

The Love of God - Part 2

In Part 1 of this series on The Love of God, we began by seeing the importance of understanding God's love. If you do not understand it, you will lack the right motive to love Him in return, and you will not know *how* to love Him or others.

We then sought to answer the question: *What is God's love?* What does it mean that God loves? We suggested three answers:

- 1) God's love is His willing good to His beloved - seeking to bless them.
- 2) God's love is His identifying with those He loves.
- 3) God's love is His delighting in those He loves.

But this leads us to perhaps the most important question of all – *why does God love?* In fact, the objects of someone's love tell us the most important things about that person.

As we saw in Part 1, when someone has a wrong idea of *why* God loves, they end up with a wrong idea of God's love. Those who think God loves us for what we do, end up with a hard, severe, displeased God. They become legalists.

Those who think God loves us for no reason at all, end up with a permissive, sentimental, harmless god who cannot be respected. They become libertarians.

Put simply, unless you understand what motivates the love of God, you will come to wrong conclusions about what God's love is, and ultimately who He is.

In both cases, the person is guilty of assuming the object of God's love, instead of seeing it from Scripture. The legalist and the libertarian come to their respective answers not from Scripture, but from assumptions - assumptions of how God must think, since it is how we think; or assumptions of how God must be, because that would, in our eyes, make Him more loving.

Let's begin with those two assumptions – that God loves us for what, or who we are, or that God loves us unconditionally.

You have heard of God's 'unconditional love'. This is sometime used to mean God does not love us because of our works or merits. It is true that election is unconditional; God chooses us for reasons outside of us. So you could say that God chooses to set His love upon us unconditionally. But it isn't entirely accurate to say that God goes on loving us or anyone unconditionally. Unconditional love, in the truest sense, would be love without anything to draw it. It would have no reasons to love. It would not simply be unconditional, it would be irrational. Not only irrational, but it would become impersonal. Unconditional love would mean God does not love us for any particular reason, He is loving everyone for no reason. That starts to make God less than personal. Like a burst pipe – water gushes out at no one and nothing in particular.

Truth be told, is irrational, unconditional, impersonal love something to be thankful for? Certainly, I am thankful for the taps built into my home. But if I walk past a burst main and it sprays me, I doubt I will feel very grateful.

But God is not someone whose love is like an impulse He cannot control, like iron filings close to a magnet. God's love is like He is; it is rational, willing, and intelligent. It does in fact have a cause.

On the other hand, people have surmised that if God loves us, there must be something we are doing or being that He loves, and so *attracts* God's love. Israel came to imagine it was because they were most worthy. The Rabbis invented a myth that God offered the law to all the nations of the world, and only Israel accepted. So, to a rabbinical Jew, the ultimate answer to why God loves him, is rooted in his own choice.

Pharisees came to imagine it was their law-keeping. God seemed to want these commands kept – like a perfectionist hostess who wants her house forever perfect. If it is kept perfect, she loves her guests. An uncomfortable situation, to be sure, but the legalists began believing they were close-to-perfect house guests.

Men through the ages have imagined that every god wants something. If you supply what he wants, he will like you and do good to you. If you do not supply it, he will hate you and destroy you. Pagans thought it might be human sacrifice, foods, blood, gold, silver, or animal sacrifices. But many people thought that God was the same way – if you supplied Him with what He wanted – be it animal sacrifices, or the keeping of certain lists – He would love you, and if you didn't – He wouldn't.

But listen to what God told Israel about Himself:

Psalm 50:7-14 *"Hear, O My people, and I will speak, O Israel, and I will testify against you; I am God, your God! ⁸ I will not rebuke you for your sacrifices Or your burnt offerings, Which are continually before Me. ⁹ I will not take a bull from your house, Nor goats out of your folds. ¹⁰ For every beast of the forest is Mine, And the cattle on a thousand hills. ¹¹ I know all the birds of the mountains, And the wild beasts of the field are Mine. ¹² "If I were hungry, I would not tell you; For the world is Mine, and all its fullness. ¹³ Will I eat the flesh of bulls, Or drink the blood of goats? ¹⁴ Offer to God thanksgiving, And pay your vows to the Most High.*

In other words, God is saying – I am not one of the pagan gods who have needs, so that when you meet those needs, I am pleased. I have no needs. My relationship is not predicated on your supplying something I wish I had. Everything you give me, I owned it already and I gave it to you. You cannot bait me; you cannot attract me with something you supply.

To the New Testament Christian – God does not love you more or less because you supply Him with righteousness. Any righteousness you possess, He supplies it in the first place.

The point is this – God's love is not based on non-condition. He has reasons for loving us. But it is also not based on something we can supply Him with. Why? Because the God of the Bible is all-sufficient, all-satisfied, complete in Himself.

If He loves, it cannot be for something He lacks.

So why does God love us? Let's examine one of the closest explanations of God's motive.

Deuteronomy 7:7-8 *The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; ⁸ "but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.*

That might sound almost redundant at first. But see what God is saying. God is rooting His act of

love not in the nature or the deeds of Israel, but in His own choice to love. The reason God loves Israel is not found in Israel, it is found in God.

When we go through Scripture, we find this truth coming up again and again. *The motive of God's love is Himself*. God loves Himself supremely, infinitely and perfectly. All of His love for other things or persons is based on, and acts according to, His love for Himself.

God is the One Person for whom supreme self-love is not sinful, it is healthy. God is the first and best Person of all. He was before anything else.

Is anything worth more than God? Therefore, should God love anything more than God? If He did so, He would be unjust.

Before He made the universe, what was God loving? Answer: Himself. Before the foundation of the world, the Father was loving the Son, and the Son was loving the Spirit, and the Son was loving the Father, and the Spirit was loving the Son, and the Spirit was loving the Father.

John 17:20-26 *"I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; ²¹ that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. ²² And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: ²³ I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me. ²⁴ Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵ O righteous Father! The world has not known You, but I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me. ²⁶ "And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."*

When God chose to create the universe, was it because He was lonely? Was it because a need had developed in God? No, the only explanation for the universe's existence is that the love of God overflowed. God wished to share Himself with countless other beings. God wanted to reflect His own wisdom and beauty in others, and enjoy the reflection.

So He created the world, which showed off the power, wisdom and beauty of God. And then, when He created man, what was special about man? Man was to be made "In Our Image", God said.

Throughout the Bible, when man has done everything to push away the hand of God, God still steps in and then tells man why He did it. "Not for your sake, but for 'my name's sake'. God's acts of love are rooted in something far deeper, older and unchangeable than man – Himself.

As John Piper says, God's love is not God making much of us; it is God delivering us from self-centredness so we can enjoy making much of Him. The more God loves you for His own sake, the better it is for you. Here is why. If God's reason for loving you was rooted in you, there would not be that much that God could love. Indeed, it might mean God would love you less, or God's love for you would change as you changed.

If God's reason for loving you is rooted in himself, then that love is unshakable, unchangeable, immovable.

He loves what is an extension and reflection of Himself. Whatever resembles, reflects, or otherwise

points to Him, He loves.

That also helps us understand God's hatred. If someone loves something intensely, it is likely they will hate something else. If you love children, you hate child abuse. If you love babies you will hate abortion. If God loves Himself and all that is an extension and reflection of Him – what will He hate?

He will hate whatever opposes, defiles, twists, or perverts His image; whatever falls short of His glory. Whatever slanders God explicitly or implicitly is what He hates.

Therefore, we come to the next question:

Whom does God love?

If God's love were unconditional, He would love everyone, including Satan equally. If God's love were conditional on something we supplied Him, His love would fluctuate greatly.

In other words, God's reason for loving is not something found in a human, it is because something of God is found in that human. God loves humans as a sun might love its planets – they reflect its light. God loves humans as parents love their children – they reflect something of themselves. We know that God loves Himself. Outside of the Trinity, whom does God love?

We can say the following with certainty:

1. God loves the works of His hands

We read last week, that when God created the world, Wisdom was beside God, “... as a master craftsman; And I was daily *His* delight, Rejoicing always before Him, ³¹ Rejoicing in His inhabited world, And my delight was with the sons of men.” (**Proverbs 8:30-31**)

The Bible shows that God truly delights in His creation. From His boasts in the book of Job to Christ telling us the Father clothes the lilies and feeds the sparrows and not one falls without Him noticing – this is clearly a loving providence. God delights in the works of His hands, because they are extensions and reflections of His beauty, wisdom and power.

Psalm 145:9 *The LORD is good to all, And His tender mercies are over all His works.*

2. God loves all men as the work of His hands, and as the crown of His creation.

We remember in **Genesis 1:26**, *Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness;*

Then man fell. But did the fall erase the likeness of God in man? No, I don't believe it did.

James 3:9 *With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God.*

In fact, the command to institute capital punishment against murderers was given after the Flood, and the reason given by God was, “*Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man.*”

All humans still retain something of the image of God. Yes, it is marred, it is like a very poor image, but something of it remains. And insofar as the natural man reflects God, God loves him. **John 3:16** *"For God so loved the world..."*

God says of sinners in **Ezekiel 33:11**: *Say to them: 'As I live,' says the Lord GOD, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?'*

But at the same time, we are reminded that God hates what is unlike Himself.

Psalms 5:5 ... *You hate all workers of iniquity.*

When you are an unbeliever – you are like a broken mirror. Where God sees Himself fairly clearly, He loves it. Where you are warping and distorting and marring His image, He hates it. You have had the experience of looking into a broken mirror. When the mirror is so badly cracked that it makes an image which disturbs you, you do not favour that mirror. In this way, God is able to love and hate sinners at the same time. God has a common grace for all men, a love for all men as the work of His hands. He does not hate His creation, for it is a work of His own hands. But does He hate the worker of iniquity? Yes, because He did not create iniquity.

However, some humans do not continue on as broken mirrors. When does a human restore that image of God? They restore it at salvation.

3. God loves believers as He loves His own Son.

Though God loves all men, He discriminates in His love and loves believers in a particular fashion.

Romans 9:10-16 *And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac ¹¹ (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), ¹² it was said to her, "The older shall serve the younger." ¹³ As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." ¹⁴ What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! ¹⁵ For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." ¹⁶ So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.*

Are believers really objects of a special love?

Ephesians 2:4-5

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),

2 Thessalonians 2:13 *But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth,*

Why does God love believers seemingly more than unbelievers?

When you are saved, the Spirit of God the Son, the very image of God, comes to live inside you.

You are counted one with Christ, hidden in Him. Now, God delights in you far more than an unbeliever. His delight in His Son is now a delight in whoever is in His Son.

Romans 8:29 *For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.*

Believers are recipients of a great love. It is the love that has chosen them, redeemed them, forgiven them, clothed them in Christ's righteousness; blessed them with every spiritual blessing in Christ. In fact, we would be here for hours if we quoted every Scripture which details how God loves His people – His saving, keeping, blessing love. If you're unsure, for a start, read Romans 8. Then read Ephesians 1 and 2. Pick up the Psalms at any time. The Scriptures are a long record of God seeking to return the blessing to His people for their ultimate good and His pleasure and glory.

God loves His people with a love that goes beyond Creator-Creature. This is the love of identification and deep pleasure. It is the love of Father to son, of Bridegroom to Bride. God does more than feel fondly for you as His child. He binds Himself to you, so that your well-being is His glory, His glory should become your preoccupation. It is a special, focused covenant love.

As Jesus put it in **John 17**: ... *that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them.*

Why does He love you, man or woman? Because He made you in His image.
Why does He love you, Christian? Because you have been recreated into the image of Christ, and are growing ever more into His image.

So our joy in God's love is in fact a joy in God Himself. It is delighting that God has clothed us in Himself; placed more of Himself in us to love, and will eventually cause us to perfectly reflect His glory. It is humbling – He does not love me for my deeds. But it is freeing - He will not cease to love me, if He has placed His own image in me permanently.

Now we come to a seeming contradiction. As we will see in Part 3, God loves according to His nature. Thus, because God is infinite, He loves infinitely. He is unchanging. He cannot love you more at 9am and less at 4pm.

At the same time, it is clear that God loves His people more than He loves unbelievers. But how can that be possible if He doesn't love by degrees?

That has led people to two wrong conclusions. One is the idea that God loves all people infinitely, without discrimination. There is enough Scripture to turn that over. The love of God, as Father, is certainly a more intense love than the love of God as Creator.

The other conclusion is that God hates some men completely, and loves believers from eternity past, even during their unregenerate state. But Scripture doesn't support that either, it seems. God sends rain on the just and unjust, so Scripture doesn't support the idea that He hates some men from the beginning.

I think the answer is this – while God does not love us more or less in Himself, humans can have more or less resemblance to God – meaning there is more or less of them for God to love. An unbeliever might only have a small fraction of God's image remaining. God loves that fraction infinitely. What does God do with the rest of the man? He hates it. God is able to love and hate at the same time, just as we are, when you think about it. Because the majority of that man is made up

of what God hates, you can say with accuracy that God hates him. But until the day he dies, God still loves him as well.

I'm going to speculate here, and agree with a certain theologian that God no longer loves people in hell, for they have lost all traces of God's image in them, and are like the fallen angels and Satan. There comes a time when a man is not only a sinner, but a worker of sin – a practising sinner – he and sin are so identified with each other, that you cannot tell them apart. At this point, the mirror has no more use to its owner, it is good for nothing, but to be destroyed.

In this sense, God's love finds more or less place in different people – not because He loves by degree, but because people choose to have more or less of God.

What about the sinful things that are in me? Does God hate His children?

The answer is that a Christian is not a worker of iniquity, a practitioner of lawlessness. A Christian is not identified with his or her sin. I John clarifies that when you and sin are indistinguishable – you do not have God's seed dwelling in you. God hates with displeasure the disobedience in us, but He is so identified with His children that to hate us would be to hate Himself. As Tozer put it, God is able to see a child with imperfections who is every day coming to look more like the One in whose image he has been made.

It was Tozer who said, there are two things we need to know to live the Christian life correctly: we need to know how bad we really are, and we need to know how much God really loves us. For most people, to believe one, they have to downplay the other. If they believe they are truly wicked sinners, then they downplay the truth that God loves them. They reason, 'How could God love me since I am so wicked?'

Other people believe that God loves them, so they reason, 'I can't be that wicked if He loves me so much.' So they imagine they are halfway decent, and God in fact loves them for themselves.

Either one is a lie and fails to experience the wonder of God's love.

If you think God loves based on your sin or righteousness, you will live in fear and guilt – and there will be no awe. If you take away from the truth of your depravity and pretend you are attractive to God, there will be no awe that God should love a sinner.

God loves you in spite of you. As we said, He loves you for Himself. As His creation, whatever remains of His image, He loves, and when restored by God's grace to look like Christ, He delights in it.

The wonder of God's love is that we have given Him far more reasons to hate us than to love us. But instead, He sets His love upon us by restoring His image in us, so that the very delight He has always had in Himself, He can have in us.

That is the reason God loves you – whatever He has made or restored of Himself in you. Why He should bother to do that instead of destroying you is something buried deep in the heart of God – a question we will not know this side of eternity – and perhaps never. What He loves is explained in Scripture, why He chooses to love us – is not.