

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

The Four Loves

by

C. S. Lewis

INTRODUCTION

The Four Loves is Lewis's look at some of the loves described in Greek thought: familial or affectionate love (*storge*); friendship (*philia*); romantic love (*eros*); and spiritual love (*agape*) in the light of Christian commentary on ordinate loves. Though it is “probably impossible” to love any human being too much, we must, says Lewis, make sure we do not “love him too much *in proportion* to our love for God.” As Lewis notes, it is always “the smallness of our love for God, not the greatness of our love for man that constitutes the inordinacy.”

SUGGESTIONS

A study of *The Four Loves* divides very easily into a two-part discussion, or even a four-part one if you wish to look at each

love separately or to incorporate questions raised by the introduction and the chapter on subhuman loves. Those keen to read more of Lewis's insights on putting Christian love into practice might also like to look at the chapter on Charity in *Mere Christianity*.

We have provided a fairly fluid array of questions for each chapter of the book and recommend that you concentrate on those you think will be of interest, leaving room for people to discuss their own thoughts and ideas. Have someone act as a moderator to help direct the conversation, and ensure that everyone who wishes has a chance to participate.

QUESTIONS

Introduction

1. How does Lewis distinguish between likeness to God and nearness to him?
2. "Where Need-love is felt there may be reasons for denying or totally mortifying it; but not to feel it is in general the mark of the cold egoist. . . . [T]he illusory feeling that it is good for us to be alone is a bad spiritual symptom" (pp. 3–4). In what ways can people be reluctant to acknowledge their need for others?
3. "One Need-love, the greatest of all, either coincides with or at least makes a main ingredient in man's highest, healthiest, and most realistic spiritual condition. . . . Man approaches God most nearly when he is in one sense least like God. . . . This paradox staggered me

when I first ran into it; it also wrecked all my previous attempts to write about love” (p. 4). Why might this paradox be so staggering? How does it subvert other assumptions we make about Need-love?

Likings and Loves for the Subhuman

1. How does Lewis distinguish between Need-pleasures and Pleasures of Appreciation?
2. “Nature will not verify any theological or metaphysical proposition. . . . To discover God we must make a detour—leave the hills and woods and go back to our studies, to church, to our Bibles, to our knees. . . . [O]ur real journey to God involves constantly turning our backs on her” (pp. 26–27). Do you agree with Lewis that there is a sense in which we must ignore nature to find God?
3. What, according to Lewis, is the mark of the true Nature lover?
4. “I think it is possible to be strengthened by the image of the past without being either deceived or puffed up” (p. 32). Do you agree? How so?
5. What are the dangers of patriotism?

Affection

1. How does affection differ from other loves?
2. Lewis sees affection as broadening the mind. How?
3. How can the “built-in” or unmerited character of affection be misinterpreted?
4. What point are the following caricatures designed to illustrate: the domestic Rudesby, Mrs. Fidget, and Dr. Quartz?
5. “If this chapter leads anyone to doubt that the lack of ‘natural affection’ is an extreme depravity I shall have failed” (p. 69). Has Lewis failed to convince you?
6. If we try to live by affection alone, affection will “go bad on us” (p. 71). Do you agree with Lewis that affection must be moderated by common sense?

Friendship

1. “To the Ancients, Friendship seemed the happiest and most fully human of all loves; the crown of life and the school of virtue” (p. 73). Is this excessive praise? Why do you think the ancients felt this way?
2. How does Lewis distinguish between friendship and companionship?
3. Do you agree with him that friendship must be “about something” (p. 85)?

4. Can you relate to Lewis's portrait of friendship in your own friendships?
5. Lewis notes that friendship is seldom used as a model of the love between man and God. What is his explanation for that? What would your explanation be?
6. Would you agree with Lewis concerning the dangers of exclusivity in friendship? How might we seek to avoid that in our friendships?
7. Would you go so far as to describe friendship as a rebellion?

Eros

1. "Suppose you are fortunate enough to have 'fallen in love with' and married your friend. And now suppose it possible that you were offered the choice of two futures: 'Either you two will cease to be lovers but remain forever joint seekers of the same God, the same beauty, the same truth or else, losing all that, you will retain as long as you live the raptures and ardours, all the wonder and the wild desire of Eros. Choose which you please' (p. 86). Which choice would you make?"
2. "All my life a ludicrous and portentous solemnization of sex has been going on" (p. 125). Do you think the same is true of the twenty-first century?
3. Venus is "a divine joke, made at our expense, but also for our endless benefit" (p. 129). What is the joke, and what is the benefit?

4. “Eros does not aim at happiness” (p. 136). Is this a surprising claim? Do you think it a true one?
5. “Nothing is shallower than the belief that a love which leads to sin is always qualitatively lower than one which leads to faithful, fruitful and Christian marriage” (p. 138). Would you agree with Lewis?
6. “It is in the grandeur of Eros that the seeds of danger are concealed” (p. 138). What are these seeds of danger?
7. Discuss Lewis’s view of marriage. What qualifications does Lewis put on the husband’s headship?
8. What does Lewis see as the purpose of Eros? What do you think the purpose is?

Charity

1. “The natural loves are not self-sufficient” (p. 149). Do you agree with Lewis? Do you think someone who does not believe in God would agree?
2. “I believe that the most lawless and inordinate loves are less contrary to God’s will than a self-invited and self-protective lovelessness” (p. 156). Would you agree that lovelessness is worse than lawlessness in love?
3. How are we to understand Christ’s words about having to “hate” our friends and families before we can be his disciples?

4. “If All—quite seriously all—‘for love’ is implicit in the Beloved’s attitude, his or her love is not worth having” (p. 161). Is this a surprising claim to make?
5. Do you agree with Lewis that proper love is a risk? Why is it a risk we should take?
6. “The first hint that anyone is offering us the highest love of all is a terrible shock” (p. 168). Why?
7. In what ways might the natural loves be converted/taken up into the realm of charity?
8. “A somewhat too vocally Christian circle can make a show, in their overt behaviour and especially in their words, of having achieved the thing itself. . . . [S]uch people make every trifle a matter of explicitly spiritual importance” (p. 172). Do you think this is a common temptation among Christians?
9. “Bereavement is in some ways easier for the unbeliever than for us” (p. 179). How does Lewis explain this?
10. At which highest kind of love should we aim?

CONCLUSIONS

1. Did you find this book helpful? Has it changed your outlook in any way?
2. How would you go about putting Lewis’s insights into practice in your own relationships?

The material in this study guide is copyrighted by the C. S. Lewis Foundation and was produced in conjunction with Liz Evershed, the guide's principal author. For more information on the C. S. Lewis Foundation's mission, programs, and events, please visit www.cslewis.org.