

Biblical Love: What Does it Look Like?

by Leslie Vernich

God calls us to be a people who love even our enemies. But sometimes it's hard to know exactly what that looks like. One thing that helps me love when it's hard, is to ask myself what's in the other person's best interest?

For example, it is always good to encourage someone's positive qualities and look for ways to do so even if it's difficult to find something commendable (Hebrews 10:24). It is always in someone's best interests to pray for them, even sacrificially through fasting or intercession for extended periods of time. The apostle Paul tells us that one of the characteristics of godly love is that it does no harm to a neighbor (Romans 13:10); therefore, we are careful with our tongue and our behaviors, even toward someone we don't like. We show respect toward someone, not because he or she is acting worthy of it, but because they are a fellow human being, created in the image of God, and we do not want to disrespect God's image in them (1 Peter 2:17; James 3:9-10).

God's Word also tells us that it is never in someone's best interest for us to make it easy for them to sin. That is bad for them and harmful to their relationship with God and with us. Therefore, we should never sacrifice ourselves in order to allow someone to continue to sin, whether sinning in general or sinning against us.

Many people get confused about what biblical love looks like in these instances, especially in marriage. For example, Joan continued to permit her husband to live at home despite his drunken rages and abusive behavior because she said, "I love him and I'm praying he will change." Of course Joan prays her husband will change, but is it in his best interest or does it give him an opportunity to change when she allows him to continue to sin with no consequences? Please hear this: the most loving thing you can do for someone who is out of control with sin is to allow the person to experience the consequences of his or her behavior. Proverbs 19:19 says, "A hot tempered man must pay the penalty; if you rescue him, you will have to do it again." It is only when we experience the pain and ugliness of our sin that we are most open and receptive to God and to our need to repent and change our ways. Otherwise, it's easy to continue to deceive ourselves into believing that our sin is not that bad.

When we commit ourselves to love someone, we don't promise to look out for what's easiest for them or necessarily for what they want us to do, but instead, we look for what God says is best for them. In loving them that way, they may even become angry with us, but that's what God's love looks like toward us. He always acts in our best interest, even though sometimes what's best doesn't feel comfortable to us at the moment. C.S. Lewis wisely put it. He says, "Love is something more stern and splendid than mere kindness.