

## **“Amazing Love!”**

February brings the subject of love front and center. Right in the middle of the second month of the year is Valentine’s Day, a day traditionally set aside to celebrate love. Although Saint Valentine’s Day has its origin as a Christian feast day honoring one or two martyrs named Valentine, centuries later it became associated with romantic love. Beginning in the 1800’s and accelerating in the early 1900’s, the 14th of February became associated with the giving and receiving of gifts such as cards, flowers, and chocolates. Throughout the month of February thoughts of love between lovers and among friends point forward to and find their climax on Valentine’s Day. Indeed, as John Paul Young sang in 1978, *“Love is in the air, everywhere I look around”*. However, is there more to love than what can be proclaimed and promoted by Valentine’s Day?

Yes. Most people know that the Bible has something to say about love. For example, John 3:16 may be the most well-known verse in all of Scripture: *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”* Not only does the Bible speak about the love of God, it also speaks about the love for God. Here’s an interesting exchange Jesus had with a lawyer who was testing him with a question: *“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And [Jesus] said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.’”* (Matthew 22:36-40). In reflecting upon the teaching of Jesus, the apostle Paul put it clearly and concisely: *“For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”* (Galatians 5:14).

No command is harder to obey than the standard of love that God demands, especially when we may view some of our neighbors to be our enemies. In teaching his disciples, Jesus tells them: *“But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you”* (Luke 6:27) and again *“but love your enemies and do good”* (Luke 6:35). Are you kidding me? Enemies are not to be loved, but hated! Loving family and friends is hard enough. But enemies? There’s just no way! It simply cannot be done!

In his autobiographical *Confessions*, Augustine (354-430), the early church father claimed by both Roman Catholics and Protestants, describes this tension between God’s demand and our inability in this way: *“O Lord, command what you will and give what you command.”* The gospel, the good news of salvation from sin and death through faith in Jesus Christ, reveals how this tension is resolved: the love that God demands from us he also provides for us. How can this be true?

You see, at the heart of the Christian faith is a man who loved his enemies by dying for them. The apostle Paul declares that *“God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:8) and then goes on to say that *“if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.”* (Romans 5:10). Not only that, but as theologian D.A. Carson puts it in his book *Love in Hard Places*, *“The church is . . . made up of natural enemies . . . who love one another for Jesus’ sake.”* Into the church, the body of Christ, are gathered those who have been reconciled to God and are being reconciled to one another.

No one says it better than the apostle John: *“We love because he first loved us”* (1 John 4:19). Not only are we able to love, we also want to love God and our neighbor, even those who may seem to be our enemies, because God loved us when we were his enemies. As the hymn writer Charles Wesley wrote in 1738, *“Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?”* What kind of love is this? In a word, amazing!

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