

The Love of God – Part 3

We have come this far in our study on God's love. We have seen how critical it is to right Christian living. We have studied what it is that God loves, and found that God loves Himself, and loves anything or anyone else for His own sake. So we saw that God loves the works of His hands; He loves all men as images of Himself – albeit broken ones – and He loves believers as restored images of Himself. So we saw God does love believers more than unbelievers, and God does hate unbelievers while loving them. The key is – how much of God is there in someone for God to love?

We come today to the question - *How does God love?*

Although we have seen that God's love means He seeks the wellbeing of the ones He loves, He identifies with them and He delights in them, we haven't yet answered what it means when God does that. Because human beings seek each other's goodwill, human beings identify with one another in relationships; human beings enjoy one another. But we all admit that our love is quite imperfect. When the perfect God sets His love upon someone, how does He love?

One of the problems we face is that a lot of teachers have portrayed God as having 'parts'. That is, they suggest there is God's grace on the one side, and God's justice on the other, God's wrath on the one side, God's mercy on the other. So you hear sermons where God is a conflicted, torn being, who, on the one hand, had to destroy man for his sin, but on the other hand, He loved him and wanted to save Him. Sometimes, this is even brought into the Trinity. God the Father wanted to judge man, but Jesus stepped in to save us from God. Such ideas cause us to think that God has competing parts that are in tension, or in conflict.

But Scripture does not teach of a God who is in conflict with Himself. Jesus did save us from the Father's wrath, but who is it that sent the Son to save us? The Father sent the Son. And who is it that will judge all men? Jesus will. It is true, God's love does not wish the destruction of sinners, but it is equally true that God's justice does wish the destruction of sinners.

Everything that God is, He is all the time. Justice and mercy are not competing. His justice is merciful. His mercy is just. His love includes anger; His anger includes love.

So what we are going to see is that all of God's attributes define how God loves. God's love never steps away from who He is, because He is unchanging and perfectly consistent. To put it another way – God's love is holy. God's holiness does not only refer to His purity, it refers to His uniqueness as God. Holiness is God's "godness". Holiness is what sets God apart and makes Him God. Holiness could be thought of as the sum total of God's attributes – much like His glory.

To say God's love is holy is to say God's love is the love that is perfectly consistent with all that God is.

Time constrains us from taking each of the revealed attributes of God and seeing how they affect and shape God's love – His expression of His goodness.

I. God Loves Graciously and Mercifully

Exodus 34:6-7 *And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, ⁷ keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation."*

In one of the most descriptive passages of the nature of God, topping the list is God's mercy and grace. Of course, when God loves Himself, it is not gracious, for God loves Himself as an equal.

But the moment God's love extends beyond Himself, it has become gracious.

When you think about it, for God to love anyone except Himself is something of grace, because, even in loving a holy angel, He is loving someone less than Himself. But that was His plan from the beginning - to love those less than Himself, to share Himself with them. But of course the stakes got much higher when man rebelled, because now man was not simply an imperfect image of God, he was a corrupted image of God.

But the Bible is consistent in stating how God's love was gracious and merciful so as to set its love upon us.

Romans 5:6-8 *For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Ephesians 2:3-5 *among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. ⁴ 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),*

The Hebrew word for grace literally means 'to stoop'. When God loves anyone except Himself, he stoops down to love them. In fact, do you know that even in eternity, when we are glorified and perfected, God's love to us will be a gracious love? We will always be those who deserved destruction, and received mercy. Therefore, God's love will always be loving the unworthy made worthy, the unlovely made lovely, enemies made into His Bride. His love is gracious.

2. God Loves Sovereignly and Freely

This one is perhaps the hardest one for us to understand. To put it simply: God is perfectly free to love whoever He wants to. His love does not bind Him or force Him. The absolute freedom He enjoys as God extends to how He loves. He loves by His own, uncoerced, uninfluenced choice.

Romans 9:13-16 *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.*

We see this in a number of Scriptures. Firstly, we see that God loved people before they were born.

Romans 9:11 *(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),*

Ephesians 1:4

just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, ⁵ having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will,

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,*

If God loves you before you have been born, what have you done to draw or motivate God's love? If you have not been the deciding factor, what has? The answer is: God's own choice.

Remember what God said of Israel:

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; ⁸but 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.*

The problem is, when it comes to the sovereignty of God's love, we insert an idea not found in Scripture, but found in our own philosophy. We insert the idea, "If God is a loving God, and loves all men, He must do the same thing for all men". It is true God is a loving God. It is true God loves all men. It is not true that God must therefore dispense the same things for all people. When we think like that, we are really saying, God must submit to His love. His love for all men must guide Him to give all men the same opportunities, the same knowledge, the same gifts. To think like this is to make Love sovereign, and God the servant of love. But as we are seeing, there is no conflict in God. God's sovereignty is loving, and His love is sovereignly given.

In fact, Scripture makes this very clear. Did God give the other nations what He gave Israel? Does God give all people the conversion experience of Saul or Cornelius? Why not? If you say, "Because He knows they will reject it", you run into another Scripture:

Matthew 11:21-23 *Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. ²² But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. ²³ And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.*

Jesus is saying, from the point of view of omniscience, that had Sodom, Tyre or Sidon received the amount of light which Chorazin, Capernaum or Bethsaida had received, they would have repented. So why did God not do that? Why didn't God send Jesus to places where He knew what their response would have been? The answer seems to be: Because He loves sovereignly.

I think we have to bear in mind – the world is a sinking ship of condemned criminals. The king is not obligated to save anyone because the ship is sinking. Because he saves one, does not mean he must, or has to save the others.

Being sovereign means, He can dispense and direct and target His love as He sees fit. His love - He freely and wisely directs it as He chooses. He is not governed by His love.

3. God loves Justly, Righteously and Wisely

Deuteronomy 10:17 *For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality nor takes a bribe.*

Romans 2:9-11 *tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; ¹⁰ but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹¹ For there is no partiality with God.*

When God loves, He loves according to His own perfectly just standard – Himself. He is not partial, swayed or bribed. You cannot manipulate God into loving you. His love is just and fair.

Our love is partial and cliquish. We love people who love us. We love people who are popular already, or who might give us an advantage. We love people for what they have or represent or might give us.

God's love is not influenced by such things; He is not impressed by fame, fortune, power, pleasure. He is just and He is pure. His love is just; His love is pure.

I have heard people attacking the idea that God is sovereign in His love by saying that God is not partial. That is like saying, God can't be free, because He must be fair. There is no contradiction between God being free and God being fair. And there is no contradiction between God loving sovereignly, and God loving without partiality. God loving without partiality means God is not swayed by your racial status, your economic background, your wealth, your education. God does not unfairly favour you because you have certain qualities, nor is He prejudiced against you because you don't. You can say that God is selectively gracious; you can't say He is unfair. By the way – if fair was all you wanted – where would we all go? Hell

God being a just God means God's love will not treat you unfairly. God will not be prejudiced against you, or reject you for some unnamed reason. God will not discriminate on the basis of race, age, sex, intelligence. His love cannot be twisted, diluted or diverted by anything we might have or own.

Job 34:17 *Should one who hates justice govern? Will you condemn Him who is most just? ¹⁸ Is it fitting to say to a king, 'You are worthless,' And to nobles, 'You are wicked'? ¹⁹ Yet He is not partial to princes, Nor does He regard the rich more than the poor; For they are all the work of His hands.*

The pagans thought they could turn a god against a fellow man. The Greek gods in particular were capricious, unpredictable, quite unfair. They did things on a whim. You never need fear that someone can turn God against you. In fact, there is someone who tries. His name is Satan – the accuser of the brethren. But who answers for you? He is Jesus the Advocate, Jesus the Judge, Jesus the Intercessor. God's love does not sacrifice justice to continue loving you, nor does His justice fail to love.

God's love answers to the perfect law of God's own justice.

Not only will God not discriminate against you unfairly, He also will not be permissive or indulgent because He loves you. His love does not let our sin hang around, because we are objects of His love. He does not become like a sentimental grandfather type. The same just heart that punishes sin in the unbeliever, will discipline sin in His children.

Hebrews 12:6 *For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives.*

God being just means He will never give you less than what is needed, required or fair. He is just. In all His dealings with us, He is perfectly balanced – His own standard of what is equitable, and right is found in all His love.

Deuteronomy 32:4 *He is the Rock, His work is perfect; For all His ways are justice, A God of truth and without injustice; Righteous and upright is He.*

Our love is foolish and sentimental. We love the wrong things too much, we love the right things too little. We are so captivated by the feeling of love, we do not think about the value of what we are loving. God's love is not that way. God is wise, and all-knowing. His is a righteous love, a wise love, a perfectly fair and good and equitable love.

We could sum it up like this: God's love is not influenced towards you or against you by something outside of Himself. Never is His love dipping below His own standard of righteousness. You could say his love is fitting, free from all impurity.

4. God loves **Immutably** – faithfully and eternally.

“Immutable” is a word which means unchangeable. God cannot change. God does not get better, for then He would not be perfect. God cannot diminish, for then He would cease to be God. God does not change in His essence. Therefore, God's love is filled with the same unchanging nature. Our love is fickle and unpredictable. It changes with our moods; it is less loyal one day, unfaithful the next. It is filled with zeal on one day, and bored the next.

Again, the gods of the pagans were completely unpredictable. You might have unwittingly offended them. You might have forgotten a ritual. You might have served another god and made them upset. Life was filled with uncertainty, because the gods could turn on you at any moment.

God's love is like His nature. He is unchanging; therefore He is faithful. His love is faithful, it is eternal. When God sets His love on you, it is not a temporary arrangement. One of the problems with believing you can lose your salvation is what it does to the doctrine of God's love. It means God loves you as His own Son at one point, and then loses that love, until it is gone entirely.

Our security is largely based on the fact that God's love remains committed and faithful and enduring.

Romans 8:38 - 39 *For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

If God loves you because of His own image in you, the question is – how long will He leave His image in you?

Ephesians 4:30 *And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.*

God's love does not wax and wane, heat up and cool. How He has loved you today is how He will love you tomorrow and the next day, and for all eternity.

This is the meaning behind the verse:

Lamentations 3:22-23 *Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not. ²³ They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness.*

It is not that God's mercies keep wearing out each day. It is that each day we find them as if they had never been used at all.

Psalms 136:1 *Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever.*

If God loves you in an unchanging fashion, with mercy that is new every morning and that endures forever, then His love is everlasting.

Jeremiah 31:3 *The LORD has appeared of old to me, saying: "Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; Therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you.*

The fact that God's love cannot change leads us to another point of God's love.

5. God Loves **Infinitely**.

Everything God is and does is infinite. He is infinite, so His wisdom is infinite, his knowledge is

infinite, His power is infinite; so His love is infinite.

Psalm 103:11-12 *For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; ¹² As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.*

Now in Part 2, we saw how it is that God can love infinitely and yet love one person more than another. There may be more or less of God in a person for God to love infinitely. So, you might argue that there are degrees in how much of God's infinite love is set on a person. In part 4, we'll see how that same principle can become true in your own life. But to summarise – whatever there is in you that is like Christ, God loves it infinitely.

This is not half-hearted, lukewarm, indifferent love. This is love that cannot be measured.

Ephesians 3:18-19

may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height -- ¹⁹ to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

With this kind of zeal, and vigour in God's love, it leads us to the last way we want to examine of God's love.

6. God Loves Jealously.

Exodus 34:12-14 *Take heed to yourself, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, lest it be a snare in your midst. ¹³ But you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and cut down their wooden images ¹⁴ (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God),*

What is jealousy? In humans it becomes simply a selfish possessiveness. It is envy, covetousness out of an unsatisfied heart. As we have seen, God is self-sufficient, so there is nothing we can supply Him.

Jealousy in God is something different. As we have seen, God loves infinitely. When He sets His love upon a people or upon a person, and makes a covenant with them, His love expects to be loved in return. God's jealousy arises out of his purity and zeal. He loves completely. His jealousy is His zeal to protect the love relationship, and even to avenge it if broken.

Remember that in the Old Testament, God had a jealousy offering for husbands. God does not condemn or frown on the possible jealousy of a husband, because it arises out of love. Certainly there is irrational jealousy, but what would we think of a husband who cared nothing for the fact that other men were actively pursuing his wife?

Our love can be divided. Our love can be distracted or attracted away from the object of our love. We can even lose interest in our loves.

God is nothing like that. God's love is perfectly pure, and therefore perfectly zealous for what He loves. God's love may get angry at you, but it will never be indifferent or bored with you. It will never simply lose interest. If He desires you as His own, He will not allow any other gods. He will pursue you and refuse your rebellion.

Song of Solomon 8:6-7 *Set me as a seal upon your heart, As a seal upon your arm; For love is as strong as death, Jealousy as cruel as the grave; Its flames are flames of fire, A most vehement flame. ⁷ Many waters cannot quench love, Nor can the floods drown it. If a man would give for love All the wealth of his house, It would be utterly despised.*

That means He expects a wholehearted, single-minded, zealous response.

That leaves us where we will finish, in Part 4, – how should we respond to God's love so that we know it and experience it better? You've already seen part of the answer: a Jealous God expects a zealous response.