
What Is Love?



God is missing. Just watch five minutes of the evening news. We live in a world filled with evil and hate. Society is rapidly being destroyed by people who claim they do not need God, but what they don't realize is that rejecting God means rejecting *love*. In a world where "all faiths are created equal," people attempt to make God whatever they want Him to be—and in turn, they make love whatever they want it to be.

A well-known writer once said, "Love is the irresistible desire to be irresistibly desired." Most of us live as if we believe that is true. I initially thought it was a good definition—until I realized how selfish it is. No wonder we are missing the mark. It should be no surprise that God has gone missing from today's dreary world. We have abandoned everything we know to be true about love, and we have made it about us.

We are all out for ourselves. Like greedy monsters, we thrust our forceful fists into the hearts of everyone we meet,

demanding that they give us love and take little in return. We want and we have, yet we are always left wanting. More than we want to love, we want to be loved. More than wanting to give and sacrifice, we want to be given to and sacrificed for. Somewhere along the line we have come to believe that we are worth something *just because*, yet others must prove their worth to us.

Close examination shows we do not even know what love is. We say, “I love pizza” and “I love my dog,” then we turn around and say, “I love my family” and “I love God.” How can one word accurately describe our feelings for all of those things? I mean, if we love pizza yet we will throw a leftover piece in the garbage, how does that translate when we say we love our friends? We have been misusing the term, and the true definition of love has been lost somewhere in translation.

What is love, anyway? First John 4:8 tells us that God is love. That means the cure for a world where love is missing is to fill it with God. The nature and acts of God are characterized by love. Love is the driving motivation behind all God does. You cannot have God without having love, because God himself is love and He cannot go against His own nature. Yes, John was right. God is love. And our world needs Him now more than ever before.

Pretend for a moment you are one of the lepers, or the paralytic, or the hemorrhaging woman Jesus healed. Close your eyes and imagine what it must have been like to be the

thief on the cross next to Jesus who was promised paradise in his last hour.

What would the evening news be like tonight if it were filled with stories of triumph like that instead of the grim pictures of evil and defeat that we see filling our television screens each night? Love is a powerful thing, and in a world like ours, real love *always* stands out.

It is seen in the girl who befriends the new girl in school who dresses differently and talks a little funny. Glimpses can be caught in the girl who holds fast to hope and refuses to sleep with her boyfriend because she knows God created sex for the lasting union of marriage. Love reigns in the girl who obeys her parents when she doesn't exactly understand or agree with their rules. God smiles at the girl who demonstrates love by forgiving someone who has hurt her. And heaven explodes in monstrous applause at the sight of the girl whose heart is fully committed to Jesus.

Oh, how often we fall short. God has placed a beautiful song in our hearts, but we sing different lyrics. We were designed to love and be loved in a selfless way, yet we exhaust ourselves with efforts to make love something other than what God created it to be. It is about others, but we want so desperately to make it about us.

As Christians we can recite verses like John 3:16 from memory: "For God so loved the world . . ." and 1 Corinthians 13:4, which states, "Love is patient, love is kind." We can probably even hum the melody to Sunday school songs like,

“They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love. . . .” But do we *live* like we believe those things? Do we love like we know what we are doing?

I am not talking *pepperoni-pizza-that-you-throw-into-the-trash-can* love. The love I am talking about is not *remembering-to-feed-your-dog-named-Floppy* kind of love. It’s the *what-can-I-do-for-someone-else-today* kind of love that will grab the world with force and change it.

But Shannon, you might be thinking, *I am just one person. I can’t change the world.* One person is all it takes. Just as God placed the strength of a leader in Moses, the heart of a shepherd king in David, the grace to be queen in Esther, and the heart of a servant in Jesus, God placed His love in you.

Multitudes everywhere are pushing and shoving each other—they don’t stand out. It will be the one who walks through the multitudes quietly while gently loving others that will captivate the crowd. True love does not demand recognition for what it is doing. The reward of love is the joy it brings to the one it loves.

In second grade my teacher told my mom that during free time I was always walking around looking for the outcast, bringing them into a group and making sure they felt at home before moving on to someone else. Little did he know I did that only because I always feared that one day *I* would be the outcast, desperately wanting someone to take the time to draw me into the circle with everyone else. I longed to help others find their place in an attempt to find my place there as well.

Perhaps you are the girl who has never been invited into the circle. If you are, I am so sorry. No one should have to experience that. But now is your moment to shine. Now is your moment to find others who have spent their entire lives on the outside, and reach out to them with the compassionate love of Jesus Christ and make them feel at home.

For a while I regularly met with a girl who was having trouble with friends at school. The popular girls were only nice on certain days of the week, and every few days they went looking for someone to pick on, someone to reject, and someone to ridicule, just for fun. Their target was usually my friend. Finally one day I asked her about the other girls in her class.

“Oh, they’re really nice,” she said, “just not as popular.” Gently I reminded her how awful she felt when she was left out or went unnoticed by those around her. Then I began to explain how the less popular girls must have felt if no one ever wanted to be their friend, just because they weren’t as well known around campus.

Eventually she saw my point—and her opportunity. Knowing the depths of her own hurting heart, my friend reached out in kindness to these other girls. They began writing each other notes, hanging out after school, and doing group projects together. And the strangest thing happened: My friend forgot all about the popular girls who hurt her. She made real friends who stuck up for her and stood by her.

One day the popular girls noticed what had happened and

began to sweet-talk my friend, inviting her back into their circle. If all of the other girls in the class wanted to be her friend, these girls certainly did too. My friend surprised them though. She was nice to them in response to their offer, but she never rejoined their clique. Feeling rejected, the popular girls decided to hurl insults at her and spread rumors about her around school.

But my friend no longer cared. She had taken the power away from those who hurt her, and she reached out and made some new—true—friends. Sometimes being the one who is pushed out of the circle is just part of God’s plan to get you to reach out to those not in your circle.

If you are the girl who has always been on the inside, now is your chance to offer the acceptance you have received to someone who desperately needs it. Look beyond your circle for a minute, and reach out to those who are in desperate need of love. Maybe it will cost you something in terms of acceptance or comfort to reach out, but do for others what you would want them to do for you. After all, you never know when you are going to find yourself on the outside of the “in crowd.” Sometimes when we refuse to step out, God will allow us to be pushed out. Trust me, it’s always less painful when we *choose* to reach out to others.

Maybe you know what it’s like to be on both sides of the circle—you have been welcomed in, and you have been left out. Then you know better than anyone out there just how good it feels to be loved, and how horrible it is to be unloved.

Your compassion meter should be well-tuned as you set out to seek those who are in desperate need of a friend.

In college I met a very beautiful and popular girl who was always reaching out to others. We'll call her Kim. She had long blond hair, perfectly tanned skin, a bright white smile, and dark brown eyes that were known to melt many of the male hearts around campus. I always knew of her, but I didn't really get to know her until my last semester. We were assigned to the same group in a class, and we had to share our life stories.

When Kim's turn came, I was shocked as she tearfully shared about her junior high and high school days. A self-described loner, the now beautiful and popular Kim used to eat lunch alone, locked in a bathroom stall where others couldn't see that she was by herself. Suddenly I understood why Kim was always reaching out to the underdog. I saw why she was making sure the freshmen felt welcomed and the loners felt included. And I came to respect Kim more in that moment, as she sat in a pool of her own tears, than I ever had before.

The world needs more people like Kim. Ever since that fall afternoon when we sat under the trees and watched the leaves turn as we talked about our lives, I have tried to be more like her. And I have been eternally grateful for all of the Kims I have met in my life, when I desperately needed someone to open her heart, offer her hand, and show me the way.

That's what Jesus meant when He told His disciples that

the world will know we are Christians by our love for one another. It's what Paul meant when he told Timothy we are to be an example in our love. It's what Jesus meant when He said we are to love like He loved.

Love is what makes us different. Love is everything. It's not too late to change the world. It only takes one person to spark a great movement. You are that one. I am that one.

But we have a choice: We can love, or we can refuse to love. We can embrace God and His love, or we can reject Him completely. There is no middle ground. First John 4:7–8 says one who does not love does not know God. Your actions are speaking louder than your words.

This isn't a book that was written to be read in one sitting. Each chapter focuses on one aspect of love and offers both scriptural counsel and practical advice on how to live that principle out in your life. Spend time in each chapter—answer the questions at the end by writing them in your journal, discussing them in a small group, or sharing with a friend. Put love into action with the suggested activity. Focus on the theme of one chapter until you think you're getting the hang of it, and *then* move onto the next. When you are done with the book, come back to it every now and then to check your progress. None of us can become a girl who loves genuinely and truly overnight. It takes time spent in prayer and fellowship with God to learn to love as He does.

We can either be girls of this world, or girls of God. I don't know about you, but in the end I want to come out being a girl who loves.