

## The Pinnacle of Love

*"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us." - 1 John 3:16*

The disciple Jesus loved is asserting that that the cross is more than just one of many pictures of love. He dares to suggest that we cannot truly even know what love is apart from what the cross of Christ reveals to us about it, at least, not that supreme love into which God calls His people. Only Christians can understand this particularly lofty kind of love, and the sacrifice of Jesus for us is how we understand it.

The contention that only Christians can understand this pinnacle of love would no doubt aggravate most unbelievers, but it may even cause a number of nervous believers to cringe as they ask, "Isn't that going a little too far?" After all, is it not true that non-Christians love their children as wholeheartedly as do Christians? Is not the love of a boy for a girl, or a friend for a friend equally beautiful whether the parties involved are Christians or not? Of course, all such love is beautiful, tender, and genuine. But, it is still not quite the love that is made known only by way of the cross.

What is this difference? Love pours from God into human hearts like sunshine and rain, upon the believer and unbelievers alike. God's essence is love, and man was created in the image of God. So, it follows that love is interwoven into man's very nature. Still, as is the case with every other attribute of the divine nature within man, something happened to love when sin entered the world, and man fell from God's perfect image.

Perfect love became at least somewhat self-centered with the Fall. In some way, even the tenderest love we show as non-Christians is inwardly distorted. It is really, in a sense, a reflection of the love we have for ourselves. We love our children because they are extensions of us. We love our parents because our lives are related to theirs. We love our friends, because we only choose as friends those who please us, help us, or are in some way compatible with us. In a sense, we love a projection of ourselves in others; so ultimately, all human love is somewhat self-centered. After all, we don't naturally love enemies or even those who just annoy us.

For those of you who regard yourselves as well-read, I cite an example from great American literature. *"Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer had a very shiny nose."* What was the net result of this nasal oddity? Rudolph was ostracized from the herd at large and restricted from participating in any reindeer games. He only receives love from his reindeer peers after he pulls their cookies out of the fire on a particularly foggy Christmas Eve.

We accept the account without batting an eye. That's the way of the world, after all, because reindeer love is not that much different than fallen human love. Rudolph is not loved unconditionally. It is incumbent upon him to rise above his handicap and establish his worth in the eyes of the community. They loved him because he served them. Jesus asked:

*"<sup>46</sup>If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? <sup>47</sup>And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? <sup>48</sup>Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" - Matthew 5:46-48*

There is a kind of love innately present in man, but the Fall makes it susceptible to self-centeredness. In Christ, something happens. There is born a new kind of love. When a person is born again he passes, as John says, *"from death to life,"* and he begins to love those he never loved before and to love those he has loved before in a different way. This is the love, the perfect love, the love never made evident before the cross of Jesus.