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UNDERSTANDING THE FIVE LOVE LANGUAGES

Before we look more deeply at just how the all-powerful God who loves us can communicate with each of us in our own love language—and how we can experience Him in the same way—I want to help you understand those languages. For some, this will be a refresher, for others a new concept.

Each person has a primary love language, which means that one of the five love languages speaks more deeply than the other four on an emotional level. When someone speaks my primary love language, I am drawn to that person because he or she is meeting my basic need to feel loved. When a person does not speak my primary language, I will wonder whether he or she really loves me because emotionally I do not connect as strongly with that person.

The problem in many human relationships is that one person speaks a particular love language and wonders why another person with a different love language does not understand. That's

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like my speaking English to someone who understands only Chinese and wondering why he doesn't respond. Human relationships are greatly improved when basic language barriers are removed—and are even more enhanced when we learn to speak each other's love language.

TRANSFORMING MARRIAGES

Thousands of married couples echo the story of Scott and Anna. They had driven four hundred miles to Atlanta to attend a "Love Languages" seminar. After the Friday night session, Scott said, "Dr. Chapman, we want to thank you for turning our marriage around."

I was confused because they had just started the weekend seminar. Sensing the question in my eyes, Scott continued. "God used *the love language concept* to transform our marriage. We have been married for thirty-three years, but the last twenty years have been miserable. We have lived in the same house and been outwardly friendly with each other, but that's as far as it went. We had not taken a vacation together in twenty years. We simply didn't like being with each other.

"Some time ago, I shared my misery with a friend. He gave me your book and told me to read it. I went home and finished reading it at about two o'clock in the morning. I shook my head and asked myself, *How could I have missed this?*

"I realized immediately that my wife and I had not spoken each other's love language for years. I gave the book to her and asked her to read it. Three or four days later, we sat down and discussed it. We both agreed that if we had read the book twenty

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years earlier, our lives would have been different. I asked her if she thought it would make any difference if we tried now. She replied, ‘We don’t have anything to lose.’”

At this point, Anna broke into the conversation and said, “I didn’t have any idea that things would actually change between us, but I was certainly willing to give it a try. I still can’t believe what has happened. We enjoy being with each other now. Two months ago, we actually took a vacation together and had a wonderful time.”

As the conversation continued, I learned that Scott’s primary love language was words of affirmation and Anna’s was gifts. (All five love languages will be summarized later in this chapter.) Scott was not a gift giver by nature. In fact, gifts meant very little to him. He got no special thrill when he received a gift, and he had little interest in giving gifts. Conversely, Anna was a woman of few words. She was not given to compliments and admitted that she was often critical.

It was not without effort that Scott learned to buy gifts. In fact, he recruited his sister to help him with the project. Anna admitted that at first she thought it would be a temporary phenomenon. Their original agreement was that for three months they would speak each other’s love language at least once a week and see what happened.

“Within two months,” Scott said, “I had warm feelings for Anna and she had feelings for me.” Anna said, “I never dreamed that I would be able to say the words ‘I love you’ to Scott and really mean it. But I do; it’s incredible how much I love him.”

When a husband and wife discover each other’s primary love language and choose to speak it on a regular basis, emotional love will be reborn.

TRANSFORMING SINGLE RELATIONSHIPS

Single adults have also benefited greatly from understanding the five love languages. As one example, let me share with you a letter Megan sent me from Japan.

Dear Dr. Chapman,

I wanted to let you know how much your book *The 5 Love Languages* has meant to me. I know you wrote it for married couples, but a friend gave it to me and it has had a profound impact on my life. I am in Japan teaching English as a second language. The main reason I came here was to get away from my mother. Our relationship has been strained for several years. I felt unloved and that she was trying to control my life. When I read your book, my eyes were opened. I realized that my love language is words of affirmation, but my mother only spoke to me with critical, harsh words.

I also realized that my mother's language is acts of service. She was forever doing something for me. Even after I got my own apartment, she wanted to come over and vacuum. She knitted a sweater for my dachshund and baked cookies when she knew I was having friends over. Since I didn't feel loved by her, I saw all her efforts as attempts to control my life. Now I realize it was her way of expressing love to me. She was speaking her love language, and I know now that she was sincere.

I mailed a copy of the book to her. She read it, and

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we discussed it via email. I apologized for misreading her actions over the years. And after I explained to her how deeply her critical words had hurt me, she apologized to me. Now her emails are filled with words of affirmation. And I find myself thinking about things I can do for her when I get home. I have already told her that I want to paint the bedroom for her. She can't do it herself and can't afford to have it done.

I know that our relationship is going to be different. I have helped some students here learn to speak English a little better, but my greatest discovery has been the languages of love.

TRANSFORMING CHILDREN

Parents also must learn the primary love languages of their individual children if the children are to feel loved. Marta was the mother of five-year-old Sam when she had her second child. About two months after Isabella arrived, she began to notice a change in Sam, who until then had been what she called "a perfect child."

She said, "We never had any trouble with Sam. But almost overnight we began to notice behaviors that we had not seen before. He would do things that he knew were against the rules and then deny that he had done them. We noticed that he was deliberately rough in handling Isabella; once I found him pulling the blanket over her head in the crib. He began to defy me. I remember the time he said, 'No, and you can't make me!'"

Marta began attending a group that was studying *The 5 Love Languages of Children*. She said, "When I read the chapter on

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quality time, I knew what was going on with Sam. I had never thought of it before, but I realized that quality time was his primary love language. Before the baby came, I spoke his language loudly and he felt loved. Afterward, we no longer played games together, and our quality time was greatly diminished. With this insight, I went home determined to make time for Sam. Rather than doing housework while Bella slept, I began to spend time with him.

“It was amazing to see the results. Within four or five days, Sam was back to being the happy child he had always been. I couldn’t believe how quickly he had changed.”

The craving for love is our deepest emotional need from child-

hood onward. If we feel loved by the significant people in our lives, the world looks bright and we are free to develop our interests and make a positive contribution in the world. But if we do not feel loved by the significant people in our lives, then the world begins to look dark and the

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perceived darkness will be reflected in our behavior.

TRANSFORMING TEENAGERS

In the heart of the teenager, love has to do with *connection*, *acceptance*, and *nurture*. Connection requires the physical presence of the parent and meaningful communication. Acceptance implies unconditional love regardless of the behavior of the teen. Nurture is feeding the spirit of the teen with encouragement and comfort. The opposite of connection is abandonment. The opposite of

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acceptance is rejection. And the opposite of nurture is abuse—physical or verbal.

Any teenager who feels abandoned, rejected, or abused will almost certainly struggle with self-worth, meaning, and purpose. Eventually the pain of feeling unloved will show up in the destructive behavior of the teenager.

Yet negative behavior often changes radically and quickly when the teenager genuinely feels loved by parents. Speaking a teen's love language can transform the parents' relationships with him or her.

THE FIVE LOVE LANGUAGES

The five love languages are more fully explained in my previous books, but let me briefly review them here.

(1) *Words of Affirmation*

Using words to affirm another person is one key way to express love. Affirmations may focus on the person's behavior, physical appearance, or personality. The words may be spoken, written, or even sung. People whose primary love language is words of affirmation receive such affirming words like a spring rain on barren soil.

There are thousands of ways to express verbal affirmation. Here are just a few examples:

- “You look nice in that dress.”
- “You really know a lot about sports!”
- “I appreciate your cleaning out the closet. I know it's not your favorite thing.”

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- “I admire how you took on that challenge at school.”
- “This was a great meal.”
- “Thanks for cheering me up. You’re good at that.”

(2) *Quality Time*

Quality time is giving someone your undivided attention. With a small child, it may be sitting on the floor drawing together. With a spouse, it is sitting on the couch, looking at each other and talking . . . or taking a walk down the road, just the two of you . . . or going out to eat and engaging in good conversation. With a teenager it is going hiking and telling him what your life was like at his age, then asking how his life differs from yours. (You focus on the teen—not the hiking.)

For the single adult, quality time is planning an event with a friend where the two of you have time to share your lives with each other. The important thing is not the activity but the time spent together. When you give someone quality time, you are giving him or her a part of your life. It is a deep communication of love.

(3) *Gifts*

Giving gifts is a universal expression of love because gifts are the product of loving thoughts. Children, adults, and teenagers all appreciate gifts. But for some people, gifts are a primary love language. To them, nothing compares with a gift for making them feel more loved.

Gifts need not be expensive. You can pick up an unusual stone while hiking, give it to a ten-year-old boy, tell him where you found it, and let him know you were thinking of him. I can almost

guarantee you that when he is twenty-three, he will still have the stone in his dresser drawer.

(4) *Acts of Service*

“Actions speak louder than words.” The old saying is especially true for people whose primary love language is acts of service. Doing something that you know another person would like to have done is an expression of love. Examples include cooking a meal, paying bills, giving someone a lift to the doctor, walking the dog, quizzing your son or daughter before a test, helping a friend jump-start their car. The list could be endless. The person who speaks this language is always looking for things he or she can do for others.

To the person whose primary love language is acts of service, words may indeed be empty if they are not accompanied by action. A husband can say, “I love you,” but the wife thinks, *If he loved me, he would do something around here*. He may be sincere in his words of affirmation, but he is not connecting emotionally because her language is acts of service. Without seeing him act, she does not feel loved.

A wife may give her husband gifts, but if his love language is acts of service, he wonders, *Why doesn't she help me out more instead of buying me things?*

(5) *Physical Touch*

The emotional power of physical touch was known to mothers for centuries before science proved it to be true. That's why we pick up babies, cuddle them, and say all those silly words. Long before the child understands the meaning of love, he or she feels loved by physical touch.

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If the child's primary love language is physical touch, nothing is more important. Kissing a six-year-old as you drop her off at school is the best preparation for a day of learning. Teenagers whose primary love language is physical touch may begin to draw back from your hugs and kisses, but it does not mean that they have lost the desire for touch. They associate hugs with childhood. Since they are not children any longer, you must learn new "dialects," new ways of touching them—a slap on the shoulder, an elbow at an appropriate moment, high fives after noteworthy achievements, a back rub after a tough dance practice. But if you stop touching those teenagers, they will feel unloved.

Just like keeping the gas tank filled up in a car, any person's "love tank" needs to be replenished on a regular basis. The key to making sure that your spouse, children, and parents feel loved is to discover the primary love language of each person and speak it consistently. If you speak someone's primary love language, his or her love tank will remain full and the person will be secure in your love. Then you can sprinkle in the other four love languages as "icing on the cake." However, if you don't speak a person's *primary* love language, he or she will not feel loved even though you may be speaking some of the other languages. The person's love tank gauge remains on empty.

WHAT LOVE LANGUAGE DOES GOD SPEAK?

It is my premise that the love languages observed in human relationships all reflect various aspects of divine love. If people are indeed made in the image of God, and if people have five distinct love

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languages, then we would expect to find all those love languages expressed in the character and nature of God. Indeed, God speaks *every* language, so it is not surprising to discover that He communicates fluently through each of the five love languages—and, therefore, with each of us, His children.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

- (1) If the idea of the five love languages is new to you, which of the five do you think is your *primary* love language? Why? (You may not be sure at this point, but future chapters will provide much more information for you.)

- (2) If you are familiar with the five love languages, can you think of a time when “speaking the wrong language” created problems between you and another person? If so, how do you think a similar problem could develop in your relationship with God?

- (3) What initial questions do you have that you hope this book will help you answer?