

“I Love You.

Therefore, You Owe Me.

There is a conflict in relationships I have observed numerous times. I describe this conflict as a struggle with the feeling and belief that being loved is contingent on fulfilling conditions or obligations. Even though First Corinthians 13 assures us that, “Love does not insist on its own way,” I find that many people have been conditioned to believe, “if you love me, then I owe you.” This belief begins with the message, **“I love you. Therefore, You Owe Me.** I believe this message is not one that most parents would ever want to give their children, however, many do. It begins in the early years of development. It is the spoken and/or unspoken message generally that, “I will love you as long as you do not disappoint me and reject you if you do.” As this message is internalized, the child grows into adulthood concluding that in a relationship, “If you love me, then I owe you.” This conclusion causes a person to be wary of love and not to trust that they could be loved simply for themselves. They are loved only for what they can do or perform. They are also often confused when the good things they do and accomplish do not result in the love they want. They are never good enough.

It can be very painful to live within the paradigm that love is something to be earned. In this paradigm it also seems the words are rarely or never spoken aloud. In a “love by works” relationship a child usually gauges love by the absence of negative feedback and not the presence of positive words of affirmation. Some children will spend their whole childhood trying to please and earn love. Others may take a different path and act out in anger and rebellion. Whatever the response, the result is an “empty hole” that is never filled; not by great works and wonderful performances, and certainly not by more anger and rebellion.

Unfortunately, after growing up in the “love by works” world no one can give us enough love to fill the hole. We must give it to ourselves and eventually learn to believe it and receive it from others. This is not easy when we have convinced ourselves that love can only be earned. The path to love is paved carefully with the ability to give love to ourselves and the vulnerability to accept it from others.