

## The Love of God - Part 1

**1 John 4:16-19** *And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us.*

Tozer said - "What comes into our minds when we think of God is the most important thing about us." He said that your concept of God will determine your spiritual future. He was exactly right. We do tend towards our mental image of God.

One of the attributes of God which suffers most from a wrong assessment is the matter of His love.

There probably isn't an attribute of God more misunderstood, trivialised, sentimentalised, downplayed, or otherwise misrepresented. In fact, given our deceitful hearts, no other attribute is more liable to be seized upon and twisted to suit us, and our self-centred universe.

There are dire consequences for misunderstanding the love of God.

Allow me to generalise for a moment, knowing that the truth is usually shades of these two black and white categories.

When people view the love of God as something based on human merit, and therefore changeable, temperamental, fluctuating – they tend to view God as cold, aloof, even spiteful. If God bases His love on our performance, He must be generally very unhappy with us, and the love relationship must be like a bad marriage. He is peevish, grim, austere and perpetually dissatisfied. He is severe and harsh.

Such a view of God produces legalists - people who serve God to maintain the relationship, who try to appease God lest He turn on them. Such people labour under a deep burden of guilt, which they find almost impossible to shake. They are only happy when they have perfectly kept, what they see as, the standard. Such people will say they fear God, but it is the fear of torment or punishment – not the fear of a child for his father. The truth is, such people have very little love for God, because their view of God is of someone you cannot really love.

Because we tend to become like our gods, such people themselves become hard, lacking meekness, gentleness, longsuffering, or even kindness. If God withdraws His favour in a moment, so can they. If He is stern and exacting, so will they be. If He is unloving, so will they be.

At the other extreme, when people view the love of God as based on nothing at all, and therefore without bounds, focus, discrimination or discernment – they view God as the sum total of every sentimental wish to be loved. They say God loves unconditionally, which of course means nothing can upset Him. He loves because He loves. This makes God the most harmless of beings, someone so loving that he is hardly perturbed by sin. If His love is unconditional, then He places no condition upon being accepted. Therefore, there can be nothing you can ever do to displease Him, because His love somehow exists above that.

Such a view of God produces libertarians. Such people take God's love as permission to live as they please. If God loves us like that, He must want us to pleasure ourselves and get as much fun for

ourselves. An unconditionally loving God could have no laws for us – because that would be a form of condition. God's love is a huge, broad door to self-esteem, self-fulfilment, self-love. The issue is not pleasing God, or knowing Him, it is being loved. In essence, God becomes a means to our own ends. The god of the legalist cannot be loved, but the god of the libertarian cannot be respected.

Both views come out of faulty ideas of God's love. And they can end up producing the spiritual shipwreck of a Pharisee, or a Jezebel.

Christians, and sometimes churches as a whole, can lean towards one or the other. Sometimes we lean more to one or the other on different days.

But I'm going to suggest that the only Christians who live the Christian life successfully, are those with a biblical notion of God's love.

Let me give you more evidence for this.

## **I. God's Love motivates ours.**

**2 Corinthians 5:14-15** *For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; <sup>15</sup> and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.*

**1 John 4:19** *We love Him because He first loved us.*

What is the greatest commandment of all? *You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might.* Our priority as Christians is to love God wholly and appropriately. But according to the verses we have just read, what precedes and compels our love for God? God's love for us is what precedes and compels our love for Him. To put it simply, your ultimate priority in life has a prerequisite – that you know and believe the love God has for you.

God always retains for Himself the privilege of being the Initiator, the Seeker, the One who Loved us first. Our love for Him is not a generous act of charity on our part; it is a humble response to being loved and drawn.

## **II. God's Love Shapes Ours.**

The result of our lives is supposed to be love. Love for God, love for family, for brothers and sisters in Christ, for our unsaved neighbour, and even for our enemies. As you have seen in Scripture, love is the crowning mark of holiness.

**1 Corinthians 13:13** *And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.*

**Philippians 1:9** *And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment,*

**Colossians 3:14** *But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.*

**1 Peter 4:8** *And above all things have fervent love for one another, for "love will cover a multitude of sins.*

**2 Peter 1:5-7** *But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, <sup>6</sup> to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, <sup>7</sup> to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love.*

With all these commands to be characterised by love, the big question is – how do we know what

love is?

The only way we know what it is to truly love, is when we understand truly what it means to be loved by God.

**1 John 3:16** *By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.*

**Romans 5:5** *Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us*

**Romans 5:8** *But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

**1 John 4:7** *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.*

God's love sets the pattern. God's love is revealed to us, and it shapes and guides the love we are to have.

If we do not understand the love of God, we will not only love the wrong god, we will lack the right motive, and we will love the wrong way.

Does it sound as if the stakes are high?

So what do we need to know to understand God's love?

There are a number of questions we need to ask and answer.

First, we will ask – what does it mean that God loves? What does love do?

Second, we will examine why God loves. What is it that He loves? And, by implication, we'll seek to answer the question, 'Who does God love?' In other words, what are the criteria guiding God's love – and for that matter, His hatred? Third, we'll try to answer the question, 'How does God love – in what way does He love?' When a Being like God loves, what does it mean? What does it not mean?

Finally, we'll ask, 'How do we come to know and believe His love in a clearer and deeper fashion?'

In this message we will try to answer the question, '*What does it mean when we say that God loves?*' What does that look like? What is the definition of God's Love? What does God do when He loves?

Let's begin with the wording in John, the interpretation of which has led to a number of errors. John states that God is love. This has led some people to say that God and love are the same, that love is what God is and God is what love is. Of course, this is untrue. If God was literally, love, then He would not be a Person; He would be a force, or an attitude. God is not what love is, nor is love what God is.

After all, the Bible also says, God is Light, God is a Consuming Fire. The Bible is simply stating that God is inseparable from His attributes. He is truth, He is justice, in the sense that He is the ultimate form of truth and justice, and He can never be anything other than truthful and just. So, it is the same with love. God loves infinitely; love is part of His essential Being. God cannot be anything other than loving.

But what does it mean that God loves?

I'll suggest three things, which theologians most often mention

**Firstly, love wills good to its beloved.**

John says, 'There is no fear in love'. Why does he say that? Because love intends only good towards its object. To be loved by someone is to know they do not intend to harm you in any way; therefore, fear is unnecessary.

Our world is full of things that threaten us. There are legitimate fears on every side. What it means to be loved by God is that God wills only your wellbeing; the happiness, the fruitfulness, the safety, the usefulness. There is nothing in love that is intentionally malicious, unkind, or harmful. Love may hurt the one it loves, but it never seeks to harm. **Romans 13:10** *Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.*

You might put it this way – love is always seeking to bless. When you go right back to Genesis, God is revealed as the God who blesses. As He creates on the various days, He keeps commenting that it is good. Who was it good for? It was good for its intended recipients – man! God created to bless.

And when He makes man, Genesis tells us, *God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every creature that crawls on the earth."*

When man fell, and brought the curse on the ground, God responded with His already-prepared plan to restore the blessing through a coming Redeemer. And the rest of the Bible is the account of God working to restore the blessing. Selecting one man – Abraham – through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed. Then protecting, and raising and shaping Israel to bring the blessing to the world. And they did – they brought the Scriptures, and the Messiah to the world. The New Testament is the record of God making the way for ultimate blessing to be restored to those who want it.

**Ephesians 1:3** *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ*

The book of Revelation closes off the story with the words, - **Revelation 22:3** - *And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him.*

**Revelation 22:14** *Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city.*

God, as a loving being, is inclined to bless. He curses as a reflex action, as much as His hatred is a reflex to what He loves. God wants to bless! God delights to bless.

**Deuteronomy 5:29** *Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!*

**Isaiah 48:18** *Oh, that you had heeded My commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, And your righteousness like the waves of the sea.*

**Psalm 81:16** *He would have fed them also with the finest of wheat; And with honey from the rock I would have satisfied you."*

**Matthew 23:37** *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!*

Consider, does an unloving being look back with sadness over a forfeited blessing? Does an unloving being grieve that its blessings were rejected?

God is inclined to overflow in blessing. The objects of His love receive blessing.

**Secondly, love identifies itself with its beloved.**

Love is not a happy feeling towards everyone, but no one in particular. Love sets up a relationship, a connection where the fate of the beloved is now the problem of the lover. When two people marry, they vow to love in sickness, and in health, for better or for worse. They are saying, 'We will make one another's welfare our own.' If it is bad, we will experience the bad together. If it is good, we will experience the good together.

Love identifies with its beloved. When your son skins his nose, it upsets you. When your daughter is rejected by others, it hurts you. When your spouse is saddened, you are sad as well. You choose to tie your happiness, in some measure, to this person.

And so it is in God. It is a strange and marvellous thing that God, who is absolutely free, has chosen to identify with His creatures. In a sense, God chooses to forego the perfect, undisturbed happiness He could have enjoyed by not creating us, and instead experiences the displeasures, the grief, the pains, and the joys, the pleasures, the victories that come with love. God will not know perfect and unmixed happiness again until He brings all His children to glory.

**Judges 10:16** *So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD. And His soul could no longer endure the misery of Israel.*

**Hosea 11:8** *How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I set you like Zeboiim? My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred.*

In fact, every time we read reference to God's mercies and compassion, we are reading of how God's love identifies itself with whom He loves. The Hebrew word for love is *chesed*, a word which especially denotes loyalty and faithfulness. God's love is that He identifies and remains loyal and faithful to those with whom He identifies.

In fact, God's love is such that, to make His identification public and verifiable, He makes covenants. The pagan gods were fickle, capricious, unpredictable and temperamental. You didn't know what you were going to get. So when the God of the Bible comes to Noah, and to Abraham, and to Moses, and to David and says, 'Here is an agreement. I will bind myself to you. I will do this for you. This is what you can expect from me.' (And in some of the covenants, this is what I expect from you).

That was unheard of – A deity, stooping down to making Himself so known, that He draws up covenants – vows from His side to us.

**Deuteronomy 7:9** *Therefore know that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments;*

When God made these covenants, by whose name did He swear? He swore by His own name. God identifies Himself with His people in the strongest terms. For me to break my covenant with you, would be to violate my own name.

**Isaiah 49:14-16** *But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, And my Lord has forgotten me." <sup>15</sup> Can a woman forget her nursing child, And not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget, Yet I will not forget you. <sup>16</sup> See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; Your walls are continually before Me.*

I am tied to you, and you are tied to me. Your actions affect my glorious name, and your welfare affects my glory. Your good is to My glory, and glorifying Me is to your good.

**Thirdly, Love delights in the object of its love.**

It is the nature of love to enjoy and delight in what it loves. It is the joy of love that draws us in. We love to love. To say "I love to do something" is that same as saying, 'I enjoy doing something.' Love seeks the good of the beloved, love identifies with the beloved, but all the while love delights in doing so. Love takes great joy in doing what it does.

In fact, when love has lost its joy, we seldom call it love any more, do we? We may call it duty; obligation, perhaps; or commitment. But love takes pleasure in its beloved.

Does God enjoy what He loves?

**Psalms 147:11** *The LORD takes pleasure in those who fear Him, In those who hope in His mercy.*

**Proverbs 8:30-31** *Then I was beside Him as a master craftsman; And I was daily His delight, Rejoicing always before Him, <sup>31</sup> Rejoicing in His inhabited world, And my delight was with the sons of men.*

**Zephaniah 3:17** *The LORD your God in your midst, The Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing.*

Now, consider Jesus Christ and His cross. Is His appearance in time, taking on humanity into His nature, walking the dusty streets of Nazareth; all the while knowing He was here to die an agonising death on our behalf – is that goodwill? Are these actions not showing a desire for the wellbeing of those He loves?

Think about identification. Could Yahweh have identified with us any more than to become one of us? Could He have set up a stronger covenant than the New Covenant in His own blood. Once you eat His flesh and drink His blood at salvation, He is yours and you are His.

Could He identify any more than to send His Spirit to dwell within us permanently; God making you the Holy of Holies?

Think about pleasure. Scripture calls you holy and beloved because of Christ. Does God delight in Christ? God's delight in you as His child is almost as perfect as His delight in His Son.

“He remembers our frame and knows that we are dust. He may sometimes chasten us, it is true, but even this He does with a smile, the proud, tender smile of a Father who is bursting with pleasure over an imperfect but promising son who is coming every day to look more and more like the One whose child he is” —(Root of the Righteous, The)(Tozer)

If God loves you, He wills only good to you – in fact, the very best.

If God loves you, He connects Himself with you, so that your good is now His glory.

If God loves you, then He delights in you.

If we meditated on these thoughts alone, we would find reason to wake each day with great joy.

Our next message in this series will be on finding out – why does God love, and if the criteria for His love are found in us.