

ABOVE ALL,
Love
REFLECTIONS OF
the GREATEST COMMANDMENT

JULIE ACKERMAN LINK



DISCOVERY HOUSE

PUBLISHERS

Above All, Love
© 2008 Julie Ackerman Link

Discovery House Publishers is affiliated with
RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI 49501.

Discovery House books are distributed to the trade exclusively
by Barbour Publishing, Uhrichsville, Ohio.

Requests for permission to quote from this book should be directed to:
Permissions Department, Discovery House Publishers,
P.O. Box 3566, Grand Rapids, MI 49501.

Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International
Version®. © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by
permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Above All, Love has been adapted from *The Art of Loving God, Loving God with
All My Heart, Loving God with All My Soul, Loving God with All My Mind, and
Loving God with All My Strength*, © 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007
by Julie Ackerman Link.

Part of the section titled "The Strength of My Life: Integrity" is adapted
from the introduction, written by Julie Ackerman Link, to *Our Daily
Bread: A Selection of Daily Readings from the Popular Devotional*, © 1997 by
Discovery House Publishers. Used by permission of Discovery House
Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI 49501.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Available upon request.

Printed in the United States of America

09 10 11 12 13 14 15 / / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Contents

Introduction 9

What Is Love? | Why Is There So Much Confusion? 11

God Is Love | Why Is There So Much Hatred? 18

First Love | How Does God Love Me? 22

PART 1: WITH ALL MY HEART

My Desire | Why Do I Want What I Shouldn't Have? 35

God's Desire | What Does God Want Me to Have? 48

Life Hurts | What Can I Do with the Pain? 58

Beauty | Is It a Vice or a Virtue? 69

PART 2: WITH ALL MY SOUL

Identity | Who Am I? 89

Deity | Who Is God? 98

Divinity | Who Is Jesus? 103

Community | Where Can I Find Myself? 107

PART 3: WITH ALL MY MIND

<i>Agreeing That God Is Right</i>	135
<i>Remembering What God Has Done</i>	147
<i>Knowing Who God Is</i>	152
<i>Believing What God Says</i>	169

PART 4: WITH ALL MY STRENGTH

<i>Weakness Everything I Never Wanted to Know</i>	186
<i>Certainty The Strength of My HEART</i>	190
<i>Humility The Strength of My SOUL</i>	196
<i>Unity The Strength of My MIND</i>	203
<i>Integrity The Strength of My LIFE</i>	209
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	235
<i>Note to the Reader</i>	237

What Is Love?

WHY IS THERE SO MUCH CONFUSION?

I LOVE ART FAIRS. I admire the creativity of the artists, and I enjoy buying unique things. At one art fair, I found a pin that features the faces of three characters from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Dangling beneath the face of the friendly but Cowardly Lion is a yellow star with the words "Be Brave." Beneath the hollow stare of the Tin Woodman hangs a red heart with the words "Have a Heart." And beneath the mindless expression of the Scarecrow is a turquoise circle with the words "Use Your Brain."

The artist was memorializing L. Frank Baum's children's classic, but I saw the pin as a symbol of what Jews call *Shema*, and what Jesus called the Greatest Commandment.

When Moses addressed a throng of recently freed slaves after leading them out of Egypt following 500 years of captivity, he began with these words:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.
(Deuteronomy 6:4–5)

Thousands of years later, Jewish religious leaders asked Jesus, "What is the most important commandment?" He answered them by quoting Moses:



**Love cannot survive if you
just give it scraps of yourself,
scraps of your time, scraps
of your thoughts.**

MARY O'HARA

The most important one is this:

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." (Mark 12:29–30)

Before the art fair, I had been studying the Greatest Commandment, so I recognized spiritual significance in the pin. In the Tin Woodman who finally feels emotion, I saw a symbol of loving God with my heart. In the Scarecrow who discovers that he can think, I saw a symbol of loving God with my mind. And in the Cowardly Lion who finds courage, I saw a symbol of loving God with my strength.

I bought the pin to wear as a reminder that I'm to love God in all these aspects of my life.

The trouble with the pin, however, as with any symbol, is that its value is limited if we don't understand what it represents. A

symbol cannot answer the question: What does it mean to love God with my heart, soul, mind, and strength? Nor can it tell me how to do it.



Everyone admits that love is wonderful and necessary, but no one can agree on what it is.

DIANE ACKERMAN

Years ago in an editorial meeting, one of the writers told of a time when she had admitted to an older, mature Christian that she wasn't sure what it meant to love God. She then described the look of disbelief that she received in return for her confession. That "look" kept her from ever again admitting such a thing—until that moment in our meeting. We then went around the table asking ourselves the question: What does it mean to love God? Even though we all had positions of leadership in our church and other religious organizations, none of us did a very good job of articulating what it means to love God.

The question bothered me so much that I decided I needed to answer it. But before I could answer what it means to love God, I had to ask myself some difficult questions about my own use of the word *love*. How is it that

I use the same word to express fondness for art fairs and Mexican food as I do for God? And why is it that my use of the word *love* is often more sincere when I'm referring to the dog who worships me than the God I claim to worship?

What, then, is the meaning of this mysterious four-letter verb/noun that we use to describe everything from the absurd to the sacred, from feelings to actions, from preferences to passions?

Part of the problem is the word itself. The Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New



The Eskimos had fifty-two names for snow because snow was important to them; there ought to be as many for love.

MARGARET ATWOOD

Testament both have more than one word that is translated love. And my English dictionary lists twenty-one definitions of love. When a single word has so many meanings, it's no wonder we have so much confusion about it.

We can easily describe what it feels like to "be loved," but we have trouble translating that into what it means to "be loving." We feel loved when someone wants to be with us, takes the risk of letting us know him or her, takes the time to get to know us, and always does what is in our best interest. Our desire to be on the receiving end of this kind of devotion is always greater than our ability to return it.

To be loved is one of the strongest of all desires. The need for love is as much a part of God's design for humans as the need for air, water, and food. We can't lead a healthy life without it.

Sadly, humans have managed to thoroughly mess up God's distribution system. One of the ways God passes along His love is through others. Children learn to love by being loved by moms and dads, grandpas and grandmas, aunts and uncles.

A birthday card I bought for my mother was short and simple. It read, "Before I knew anything else, I knew how it felt to be loved. Thanks, Mom. Happy Birthday."

I take for granted the love of my parents, but many people have never known this blessing. My heart breaks when I hear stories about children like Melissa. From as early as she can remember, her parents treated her as if she were less than human. During the day, she was locked in a closet. At mealtime, she was taken outside on a leash and made to eat on the porch. Relatives called her "it." The only emotion Melissa learned to feel was anger, so anger is what she learned to express. At age twelve, she was removed from her abusive family by child protective services, but in



**Tell me,
when did love get twisted?
Pummeled out of shape,
Bruised and battered
beyond recognition . . . and
Why do we still call it love?**

MARY TIMME

every foster family her behavior remained the same—rage and violence—even toward those who truly wanted to help her. As a last resort, she was placed in a Christian residential care center for troubled children. Within a year Melissa’s heart began to soften. From people who were kind to her, she learned how to express kindness. Eventually, she turned her life over to God because she had experienced His love through the care and concern of godly counselors and staff. Melissa came to love God and others because God’s people loved her.



Few people know what they mean when they say, “I love you.” . . . Well, what does

the word love mean? It means total interest. I think the reason very few people really fall in love with anyone is they’re not willing to pay the price.

The price is you have to adjust yourself to them.

KATHARINE HEPBURN

Those who have grown up in loving homes may be more willing than Melissa to trust love, but they may also be more likely to believe lies.

If we grow up believing the romanticized definition—that being in love means feeling passion—we may not believe those who tell us that loving another human being is difficult work that requires knowledge, skill, and perseverance to go along with emotion. By focusing on the emotion and neglecting the behavior, we make ourselves vulnerable to all kinds of false expressions of love. Imperfect understanding makes

us prone to being deceived as well as to being deceptive. So what is the sacred meaning of this word that has been twisted and distorted by overuse and misuse?

The Bible describes love in this familiar New Testament passage:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (1 Corinthians 13:4–7)

Genuine love seeks the highest good for someone other than self. God's love is perfect because He seeks the highest good for all creation. Every human being longs to receive this kind of love, but none of us can give it unless we first receive it from God. The only place to experience genuine love is in a relationship with the One whose very being defines love. Not only is God the perfect *example* of love, He *is* love, and



In real love, you want the other person's good. In romantic love, you want the other person.

MARGARET ANDERSON

apart from His love for us none of us could love or be loved
(1 John 4:19).