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## Love Takes Action (2011)

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## Love Takes Action

*By Sara Meeter*

1 John 3:18 reads “Let us love, not in word of speech, but in truth and action.” This illustrates that love should be shown through a person’s deeds—not by simple words that have no driving action behind them. *Alcestis*, a play by Euripides, translated by Ted Hughes, demonstrates instances when the characters prove their love by selfless actions they do for one another. Also, the play displays scenes where some characters claim they love one another, but they are unwilling to actually prove their love. Reviewing the effects on the characters and the outcome of the story, we can see that it is imperative for us to act upon our love instead of just talking about it. However, at times human nature prohibits us from being proactive with these emotions.

In the play *Alcestis*, the king Admetos of Thessaly is doomed to die. To remedy this tragedy a deal is made: Admetos can live if someone else takes his place in death. When asked, Admetos’s own mother and father refuse to give up their lives for him. Admetos recalls the moment when his father Pheres was approached: “When I was condemned to die/ You snarled in my face./ You showed no more grief than a hyena./ ‘Die,’ you said, ‘hurry up and die.’/ To me you said that—to your only son./ ‘If you have to die—die and stop whining.’” Following this was his mother’s reaction: “She could only scream:/ ‘What do you expect us to do about it?/ If you have to die/ Why come running to us/ Asking us to die for you?/ You’re a man now, Admetos,/ Responsible for your own debts’” (Euripides 51). Though his parents say that they love him, it is apparent that they are unwilling to act upon their love for him. No one in the community or the servants who claim to love him as well will give up their lives either.

The only person who will sacrifice herself for Admetos is his wife Alcestis. She volunteers out of her own free will; “I chose this! I did not have to chose it,” Alcestis insists (Euripides 25). Alcestis is the young mother of two children with her whole life ahead of her and many responsibilities. On the other hand, Admetos’s parents are withering and dying, with hardly any new adventures left in their lives.

To the reader it seems unfair that Alcestis is dying instead of Pheres or his wife. Admetos agrees, outraged when he finds out that his wife is dying in his place instead of his mother or father, “She had all her life ripe, inside her,/ Unused./ [My parents] are empty (Euripides 56). The scrap of time left to them/ Is more precious than [Alcestis] [is]” (Euripides 26). He expects

them to sacrifice their lives for him, but they do not. He thinks that they will die soon anyways and they are being selfish letting Alcestis die. Admetos lashes out at his parents, insulting and degrading them: “Rotten-gutted coward,” he calls his father (Euripides 52).

Conflict arises and we see that the parents are just scared to die like any other human. “[They] began to shake, both of [them],/ At the very idea of dying—/ Clinging to ivy, half of [them] cold in the earth,/ [Their] feet numb in the grave,/ And still [they] screamed for life,” Admetos explains (Euripides 51). Even though his death is near, Pheres still does not want to cut short his time left. Explaining this to Admetos he says, “My life might not be much in your eyes. For me it is all I have” (Euripides 56). As the reader we can clearly see that his fear of death overpowers his love for his son. However, the fear of death is evident in every human being. No one wants to lose their own life, so we can see that Admetos’s parents’ reactions are a result of human nature that is difficult to control; it prohibits them from acting upon their love for their son.

On the other hand, Alcestis is surprisingly calm as her death draws near. She seems proud to be able to save her husband’s life; however, Alcestis is not humble about her sacrifice. She makes sure that everyone is aware that she saved her husband’s life. Also, she has specific guidelines following her death that she demands be met. Alcestis does not want her husband to ever remarry because of how a step-mother would affect her children. “These two will be in her power/ And she will secretly destroy them In the shadow of her own children” (Euripides 27). This argument sounds reasonable; however, we begin to see another component of why she does not want another woman in Admetos’s life: “Some other woman, some woman/ Not so wound into his heart,/ Not so woven into his days and years,/ Will sprawl here with him./ And be happy./ Happy, yes, happy, chattering about a future./ She will not even know what I looked like” (Euripides 17). As she ponders life after her death, it seems like Alcestis does not want her husband to be happy with anyone else. She does not realize that though her life has ended, his life has to continue—that is the gift that she gave to him. Jealousy is very common and hard to avoid since it is human nature. Once again we can see how human nature can interfere with truly showing our love for one another.

When the house is in mourning for Alcestis, Admetos’s good friend Heracles stops by. At first he is unaware that Alcestis is dying, but when he finds out, Heracles feels that it is his duty to Admetos to help with the situation as best as he can. After all, he is the famous Heracles and is known for his ability to conquer anything—even death. He states that he is ready to take on “[...] a challenge worthy of his father” (Euripides 81). In the end Heracles’ bravery and determination ends up defeating death, bringing Alcestis back to life. If Heracles did not act upon his love like John says, Alcestis would have died and the rest of Admetos’s life would be doomed. However, since Heracles actually proved his love for Admetos and his family, he was able to bring happiness back to everyone.

In conclusion, throughout this play we have seen spoken love from Admetos's parents to Admetos as well as love put into action from Alcestis and Heracles to Admetos. Pheres and his wife were unable to prove their love through action because fear held them back. Alcestis was willing to sacrifice her for Admetos but her jealousy would have hurt him further. The love from Heracles benefited the characters the most because he was able to profit everyone in the story without human nature's flaws. As a result, everyone in the play is able to survive without grief. The parents do not have to live with any guilt, Admetos does not have to live his life in mourning, and the children are able to have a mother.

One character in the play mentions "They are easy words/ [...] Proof of the oath is hard" (Euripides 16). This means that simply saying the phrase "I love you" is easy to do. However, actually proving your love is difficult. Looking at our own relationships, we put our feelings into action in order to achieve true love. However, as Alcestis proves, our own fears and human nature tends to get in the way.

#### Works Cited

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