is interested only in himself, wants everything for himself, feels no pleasure in giving, but only in taking. The world outside is looked at only from the standpoint of what he can get out of it. He lacks interest in the needs of others and respect for their dignity and integrity. He can see nothing but himself. He judges everyone and everything from its usefulness to him. He is basically unable to love."

Does that mean a selfish person cannot change, and is unable to love? The Lord has planned that we can always turn back to Him. We can always open up our hearts, change our lives, and begin again. But it is true that to the extent that we build our lives on selfishness, the harder it is to get out of it. If we wrap ourselves up in ourselves, it is much harder to unwrap, to begin to love. And so the Lord says, "He who commits sin is the slave of sin." After a while of following the path of selfishness, one's attitude becomes harder and harder to change.

And so there are some questions that we should ask ourselves: one of them being, why do I have the friends that I have? Is it because of selfish reasons? Is it because of what they can do for me rather than what I can do for them? If we do this we'll find that we have mixed motives. Every one of us has friends for selfish reasons,

and also for good reasons. But we can look and see where the bad is, (where we are using our friends instead of giving) and try to change that. We can pray to the Lord for help to become better and more loving people, more concerned, more understanding about our friends, and our partners.

Now a single person, alone, also has a challenge. They can so easily fall into the trap of going for the quick fix- going for that feeling of intimacy that we all desire so much; or going into friendships with people without thinking about what they're really like on the inside; or moving into a physical relationships with members of the opposite sex because of a need to feel secure. And we can get that for an hour, maybe a day or two, or even a longer time, moving into the kinds of relationships that aren't really based on any kind of commitment.

But if we do, what happens? If we don't have the discipline to sit back, to think about what we are doing and use our heads and not just what we feel in our insides, we form relationships that on the external, on the very sensual level, seem together and bonded, but within one is really miles apart from the other. People can move into relationships where, externally, bonds are created, where emotionally people are together as it were, but on the inside have nothing in common. They have no real or genuine affection from within. This kind of relationship is such a hard thing to break. And it causes so much pain.

All the Lord's teachings about leading an orderly life, are there to help us. They are not there just simply to tell us what to do and if we don't do them we are going to be hurt. He gives us these teachings so that we can be happy, so that we can be with Him.

Now, love isn't all giving. If you think that Christian love means to give and give and give, and be used and be hurt, you are wrong. Christian love is not about being a martyr. What good does it do if you are giving and giving to someone who's always taking from you and hurting you? Does it do you any good? No, it doesn't. Does it do the other person any good? No, it doesn't. They will continue being selfish, and continue hurting themselves too, by that very selfishness.

Christian love sometimes says, no! Christian love not only benefits, it sometimes punishes. It looks to the end. To the most good it can do, the most useful. And if you really love someone and they are hurting themselves and you by using you, the best thing to say is no. That's true Christian love.

Now how do we love? This is a hard question. It takes real discipline to learn how to really genuinely love. It takes sitting down and looking at yourself and deciding what you need to work on, what selfishness there is in your life. It takes dealing with one or two of them, putting them out of your life and beginning to start giving. And so you'll find in life that the more you look at yourself and be honest with yourself (sure you may be afraid for a while to see those things within you!), but if you deal with them and pray to the Lord for help, a change will take place in your life. It takes real discipline but you will be able to begin to feel that love come within you.

How often in our lives do we decide to change something, and maybe the next day we still remember to work on it. Perhaps the next day we wake up and again we remember to make the change, but then the following day we wake up and we forget all about it. Maybe a month later we remember, "Oh yeah, I was going to work on that, wasn't I?" It takes real discipline. It takes concentration. And even more than this, it takes patience, patience not only with ourselves but also with those we deal with. It's not going to happen overnight. It's not going to happen instantaneously in our lives. There are going to be times when we fall down. There are going to be times when we hurt ourselves, but we've got to get back up and try again. This is all that the Lord asks - that we try. And if we put that little grain of mustard seed of effort into our lives, it will grow and become a tree.

Now the last and probably one of the most famous quotes from Swedenborg in the Writings for the New Church is this:

"Love consists in this, that its own should be another's. To feel the joy of another as joy in oneself, that is loving. But to feel one's own joy in another and not the other's joy in oneself is not loving."

To feel one's joy in another, what does that mean? That means to give that goodness that we have in our lives to someone else. To

give what is one's own to another person. It means, if we have gone through an experience and learned something about life, and if someone else needs that, to give it to them, to help them. Let's say somebody is having a real problem with anxiety, something perhaps that is going on in their life. Maybe you have dealt with that before. Maybe you've come through it. By sitting down and talking to them to help them out, to give them those answers that you have found in your life - that's loving. Maybe someone's going through a tragedy in their life, the death of a loved one. Maybe you've gone through that too and have dealt with it, to help them out, to tell them what it's going to be like, to tell them how you hung on through the storm. That's loving! I remember someone who had lost his wife and said that it was as if the Lord had put all these people in front of him in the weeks following her death, people who had the same thing happening to them, that their spouse was dying. It was as if the Lord was saying, "I'm going to make something good come out of this, and you can do something here to help your neighbor. Go and give to that person, tell them what you went through." That is loving, that is giving.

Now you don't have to do this. It's so easy to stay in one's own little house, one's own little closet, and one's own little mind and not reach out and give because it feels so vulnerable. If you don't give, after all, you won't be hurt. But the Lord is telling us to take the chance. Risk! Give! And you will receive that love within. And to feel the joy in another in oneself is also loving. But we can understand this - maybe in a child's first step, for those of you who have seen that. When that child takes that first step, you should see the parents' faces, they're beaming! It's a great miracle! The feeling that we feel within, that's love. To see a young couple in love, get married, with all their dreams that they have, their visions for what their marriage will be like, that feeling we can feel in our hearts during the wedding is love. To see someone who has worked for a company all their life be rewarded and recognized upon retirement, and to look into their face and see them as they are reflecting back on all the things that they have done and accomplished, that's love - to feel that feeling within.

But it's not only the good times where we can feel the joy, the love. There are also the times of pain when other people are suffering, when people are hurting, and we feel that within ourselves,

feeling what they must be going through and it hurts us. That's love, too. Going to them, picking them up, holding them to make them feel better, that's what love is. That's what love is all about.

Love doesn't come naturally, not the genuine love the Lord wants us to have. We've got to open our hearts to Him. We do that by recognizing our shortcomings, by praying to the Lord to remove them and beginning a new life. If we do this and then begin to give with sincerity, with concentration, and be willing to risk, then the Lord will begin to flow into our life and fill us with goodness and happiness. For the Lord said,

"Do good and lend, hoping for nothing in return and great will be your reward in heaven."

Amen.