

Loving God in Sincerity

By David de Bruyn

"Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. Amen." So says **Ephesians 6:23-24**.

If I was faced with the situation of having to choose only one book of the Bible to take with to a desert island, I believe I may very well take the book of Ephesians. Ephesians seems to be the summation of what it means to be saved, positionally and practically. It's been a fascinating and enriching time to study this marvellous book.

Now Paul closes the book of Ephesians with one of his characteristic greetings – 'peace be to the brethren, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' His final words are: *"Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity."*

Now remember, every word in the Bible is inspired, including the greetings and salutations. Paul begins every letter he writes with the greeting 'Grace to' whoever he is writing to, and he ends every letter with the words 'Grace be with' whoever he is writing to. It is like he says – 'Grace to you my readers, for the duration of this letter,' and when he finishes, 'grace go with you now as you seek to live this out.'

But his last words of Ephesians are somewhat different.

Five of his epistles end with "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you' or 'be with you all' – Romans, I Corinthians, Philippians, I Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians. Then 2 Corinthians adds the words, "the love of God and the communion of the Holy Ghost."

Three of his epistles end with "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit' or simply, 'the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit' – Galatians, Philemon and 2 Timothy. Another three of his epistles end with simply 'Grace be with you' – Colossians, I Timothy, Titus – and the book of Hebrews ends that way as well.

And they are all pretty similar – Grace be with you – the grace of our Lord Jesus be with you, or be with your spirit. But the last words of Ephesians are completely distinct, and Spirit I believe the Holy wants the careful reader to take note of them: *"Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity."*

And so Ephesians ends on the highest note possible: May God's grace assist those who seek to love God in sincerity. In many ways – this last verse sums up the whole book, just like Ephesians 1:3 prepares us for the first three chapters. Loving God is the absolute core of a Christian's responsibility, as the Bible often reminds us:

Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, "Master, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus said unto him, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This

is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Matthew 22:35-40

“There is none other commandment greater than these.”

Mark 12:31

Now the end [purpose] of the commandment is charity [love] out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned...

1 Timothy 1:5

Loving God is the main point of the Christian life. When we love God, we glorify God, which is His purpose for us.

It's amazing to think that just a few years later, the Lord Jesus spoke to this church at Ephesus through the apostle John and said, “I have somewhat against thee: thou hast left thy first love” (**Revelation 2:4**). The church was doing fine on identifying false teachers, and labouring, and bearing up, and enduring, but they had missed the last verse of Ephesians – love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.

I think many churches, indeed many Christians, are guilty of missing the last verse of Ephesians. They are doing everything but loving God. They are serving, they are discerning, they are enduring, they are obeying – but they are not loving. And if we reach the end of Ephesians and miss the last verse, we have missed the whole point. On the other hand, if we grasp this last verse, it is the key that will unlock the rest.

Let's consider what it is to love God in sincerity. We can begin by examining the idea of sincerity.

What is the opposite of sincerity? Insincerity, or in religious terms – hypocrisy. To act one way, but truly believe or feel another. So start understanding what it means to love God in sincerity, try picture the opposite – those who ‘love’ God in hypocrisy. Insincere love is of course not love at all. Nevertheless, it is a game many people play. They feign love for God, when none exist in their hearts.

We see many examples of insincere love for God in the Bible. Many Israelites were this way, which caused God to say in Isaiah: “Wherefore the Lord said, ‘Forasmuch as this people draw near *me* with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men’” (**Isaiah 29:13**).

Jesus quoted this very verse when rebuking the Pharisees. They, of course, were masters of faking love for God, with long prayers, broad phylacteries (leather boxes containing Hebrew texts on vellum, worn by Jewish men as a reminder to keep the law), chief seats in the synagogues, blowing trumpets when they gave, and putting on a fasting face twice a week. Jesus made no bones in calling them hypocrites to their face.

Paul knew people like this as well when he wrote: “*They profess that they know God; but in works they deny Him*” (**Titus 1:16**) and “*Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof...*” (**2 Timothy 3:5**).

There have always been, and always will be, people who fake love for God. They sing the songs with smiles, and even raise their hands, they quote Scripture, they seem to pray with real intensity, they can talk the spiritual talk – but inside, it is dead. When all the religious activity has died away, they are strangers to God, and God is a stranger to them.

Why then do they do it?

Jesus gives us the one reason in Matthew: *“But all their works they do for to be seen of men”* (**Matthew 23:5**). Jesus unmasks their true motive – to be seen and praised by men. They lusted after prestige, honour, the praise of man, the acceptance, admiration and approval of others.

Many people seek this very thing in varying degrees. To feel like I belong, to feel important, to be admired for my religious prowess or knowledge or spirituality, to obtain a special place in the church, to be considered holier than others. This drives many a person to fake love for God when in fact nothing of the sort exists within them.

A second reason is self-righteousness. Many a person thinks that if they are heavily involved in religious activity, and contributing toward it, putting in their share, that somehow this is crediting them with righteousness and favour in God’s eyes. They do not feel any love for God, but they believe that acting like they do will certainly impress God, and earn them their way to heaven. We read what God thought of this attitude in Isaiah:

Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them.

And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well.

Isaiah 1:13-17

But the true believer in Christ seeks to love God in sincerity. He is not seeking primarily to please man, because God has put a higher motive in his heart – to please God. He is not seeking his own righteousness, because he has cast himself upon the mercy of God. So, of all people, the believer can, and must, love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. In fact, not loving the Lord is condemned in **1 Corinthians 16:22**: *“If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema[accursed]...”*

How do we do this? Interestingly, the various things we have seen in Ephesians provide the answer.

Firstly, **loving God begins with becoming aware of His love toward us**. The principle is stated so clearly in **1 John 4:19**: *“We love Him, because He first loved us.”* Our love for God is not something we initiated. It is not something we came up with. It is not a benevolent act of charity toward God. It is not sympathy or compassion. It is not a love between equals.

Our love for God is an adoring response to God’s love for us. Even in our loving God, God will get all the glory. Our love for God flows back to Him based on His love for us. Nobody loves God out

of the sheer willpower in their hearts. No one loves God in sincerity apart from being filled and convinced of God's love for them.

May I at this point offer a definition of love? Love is both being pleased with someone, and seeking to please them. When you love another person – who they are pleases you. You delight in them, you enjoy them, you appreciate them. At the same time, your love seeks their best, you seek to please them in a way that benefits them. Love is pleasing and being pleased.

God loving us is God being pleased with us, and seeking to please us further. God delights in us, and seeks to delight our hearts all the more. May I say then, that much of the key to loving God in sincerity is taking much time to consider how much God loves you. That's not shallow or selfish. The Holy Spirit took the first three chapters of Ephesians to tell us that! **Ephesians 1:3** sums it up: *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ..."*

And as we saw, each incredible truth – God's election, us being adopted into God's family, our future inheritance as Christ's Bride, our redemption in Him, the Spirit sealing us, God's amazing grace in saving us, God's wisdom in creating His church, and His future plan to vindicate His name through us – each one of those things is God saying – I love you. I do this for you and to you because I seek your good.

Oh, that we would see the heart of God resounding through the Scriptures as He says of His people, 'that it might be well with them!' God seeks the joy and happiness of His people, and all the spiritual blessings are proof of that. You might say, "I find it hard to believe that God could delight in me." Ephesians answers that objection by repeating the beautiful phrase 'in Christ.'

As believer, you find yourself 'in Christ.' The old is gone, and you are now inseparably bound up with Christ – your Bridegroom, Redeemer, Saviour, Lord and Friend. We are not just in Christ like someone sheltering under an umbrella. No, the Bible says, "For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones" (**Ephesians 5:30**).

Now do you recall what God said about His Son when He was baptised? "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (**Matthew 3:17**). That is what God effectively says of you, in Christ. God does not do you good dutifully and reluctantly, but delightfully, as we repeatedly see throughout the Bible:

"Yea, I will rejoice over them to do them good, and I will plant them in this land assuredly with my whole heart and with my whole soul..."

Jeremiah 32:41

For the LORD taketh pleasure in his people: he will beautify the meek with salvation.

Psalms 149:4

But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us...

Ephesians 2:4

Yes, Ephesians builds the foundation – God loves you. God is pleased with you in Christ. God seeks to please you further, to delight your heart.

1 John 4:16 also tells us, “*And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us.*” Any attempt to love God that does not arise from a reaction to His love is doomed to failure. God reserves the right to be the initiator, the husband, and insists that we be first recipients, and then responders. If I try to love God without first knowing and believing in his love for me, I am violating the principle of **1 John 4:19**, and my efforts will fail or malfunction, because they are based in pride, and not humility.

Only those who spend time dwelling deeply, feasting on, the love of God, will love Him sincerely. One of the reasons is that knowing God loves us frees us from the fear of man. Perfect love casts out fear. Security in the love of God makes approval from man insignificant or secondary at best. I don’t need to fake or pretend to love God to get the love or approval of others, if I am truly abiding in the love of Christ. “How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that *cometh* from God only?” (**John 5:44**).

Knowing God takes pleasure in me in Christ, and continues eternally to seek my good, what is my response? **Well, we then love God in sincerity.** And if loving God is being pleased and seeking to please, then we see both those ideas in Ephesians. Knowing that God is this kind of God, I can delight and adore and be pleased in who He is. I am to enjoy God.

What is the very first word of **Ephesians 1:3**? “*Blessed*”! Praise be. The book begins in praise and ends the same way. We see it in **Ephesians 3:21**: “*Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.*” There is no doubt the tone of the verses in chapters 1, 2 and 3 are exulting and extolling and enjoying God.

Never think that being delighted in God is an optional extra. It is an integral part of love. Just think of it from your standpoint. What if you found out that God had no delight in you, and the blessings He poured out on you were done so reluctantly, begrudgingly and dutifully. Would that make your heart rejoice in God? Sadly, this is how many Christians in fact view God. We are glad when we know that it was God’s pleasure to bless us.

In the same way, do you think God is pleased when we do things for Him, out of a heart that has no delight in Him? That’s the very definition of insincere love. We are to be meditating on the wonderful God He is. Take time to meditate on the God who was, who is and who is to come, as He relates to you.

Meditate on who God was to you – what He has done in your life. Think on the things He has done for you, given to you, taught you, spared you from, enabled you to do. Then meditate on the God who is. Think on what God is busy doing for you today. The health, the provision, the loved ones, the helpers, the opportunities, the protection, the ministry, the illumination.

Finally, think on the God who is to come – the one who will return for you or deliver you safely to Himself, crown you with crowns, clothe you in fine linen, seat you with Him on thrones, and delight your soul for all eternity with Himself. Christian, delight yourself in the Lord. Taste and see that the Lord is good!

And then, as we have said, love is not only being pleased, but seeking to please. And this is the theme of chapters 4, 5 and 6 in the book. Chapter 4 starts, “*I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord,*

beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called” (Ephesians 4:1). The words “*therefore*” means, in light of this God who is pleased with you in Christ and seeks to please you, and since you are pleased in Him – then seek to please Him with a holy, God-pleasing life.

All the commands regarding unity, Christlikeness, integrity, honesty, speech, emotions, marriage, family and work find their motivation in a desire to please the One we love. As my soul is so overflowing with God’s love for me, and as I delight myself in Him, what follows but a desire to walk in a manner pleasing to Him. That’s why Jesus said, “*If ye love me, keep my commandments*” (John 14:15).

Now – the key question is, how do I do this? The answer is in the last verse: “*Grace be with those...*” (Ephesians 6:24). How do I love God in sincerity? Grace. It takes God to know God. It takes God to love God. As we said, God will get all the glory, and the way He makes sure He gets all the glory is through this thing called grace. Grace is what we need to meet God’s requirements. Grace is given by God in mercy.

And as we have seen all through Ephesians, God’s grace is necessary for me to love God. In order for me to know that God loves me, God must reveal it to me. We saw that in **Ephesians 1:17-19**. The Holy Spirit must illuminate us to how God loves us for us to know it. Apart from His illumination, we will not know that God delights in us, and see that God has indeed plans to do us good and not evil. We will not see that God has continually, and does continually, seek to please us.

Now, we have to be in a surrendered, teachable place so the Spirit may impart to humble, childlike hearts how much God loves them. I think of how Peter had to learn this lesson. Peter was always trying to initiate and run ahead of God. In **John 21** we see the Lord restoring Peter. He first feeds the fisherman some fish. Then He asks him, Peter – ‘do you love me?’ Three times Peter had the opportunity to deny his denials and say – ‘yes, Lord, I am ready to receive *from* you – I love you, I will follow you, I will feed your sheep.’

Not only do we require the Spirit to show us God’s love, but we require Him to stir up the loving response in our hearts. The Holy Spirit gives us the desire to love God back.

We see this in **Romans 5:5**, which says, “*...the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.*” Philippians also spells it out: “*For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure*” (Philippians 2:13). So when we want to please God and walk worthy of Him, we need the Holy Spirit to produce Christlikeness in us. That’s what’s meant when we read, “*And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit*” (Ephesians 5:18).

To know God’s love for me is grace. To take pleasure in God is grace. To please God is grace. Both sides of loving God – being pleased and pleasing – can only come through the Holy Spirit. So what do I do? Love with all your heart. Work at your love!

God gives joy and we are told to rejoice. God circumcises the heart, and we are told to circumcise our own hearts. God gives peace, and we are told to let peace rule in our hearts and to not be anxious. God gives faith, but we are told to trust and believe.

Who does God give grace to? The humble. The humble man says, 'I need to know and sense God's love. So He asks the Spirit to teach Him and show Him that, while he applies himself wholeheartedly to the Scriptures. God begins to show him how much He loves him. That man starts to rejoice.

Then he humbly asks for more. He says, 'I want to delight in God, but I don't do it the way I should. Please, Lord, show me Thy glory that I might delight in it.' So he gives himself diligently to seeking God all the more. And as God opens his eyes, he sees how much God loves him, and what God has done and is doing. So he delights in God and wants to please Him, but being humble he asks again, 'Lord, help me to do the things that please You.' Then he applies himself wholeheartedly to putting off the old and putting on the new.

Humility receives grace.

So it comes down to this – we love Him because He first loved us. To love Him, you must cooperate with the Spirit so He can reveal His love to you. Abide in His love, and you will desire to please Him and delight in Him more. And to do that, you again turn to His Spirit for grace.

What a treasure – that God loves us! And we can, by His power, love Him too. As Song of Solomon says: "My beloved is mine, and I am his, and his desire is toward me" (**Song of Solomon 7:10**). How incredible that our God has chosen to delight in us, and offers us the joy of delighting in Him.