



This statement, when you think about it, is empty and illogical. You can't define something by itself. Imagine a dictionary where the definition of every word was just the word itself:

logic / 'lɒdʒ.ɪk/ (noun) Definition: logic

Something must be defined by something else outside of itself. Just as a word can only be defined by *other* words, so love can only be defined by *some other* standard.

When we say 'Love is Love,' what we really mean is, 'I don't want to be told how to love, or who to love. I want to define it any way I please, so I can ultimately please myself.' By doing this we've robbed love of its meaning; it's whatever *we* want it to be.

But we need something better than that. We need a love that doesn't just make us feel good. We need a robust love that will help us face the realities and challenges of life with all of its evil, injustices, contradictions and grief. We need a love that's able to conquer even death itself.

The Bible gives us a description of that kind of love:

"This is love: not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."¹

...keep reading ➡➡

¹ In the Bible: John's First Letter 4:10

These words were written by John, a follower and close friend of Jesus. In his biography of Jesus, he describes himself as someone ‘whom Jesus loved’² and he claimed to know something about the nature of genuine love. Please take a few moments with me as I explain this statement

‘not that we... but that he...’

Only one person is ultimately qualified to define love: God. This is because, as John wrote just before this, ‘*Anyone who doesn’t love doesn’t know God, because God is love.*’³ This means God alone can tell us the nature of love, because it’s not only what he does, but what he *is*: love is an aspect of his character. So God and his actions are the standard by which we should measure anything that’s claimed to be ‘love.’

‘...sent his Son...’

Jesus, who identified himself as the Son of God, shows us why we know God is love: because he’s the God of relationships. God isn’t distant and inaccessible. Jesus shows us he’s the Father who sent his Son.⁴ It was out of a relationship of love, the family relationship of Father and Son, that God has reached out to us. This means God wants us to experience and share in this love; to be brought into the family where we can know ourselves as his children; to call God not only our maker, but also our Father.

‘...to be the propitiation...’

Propitiation is a ‘jargon’ word that comes from the language of the Jewish temple that once stood in Jerusalem. It means a *substitutionary sacrifice*. In other words, something that takes our place (substitution) and is killed instead of us (sacrifice).

For over 1000 years, priests would make animal sacrifices, which involved their blood being drained, and the bodies being burned on a platform called an ‘altar’. Once a year a special sacrifice was made at a festival called *Yom Kippur* (‘Day of Atonement’). On this occasion, the animal’s blood was taken into the inner chamber of the Temple, and sprinkled on a box that symbolised God’s throne. This symbolic act told all the people watching that he is a forgiving God, who is willing to do something about the problem of human sin and evil.

When Jesus was killed by being nailed to a cross,⁵ his death wasn’t just as a political revolutionary or religious fanatic: it was a *propitiation*; a *substitutionary sacrifice* that did away once and for all with the need for ongoing animal sacrifices.

So why would Jesus need to come and be a *propitiation*?

‘...for our sins.’

Jesus came and died for us because our love has failed. Our love is empty and distorted, and we really have no idea what true love is.

² John’s Gospel 19:26

³ John’s First Letter 4:8

⁴ Jesus also made it clear that the *Holy Spirit* is also God – what Christians call the Trinity is simply the fact that there is one God, who has always existed as three persons – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

⁵ Crucifixion was the method that ancient Romans used to execute criminals and traitors.

- We've tried to define love by looking at ourselves, instead of at God who is Love.
- We've loved the wrong things. When he was asked what the greatest rule to follow was, Jesus said that there's two: 'Love God with all your being, and love your neighbour as yourself.'⁶ But that's not what we do:
 - ➡ God should be the main object of our love, because he deserves it the most, but instead we've loved things in this world, thinking that they'll be able to give us the things that only God can give: identity, purpose, wisdom, life.
 - ➡ We've failed to love one another as we should, and so the world is filled with greed, violence, division and hatred. All the way from international wars, right down to our personal relationships, all of us don't love others as we should. It's not just that we can't - but that we won't.
- Worst of all, our love is turned in on ourselves. Instead of looking outwards to see how we can generously love those around us, we focus on trying to get love for ourselves. We think that '...it's our God-forsaken right to be loved, loved, loved, loved, loved!'⁷ So we work hard to make others acknowledge, affirm, celebrate and approve us - even when it's at the expense of others!

This is what *sin* is: refusing to love God and our neighbour. And we're all guilty. If you think that's rough, then try this challenge: *For just 1 week, try to put into practice the rule of loving every single person you meet, perfectly. This means putting their needs entirely before your own, doing nothing that will harm or humiliate them, and being proactive in bringing goodness into their lives. And near enough isn't good enough. God's standard of love requires that we do this perfectly, for everyone we meet.*

After a week, do a self assessment, and see if you're a person who loves truly. Even if you feel you got close, remember that's only half of it. Not only should you love your neighbour perfectly; you should also love God perfectly. That means obeying all his commands, living your life the way he designed and directed you. It means having God as your number one affection, and wanting everything you do, say and think to be honouring to him.

When we see this high standard of love, we have to admit that we've fallen and continue to fall short. We're sinners, and because of that we all deserve God's right and fair punishment of being excluded from his goodness forever.

'but he loved us'

Despite our refusal to love God, God still shows love towards us. That's what makes God's love the supreme and highest expression of love. It's not just that we don't deserve love, but we deserve the opposite: to be punished by God. Yet he has acted towards us in love. Jesus' *substitutionary sacrifice* means that those who deserve punishment can receive mercy. The punishment we all deserve was turned aside and

⁶ Matthew's Gospel 22:35-40

⁷ Jason Mraz, I'm Yours (2008)

placed upon Jesus instead. He died *in the place of* sinners. God treated him as justice requires him to treat sinners, so that instead he treats sinners as love requires him to treat his Son, Jesus. That means anyone who comes to Jesus will be reconciled to God: brought into that loving, family relationship that we're designed for.

On the third day after being crucified, Jesus was made alive from the dead, never to die again. This was how God the Father shows us the sacrifice Jesus made was enough for sinners to be forgiven. It tells us that Jesus' love for us was perfect. He laid aside his own needs in order to meet out needs. Our standard of love says we'll love when it's convenient for us; Jesus demonstrated the highest standard of love of laying down his life for his enemies... us! This is how Jesus shows us what love is, and that God has shown this great love towards us.

How should we respond?

There's nothing we can do to earn God's love, to make ourselves God's children, or to bring ourselves back into a relationship with him. We need to rely on Jesus to do it for us. That's what the Bible calls 'God's grace':

“By grace you are saved, through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”⁸

We become beneficiaries of God's grace not by doing anything, but by receiving it as a free gift from God. Here's what receiving it looks like:

Repent: means recognising that we're sinners, not only failing to love, but rebels at heart against God and deserving his punishment. It means acknowledging that if anything's going to be done to fix our problem, it has to be God who does it, his way.

Faith: means accepting what God did in Jesus to do just that: fix the problem of our sin and rebellion. Faith means trusting in Jesus alone. His life, death and resurrection⁹ is the only way for us to be reconciled to God and brought into his loving family.

Real, genuine faith in Jesus will result in a life that begins to change. It means we've been brought into God's family, expressed in the community of the church - where we can start learning and putting into practice the same kind of love that God has shown toward us. Jesus told his followers, 'Love one another, as I have loved you.'¹⁰

If you've come to realise that you need to know this love of God in Jesus, or if you have any questions about Christianity, the best place to do that is in a church community.

You can contact us on meefjesus@bethel.net.au or visit our website at bethel.net.au/meefjesus We would love to answer all your questions and welcome you into God's family.

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⁸ The Bible: *The Letter to Christians in Ephesus* 2:8-9

⁹ *Resurrection* is the Bible word for being brought to life from the dead, or *raised to life*.

¹⁰ *John* 13:34