

Welcome

A couple of weeks ago, Amanda and I and our friend Bee went to Dallas Shakespeare in the Park to catch their production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Which was great. It was actually the first time I've seen the bard's most famous play staged, and I was struck by something about this great love story.

It's not actually about love. Romeo and Juliet are really just lovestruck teenagers. (Which, in the play's defense, is something that like 5 characters point out to Romeo.)

Romeo and Juliet meet at a party. They 'fall in love' which actually means they each think the other is attractive. They don't even have a full conversation. They read some poetry to each other (which in their defense is MUCH better than any of the poetry I wrote as a lovesick teenager). Importantly, they do *not* get to know each other very well.

Then the whole world is against them (because yeah, when you're in puppy love, it absolutely feels like it's you against the world). And in this case, they're sort of right because all their friends and family hate each other.

They make a plan to run away together, and they get their wires crossed. They then each kill themselves, which could have been prevented if either of them had... waited like 2 minutes.

Despite its position as one of the great love stories of all time, it's pretty easy for us to look at that and say, "That's not love."

Compare that, for instance, to the first 15 minutes of the Pixar film *Up*. In what is essentially a short, silent film, we watch as two young people meet and fall in love. We watch them grow up, see their joys and failures, their successes and struggles. And we see the wife die, leaving the man alone and grieving (which is where the rest of the film picks up).

When you put those two side-by-side, it's easy to identify the couple in *Up* as truly loving and Romeo and Juliet as infatuated.

Which, to be clear, isn't bad. Every romantic relationship begins there. In fact, a lot of friendships begin there too - I can't count the number of friends I have who, when I first met them, I just thought they were so cool and couldn't wait to be their friend.

But one of the things I love about that opening cover song is it sketches out what can happen with infatuation. Yes it can blossom into love, like we saw in *Up*. Or it can fade into indifference, as it does in the song.

Either way, we can see right away that what's between Romeo and Juliet, the thing that ends in their deaths isn't real love.

Today, we're going to talk a lot about what love *isn't*. Because we mistake a lot of toxic stuff for love. Which means we excuse a lot of awful behavior in the name of love. And friends, that should not be.

Message

Welcome to Journey to Love. We're in a 40-day experience that lies at the very core of our human existence. For the next couple of months, we're gathering here in this group and also in our small groups to answer together some of the most basic questions we ask as humans:

How do we love well?

And How do we *receive* love well?

We began with our friend Matt Mikalatos, the author of the book we're using as a guide in our journey. Matt invited us to prepare to set out. He invited us simply to 'show up', to agree to participate in this journey. Then last week, we asked how to find love. We saw that love is the root virtue out of which all the fruit of the Spirit grows. When we find those, we know we're on the path to love.

Today, I want to ask the question, "What is love *not*?"

In his 1877 novel *Anna Karenina*, Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy wrote "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

Tolstoy's observation is helpful for us - we can acknowledge that we all fail to love well in different ways. Which means it's easier for us to spot for other people than ourselves. Maybe you have a friend that grew up in a family that was always critical. You see how that friend interacts with their parents and you say, "Wow, that's not loving."

You have a co-worker whose romantic partner is jealous. Always checking up on them, going through their phone. And your co-worker says, "Wow, they love me so much!" But you know that's not love.

Or maybe you know someone who has a temper. They fly off the handle at the smallest things - everyone in their home walks on eggshells. That's not love.

It's harder for us to spot unlove in our own relationships. I think that's because our own world is normal to us, no matter how unloving or dysfunctional it is. So the behaviors, attitudes and patterns we've grown up with feel normal. We have learned unlove is loving and didn't even realize it.

So how do we unlearn unlove? How do we even know what behaviors, attitudes and patterns in our lives are unloving when they seem normal to us?

Tolstoy is helpful here - he reminds us that loving families are much the same. That is, love is the same. Love is love is love, no matter where you find it.

Turn with us to [1 Corinthians 13](#).

This is that wedding passage - the one you've heard at most of the weddings you've been to. There's a reason for that - this is a powerful, poetic expression of what love is.

But here's the thing: 1 Corinthians is a letter from the apostle Paul to the church he planted in the Greek city of Corinth. And the letter's not about marriage (well, one part of it is, but all Paul says is that we shouldn't get married - whole different sermon!).

Chapter 13 - the famous love chapter - is set in the middle of a section not on marriage but on how to be a church family. That's right - the 'love' described here isn't marital love. Or rather, it's not *just* marital love. It's what love should *always* look like. Anywhere we find it.

I want to read with you some of the descriptors Paul uses here, and then work through them a little more slowly.

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. -- 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (NLT)

Love is patient. I like to think of patience as a willingness to hold space for someone else. Do I respect you enough to give you the space you need to be you? Or do I insist you're always working my agenda, on my timeline? Someone who can't make space for others isn't loving.

Love is kind. I like to differentiate between nice and kind. Niceness isn't loving. Niceness is a way of ignoring or papering over conflict and differences (we know that down here in Texas, don't we?). Kindness isn't the same. Kindness isn't afraid to have hard conversations or to speak hard truths... but kindness insists on doing such things with respect and love. Kindness is interested not in winning arguments, but in helping the other person be the best version of themselves. So if someone isn't kind, then they're not showing love.

Love is not jealous - this is one a lot of us mistake for love. But jealous isn't love. Jealousy grows out of insecurity and selfishness, not love.

Love is not boastful or proud. Love doesn't spend time calling attention to itself. Love spends its time highlighting other people.

Love isn't rude, which is another way of saying that love notices other people and prioritizes them. Love makes others the center of attention, not ourselves.

Love does not demand its own way. Love is a team player. Love works for the good of all, not the good of just me. Love doesn't demand my rights at the expense of others.

Love is not irritable. We might better translate this as “Love is not hot-headed,” or “Love doesn’t have a temper.” Love does not explode with anger. Love doesn’t make others walk on eggshells.

Love keeps no record of being wronged. I’ve heard people say, “I forgive, but I never forget.” That’s not love - that’s actually abusive. Love doesn’t hold grudges or hold past offenses against you.

This one is actually a little bit tricky, because it could sound like Paul is saying Love puts up with *being* abused. But remember - love is kind. Love doesn’t let someone persist in abusive behavior because that’s toxic for both the abuser and the victim. So while love doesn’t put up with abuse, neither does love hold abuse against the abuser forever. Love champions forgiveness and reconciliation, where it’s possible.

Love doesn’t rejoice about injustice, but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Wow... this one hits where we live today, doesn’t it? In a world of fake news and alternative facts, Love insists on truth-telling. Love opposes injustice. Love champions the vulnerable and the least of these, and love celebrates when truth and justice are done. Where you find injustice, you don’t find love. Where you find lies, half-truths and distortions, you don’t find love.

Love never gives up. Love stays the course. Love remains faithful and hopeful. Love hangs in there. Because Love knows the best is yet to come.

Now, here’s the thing about this list (which, by the way, is only part of the whole chapter - only four verses!): I’m willing to bet we all felt called out in some part of that or another. We all saw places where, if we were being honest, we could say, “Yeah, I’m not very loving when it comes to that.”

Some of us might have been caught off guard, because we had never considered that particular aspect of our personality or behavior might not be loving. Because of how we grew up or the relationships we’re in.

And that’s why it matters that this chapter isn’t just a chapter for romantic love.

I mean, it *is* true that intimate relationships can help us see how we’ve been formed unlovingly. My wife, Amanda, and I love to talk about how we’ve learned to navigate conflict in our marriage. I come from a family that’s definitely more hot-tempered. We often resolved conflict with knock-down, drag-out fights. Shouting. Amanda’s family is the exact opposite. If someone’s mad at you, you find out fourth or fifth hand, and never, ever speak about it directly.

Needless to say, when we started dating, we had some... rough patches. We’ve learned - her to speak up and express her needs, and me to listen and think before I speak. In other words, both of us have become more loving through each others’ commitment to love each other.

But friends, this is not something that should be exclusive to romantic relationships. Paul wrote this chapter on love to a church community just like us. So Paul expects that we all will help each other learn to love better.

And that's true too. Through friends here at Catalyst, I have learned to be more patient (because Love is patient). I've learned to be more humble (because Love does not boast). I've learned to be more kind (because Love is kind). I've learned to be hopeful and stay the course, to believe the best is ahead of us. Because that's what Love does.

I've learned to love better because you love me and invite me to love you. That's the power of church as community (not just a building or a livestream). That's why our C-Groups are so important - they're a much more effective way to facilitate relationships than just being together here or on the livestream.

In any case, friends, the truth is that we're all dysfunctional in our own ways. We're all unloving in different ways we've learned from a lifetime in this world. The good news is that God calls us together, to be a part of this church, so that we can learn love together, from each other and from Jesus.

Communion + Examen

Our journey begins with Jesus' love for us.

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Assignment + Blessing

Let's focus on anger this week. Even when we're angry for the right reasons, we can still be gentle (remember that's one of the fruit of love!). If you struggle with anger, make a plan for the next time you're angry. How can you, even in the midst of anger, practice loving gentleness?

If a loved one struggles with anger, every time they get angry, ask yourself, "Is this anger motivated by love?" You don't have to say or do anything. Just ask yourself that question.