

Languages of Love

1 John 3:17-18; Philippians 4:1; Luke 7:40-43; Luke 7:43-47; John 11:17-21

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Imagine with me a counseling group—not just any counseling group—a Christian counseling group of couples and friends, as they approach Saint Valentine’s Day.

Imagine a counselor whose name is Lucy. She is explaining briefly that there are different ways to express love. For example, she says, we can communicate love using words, through our actions, by gentle touch, through giving gifts, and also by spending time with another.¹ A group member, Charlie Brown, says that as a Christian it is clear that *actions* are the way to express love. “Jesus insisted, if you love me, feed my sheep.” Peppermint Patty speaks up in support, quoting Paul, “How can anyone have God’s love in them if they don’t take *action* when they see a brother or sister in need and help?”

The counselor Lucy nods appreciatively to Charlie and Patty. Then Linus speaks up, “*Words* are the best way to make sure love is communicated. When Paul wrote letters he told people he loved them—in *words*. Listen, Paul writes ‘My brothers and sisters whom I love and long for.’ He even calls them ‘my beloved.’”

Counselor Lucy is impressed with how well these Christians know their Bible. Before she can speak again Cathy says she feels loved when someone *touches* her gently, affirming her. She mentions the time when Jesus went to dinner with a number of powerful people in town. A woman washed and kissed his feet and anointed Jesus with oil, and the powerful people were embarrassed, but Jesus told them that she had expressed love by *touching* him in these symbolic ways. Cathy says, “It’s not just that he appreciated her touch, Jesus also touched plenty of people himself as he healed them, and when he did that he was expressing love.”

Calvin is surprised that his primary way of expressing love hasn’t been mentioned yet. He thinks that *spending time with people*, quality time, is the best way to express love. Calvin speaks up, pointing again to Jesus, reminding the group that when Jesus got the call from Mary and Martha that Lazarus was in critical condition, Jesus left what he was doing *to be with* them.

Lucy is getting a little impatient. She wants to use her authority as the counselor to say something, but just then Marcie pipes up with yet another example of expressing love, again from Jesus. She recalls the parable about a man who relieved the debt of two people. Marcie is a bit insistent, “Jesus made clear that we express love by *giving gifts*, not only relieving debts, as some in the international community recommend today, but also *giving tangible gifts*—as lots of Christians do, as we did recently for Haiti.”

Lucy is puzzled. She is glad her counseling group of Christians knows the Bible so well, but she intended them to reflect upon themselves, their own ways of communicating love. She notices that they are all wearing bracelets with the initials WWJD. Evidently this group thinks often about “What Would Jesus Do.” Finally Lucy gets their attention, “You all have reminded us of times *Jesus* communicated love—in many love languages, but what about YOU?” The group members shuffled around, a bit uncomfortable.

She presents this scenario: Mike fills the gas tank of Joannie, and Mike also washes the dishes. Mike assumes Joannie will know his *gestures* communicate love. But Joannie is disappointed. Valentines Day goes by and Mike hasn't *told* her that he loves her. "What's wrong with Mike?" thinks Joannie.

Linus gets the point. "Mike and Joannie are speaking different languages! It's as if one was speaking Russian and the other was speaking Swedish. They don't realize that the other is communicating love. Joannie is expecting the language of *words*, but Mike is giving the love language of *actions*."

Lucy then asks the group what Mike and Joannie could do. Someone suggests they break up and find someone who speaks their language. Lucy asks for *other* ideas. Another recommends that they learn each other's language. Voila! Counselor Lucy is happy. She points out that Mike could learn to *say*, "I love you" **or** Joannie could learn to **interpret** Mike's *actions* as expressing love. Or, if they were adventurous, they *both* could learn to speak *both* languages—twice the ways to express love and feel loved--through *words and actions*.

Dagwood points out that Blondie took off work to *be with* him all day long, but he had been waiting for Blondie *to touch* him, and she never did, so he didn't feel loved. Now he realizes that Blondie **had been** communicating love all day by *spending time* with him. Blondie comments that if Dagwood wants the love language of *touch*, he could help by telling her. Dagwood rolls his eyes, but counselor Lucy nods. "We sometimes do have to ask for a love language that we want if our loved one doesn't naturally speak that language."

Then someone ponders aloud, "How do we know God loves us?" Charles says he's felt God loved him ever since his prayers for self-confidence were answered; in other words, God took *action*. Linus knew God loved him because he had been told so in *words* over and over again at church and at home: "God loves you."

Lucy is glad to be counseling people who are so open to self-reflection and eager to consider ways God loves them. She knows that sometimes people think God doesn't love them. They may be expecting God to speak one love language and are listening only for that, when all the while God may be expressing love in other languages.

Time is up. Lucy starts packing up her briefcase. She finds herself thinking more about Jesus, the many languages he used to communicate love—the group members surely had been observant. Then she gets to thinking, "I doubt that there are just five languages of love, after all sometimes we express love when we are *silent* at appropriate times, sometimes we communicate love when we give another the *freedom* to follow their own paths, and sometimes *listening* really well to another while they talk communicates love..."

That was quite some counseling group. Many of you probably noticed the basic premise all those participants seemed to know, made popular in a book entitled, "The Five Love Languages." We might tell someone with *words* of affirmation that they are beautiful or that we love them. Or, we might express our love for another by filling the car with gas, cleaning up the house, making dinner or doing the dishes—that is, *doing things* that help the other. We might communicate our love through *gentle touch*—reaching over and putting our arm around them in church, holding their hands. We might communicate love by taking *time* to be with each other. Focused on each other. No other

agendas. Or, maybe we express our love through *gifts*, by sending flowers, or buying or making a present.

Notice how wise those group members were who pointed out that the recipients of the five languages of love have to be able to interpret the particular languages in order to feel loved. Consider this: if you told me you appreciated me in Russian, or Hebrew, or Swedish, I wouldn't know whether you were swearing at me or telling me you liked me. I don't know those languages at all! So, if **all** you want to do is to tell me you appreciate me, go ahead and speak Russian. But if you really want me to *feel* loved, you'd better speak English.

Each of us benefits when we reflect upon what languages we prefer. Do I "Hear" that I am loved with gifts? Actions? Touch? Time spent with me? Or Words? Then we ask ourselves what language we tend to speak to others.

It's marvelously lucky if we are with people who speak the same language... Just think, we can save a lot of money on flowers and *gifts* if we discover that *time and touch* are our friends' languages!

Or, we may discover that we don't need to feel guilty for having only so much time together—because our friend feels our love, even if we're apart. What they want are words of affirmation, and that can come through twitters, email, or telephone calls.

Now, if we discover that we speak different love languages, then we have to make some decisions. Are they going to make an effort to speak the language our partner wants to receive? Give gifts, so the other can feel loved, even if that seems silly to me? Give time, even when that's really hard and gifts or words would be easier?

Finally, we can work to learn to read the language of our friend. Jo's calling me on the phone to say I love you is love; even if Jo can't go with me to dinner tomorrow. Jan's presence is love, even if she doesn't bring a gift.

If Charles, Blondie, and Linus can figure it out, surely all of us can!

All this is important--with each other as humans. However, we may benefit immensely by asking the same questions in relation to how we experience God! We may believe that God loves us only if God heals us; all the while God is bringing significant friends into our lives. We may think that if God doesn't make a mate appear in front of our eyes, God doesn't love us; when we have a meaningful vocation that could be even more so, if we weren't pining away for a mate.

We may want calm, but receive the ability to deal with stress. (Thanks, God—you love me so much.) We may think that God wants sacrifice on our part, when God prefers that we'd claim our voice more forthrightly. Or, we may wonder why we're having such difficulty in a friendship, when God is guiding us out of it.

What language does God speak? Probably all the ones we do, and even more—so if we pay attention, we just may feel very loved.

ⁱ Chapman, Gary. *The 5 Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate*. There are also by this author *The 5 Love Languages of Children ... of Teens, . . . or Singles, and The Love Languages of God*.