

THE TWO SIDES OF LOVE

“She ain’t no good to me. Shoot her.” The old sow had become pitifully blinded by disease. After days of stumbling into stumps and holes she gave up. She just stood helplessly still, confused and frightened.

“Can’t get no meat off her. You boys kill her and drag her up in the woods with the tractor.”

The younger son, about sixteen, stood as motionless as the condemned hog. As tears welled up in his eyes he turned his head so his older brother wouldn’t see him cry. “You heard him. Get the rifle!” His brother’s sharp tone quickly turned his tears to anger. “You do it! I’m not going to shoot her. Look at her. She can’t even see to run from you.”

“Give it to me, you baby!” Stoically the older brother loaded the chamber, aimed the rifle at the sow’s head and fired. She stumbled at the bullet’s impact but didn’t fall. Blood began to pour. Then came the doleful squall that echoed through the hollow. The younger brother exploded into a rage. “You didn’t kill her! She’s suffering! Do something!” Without saying a word the older brother methodically reloaded the rifle and fired again. This time the gun did its work. The old sow fell to the ground with a heavy thud. “You murderer! I hate you!” the younger boy shouted. “Shut up and get the tractor. We got work to do.”

Some are tough. Some are tender. There are probably many reasons why we are so different from one another. Part of it can be explained as God’s workmanship. He makes us all different. Part of it is due to family heritage; that individual’s temperament and the kind of life experiences he has had. Both toughness and tenderness are important character qualities; both are necessary sides of love.

Of course, one without the other can create an imbalance. For those of us who are Rambo clones, need to learn to be tenderhearted if we truly desire to be like Christ. For the tenderhearted, tough love needs to be learned—speaking the truth even when it hurts, making waves in relationships that should not stagnate, exhorting others before they shipwreck their lives. The tough need to learn tenderness and the tender need to learn toughness.

To the tenderhearted, tough love sounds unnatural, frightening and maybe even unchristian. For the tough hearted, it comes easier. When they see a problem in the life of one they love, they don’t hesitate to pick up the scalpel and begin surgery. If there is a little blood, that’s o.k. as long as the problem is fixed. A few stitches, a Band-Aid and they’ll thank us later, that is, if they survive.

To the tenderhearted, scalpels and blood makes them say, “Not me! All I want is peace and harmony.”

Let’s look at some practical helps for the tough and the tenderhearted.

The tough-hearted tend to see people as scenery or machinery. They are either a necessary means to their ends or unnecessary obstacles hindering progress. The tough-hearted must first learn to see others from God’s eyes. When he looks at other people he must think, “This person is a custom-designed creation of the Almighty God. He has God’s image stamped on him. He is the object of God’s affection. The Lord Jesus shed his blood for him. The Holy Spirit

is seeking him out night and day in order to bring him into a relationship with the Father. He really matters to God!" Yes, even hot heads, homosexuals, bag ladies and Russians matter to God. Secondly, the tough hearted must learn to feel with God's heart. He needs to slow down and put himself in the other person's shoes. He needs to ask himself how he would feel if he was in the same situation. Thirdly, the tough hearted must treat others as Christ treats us. Tenderheartedness must go beyond feeling to action. If comfort and support are needed, give it!

What about the tenderhearted? How can they learn to practice tough love? First, he or she needs to begin to truly believe that truth-telling is more important than peace-keeping. Tender hearts will go to unbelievable lengths to avoid conflict or upheaval in relationships. However, a relationship built on peace-keeping will not last. Tough love chooses truth telling over peace-keeping and trust God for the outcome. Secondly, the tenderhearted must put the other person's well-being ahead of the comfort level of the relationship. They must be willing to risk the comfort level in the relationship and say whatever needs to be said in order to protect the other person's well-being. Yes, confronting people can be frightening, but usually the outcome is positive over time. Don't internalize your feelings of frustration or anger. Instead, be tough. Schedule a heart-to-heart talk, and try to work out the problem.

Remember that real love is both tough and tender. May God give you the sensitivity to know when to show each kind of love and the courage to do whatever love demands.