

We Abide in Christ **1 John 3:16-24**

The same word different meaning

Communication relies on a shared understanding of word meaning. A chicken means a chicken and a dog means a dog. However, the same word or phrase can mean completely different things. I read an interesting article, “3 Common Phrases That Mean Completely Different Things to Men and Women.” Those three phrases are “with all due respect,” “A few amends,” and “bless your heart.” If someone says to you “with all due respect,” do you find it a positive comment or a negative comment? “Fifty-one percent of women hear this as a negative comment, while 68 percent of men hear it as a positive one. When women say a document or other work item needs “a few amends,” 74 percent of female respondents said it means “there are just a couple of typos.” Meanwhile, 44 percent of men said it means, “this is awful and needs redoing.” What about “Bless your heart”? How would you understand it? Does it sound positive or negative? 77 percent of men would understand it as another way of saying “you’re sweet” while 44 percent of women said what it really means is, “you’re dumb,” especially in the South. Interesting. Isn’t it? What I would like to say is that the same words do not always carry the same meaning for everyone. It applies to our interpretation of the Bible as well. We tend to read the Bible with our own cultural lens.

Love is more than an emotion!

The main theme of 1 John is “love.” When we hear the word, “love,” what first comes to mind? Because of cultural influence, we tend to think of love primarily as an emotion. The first meaning of love in the dictionary is “an intense feeling of deep affection.” However, biblical love is more than an emotion. According to John, “we know love by this, that he laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” We learn love from Jesus Christ and this love is self-giving and self-sacrificial by nature. If we understand love primarily as our emotion or feeling, we find many difficulties in understanding this self-giving and self-sacrificial nature of love.

When we understand love only as an emotion, love becomes something that we cannot control. Can you control your emotions and intentionally make yourself have an intense feeling of deep affection toward someone? No. Love doesn’t work that way. That’s why we say, “I fall in love with you” rather than “I decided to love you!” But Jesus commands, ‘Love one another and love your enemies.’ If we understand love only as an emotion, this commandment is impossible to follow.

Also, Jesus’ commandment of loving your enemies can be oppressive if we understand love only in terms of our emotional status. Even if we try to obey Jesus’ commandment to love our enemies, we often feel that we become hypocritical because we know that deep down in our hearts, we don’t really feel deep affection toward those who have harmed us. Many years ago, my father’s church decided to relocate and build a new church building. They bought land and started construction. However, a few months later, construction was halted because a representative of a neighboring apartment complex filed complaints about the noise and dust, despite the church following the guidelines. The only way to resume the construction was to reach an agreement with the representative. My father met him several times and begged him to drop the complaints so work could continue. Even though they had done nothing wrong, the representative acted very rudely, as if he was the boss. Of course, what he wanted was money. Yes, he was an unjust man who knew how to take advantage of a loophole in the law. I saw the stress he caused my father and construction of the church was delayed for three months. Could I love this man? No. I still cannot have an intense feeling of deep affection toward him. If we understand love primarily as an emotion, we cannot love our enemies.

Love is also an act of will and action

Can we love someone without liking them? Can we really love our enemies? Yes, we can if we change our understanding of love. Biblical love is more holistic than emotional. It includes an act of the will and action. It means that we can “love against our will or feeling” by obeying Jesus’ commandment to love even when we do not want to do so. In many cases, we may not be able to love one another and surely not our enemies emotionally. Our heart knows this, but we can still choose to love them in action. I believe you remember John Wesley’s three simple rules for Christian living: Do no harm. Do good. And stay in love with God. While we may not have a strong feeling of deep affection for those who hurt us, we can still choose not to harm them and maybe we can even choose to do good for them. That is also love. In his sermon “Loving Your Enemies,” Martin Luther King Jr. said, “When the opportunity presents itself when you can defeat your enemy, you must not do it.” He points out that this is the way to

love your enemy. Yes, we can love others and even our enemies through our actions. We can choose to love them in action even against our own emotions and will. So don't feel guilty about not having a feeling of deep affection toward those who harm you while obeying Christ's commandment to love.

John said, "for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything." Yes, God knows our hearts. God knows what we've been thinking. God knows sometimes our hearts betray us so we may not be able to emotionally love others, but what matters is how we act on those inclinations. God knows our hearts and our struggles to choose love in action. If we still choose to obey Christ's commandment to love others, we still abide in Christ. God meets us where we are. God does not expect perfection from us, but for us to act in love. As we abide in Christ by loving others, we can gradually overcome our innermost thoughts of anger and hatred and can truly love others as Christ loves us.

I have read a remarkable story about Rev. Dr. David Suh. He was a renowned theologian, pastor, and human rights activist as well as a leader of the Korean peace and unification movement in Korea.¹ It sounds like he embodied Jesus' teaching of love, but his faith journey had not always been motivated by love. He was born in 1931 in a village near the northern border of Korea under Japanese colonial rule. His father was a pastor and worked for the liberation of Korea. After Korea was freed, Korea was divided, and the northern part of Korea was governed by the communist administration. Some Christians had joined the communist administration and created the Korean Christian Federation (KCF), and urged pastors to join the KCF, but his father refused to join and they viewed him as an enemy. Soon after the Korean War broke out, his father went missing. After a few months, he was able to find his father's body covered in bullet holes and blood. As he held the body of his father, he felt anger and a strong desire for revenge. So, he moved to the South and joined the South Korean Navy as a way to avenge his father. Hatred and anger moved him.

Long story short, God somehow used his intellectual talent and allowed him to study theology in the United States and used him to work for human rights and the democratic movement in South Korea. Many years later, he had the opportunity to join the World Council of Churches as a keynote speaker for Korean peace in Montreal, Canada in 1991. Delegations from the Korean Christian Federation from North Korea also participated in that meeting. He discovered that the head of the North Korean delegation was the same age as he, and was also the son of one of the founders of the Korean Christian Federation, his father's main enemy and very possibly related to his father's death. He could be the son of the man who was responsible for his father's death. Interestingly, both Dr. Suh and he were scheduled to speak before the Canadian church, government leaders and representatives of the World Council of Churches.

Dr. Suh struggled the night before his speech and prayed, "Father, your son is here to talk about peace, and I'm representing South Korean Christians. What do I do? How can I meet this man?" The following morning, right before the meeting began, the head of the North Korean delegation came to Dr. Suh and said, "Dr. Suh, can you translate my speech?" He said, "You have your own interpreter who came with you." He responded, "No, he is not an interpreter. His English is not good. He came here to watch me." But if Rev. Suh was to help him translate his speech, he would violate South Korea's National Security Law, which could get him arrested. If you were in his situation, what would you do?

While he was struggling to make a decision between revenge or forgiveness, he heard a voice say, "Loving your enemy is the real revenge." So Dr Suh helped him with translation and then gave his own keynote address representing South Korea. In some sense, he risked his own well-being to help his enemy. He chose to love his enemy in action. Later he wrote, "After I did that, I felt a sense of freedom from the bondage of vengeful thoughts. It was like a moment of grace, a chance for me to perform a loving action for my enemy." As he obeyed Jesus' commandment to love others and his enemies against his feelings and will, he was freed. His small loving action for his enemy changed his emotion toward him.

My friends, if you cannot love your enemies or your annoying neighbor emotionally, choose to love them in action. As we obey His commandment to love, we abide in Christ and he abides in us. The power of the Spirit gradually but surely changes us to love others as Christ loves us. Don't give up, but choose to love all people you meet in action. Amen.

¹ For full story about Rev. Dr. Suh, see, <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/life/forgiveness/forgiving-my-north-korean-enemy>