

The Love of God – Part 4

We have learned much about God's love. We have learned why God loves. We have learned whom He loves. We have learned how He loves.

We come at last to the question of application – how do we come to know and believe this love? How do we experience this love?

I think there is a parallel I can draw here to help us to understand an important truth. Experiencing the love of God is very similar to eternal security and assurance of salvation. Eternal security is an objective fact - something that God does, which you cannot influence or change. But assurance of salvation is something that you experience depending on how you respond to God. As you continue in the faith, you experience the subjective appreciation of the objective fact of eternal security.

God's love and our experience of it are very similar. There is something objective that God does – He loves us, and we cannot influence that fact. There is also something subjective we do – responding to Him in a way which brings the personal knowledge and experience of that love.

When we studied the topic of security and assurance in Colossians we realised the importance of understanding eternal security as dynamic, not automatic. If you see security as something automatic – you will think the Christian life is an escalator heading for heaven, and you don't need to do anything except enjoy the ride. But the Bible paints security and assurance as a dynamic thing – like a river flowing downstream toward destruction, and the mark of security is that you endure – you keep swimming upstream.

Experiencing God's love is somewhat parallel to this. When God loves you, it is a wondrous, glorious thing. But how do you *know* He loves you? Is it something automatic? He says He loves believers, you believe you are a believer; therefore you automatically have God's love upon you. Many take this view. The result is, they tend to experience God's love the way they experience security – something they take for granted, a mental fact they file away in their mind and hardly give any thought to.

Viewing our responsibility when it comes to knowing God's love presents the same issues as security. There are two traps we can fall into.

One of them is that once you understand that it is God who secures you, it is God who saves you, you can wrongly conclude that you must be passive and coast on to heaven. Such people think that if they seek assurance in the form of fruit, they are doubting God's complete work.

Therefore, there are people who understand that God loves us sovereignly, setting His love upon us. So they conclude that if God loves us, we must do nothing more than assume it to be true and carry on. They feel that if they do anything more, they are trying to earn His love – acting like legalists trying to earn God's favour.

That's the other trap. Some people think that because assurance is something given when we meet certain conditions, salvation is kept when we keep certain conditions. So, just as some believe they must actively maintain their own salvation, more or less the same people believe they must maintain God's love upon themselves.

Both extremes are wrong. It is wrong to think you can merit God's love by your works. But it is also wrong to think that because God's love is sovereign and uncaused, that you have no responsibility to know it better.

When we read the Bible we find that there is a side to God's love which involves a responsibility on our part. We are not to simply agree that God's love is a fact; we are to do certain things which will

mean God's love is true of us.

Consider the following verses which show that there is a side to God's love which is known when we meet certain conditions.

Exodus 20:5-6 *you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, ⁶ but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.*

Psalms 103:11 *For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him;*

Psalms 103:13 *As a father pities his children, So the LORD pities those who fear Him.*

Psalms 103:17-18 *But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting On those who fear Him, And His righteousness to children's children, ¹⁸ To such as keep His covenant, And to those who remember His commandments to do them.*

Jude 1:20-21 *But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, ²¹ keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.*

Here is the unmistakable conclusion – like assurance of salvation, God's objective love for us is known subjectively when we meet certain conditions. Those conditions will mean that God's love is true of us. It does not mean that they merit God's love. It means they reveal it to be upon us.

It also means that when you meet these conditions, you will experience His love.

There is a qualitative difference between knowing the objective fact that God loves you, and the subjective knowledge of His love being illuminated to you.

We see this most clearly in Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:

Ephesians 3:14-19 *For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵ from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, ¹⁶ that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, ¹⁷ that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ 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.*

Paul prays for a knowledge of God's love that goes beyond the objective statements about God's love which he has already made (1:4, 2:4), to a felt, experienced known love.

Obviously this subjective experience of God's love goes beyond mental assent to a conscious, personal experience of it. In other words, it is the experience of illumination.

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.*

1 John 4:16 *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.*

Likewise, John seems to be indicating an experience beyond merely agreeing with the fact that God has loved us.

So while God's love for us is something He does and we cannot influence Him to love us more or less, we can meet certain conditions that will reveal His love to be true of us, and personally known to us.

And since we have already seen how vital it is that we know the love of God correctly, it is crucial that we meet these conditions so as to experience and know God's love as we should.

I believe we can boil them down to three responsibilities:

1. We trust the love of God for repentant sinners.

It sounds like stating the obvious, but in fact, in many people, this is where everything breaks down. They simply cannot believe that God loves them. We quench the Spirit's ministry by unbelief. And since the experience of God's love is brought about by the Spirit of God, they do not experience His love, perhaps adding more weight to their unbelief.

When I say, they cannot believe that God loves them, I should probably qualify that. It is not only that they cannot believe that God loves them. Behind the '*cannot*,' is a '*will not*.' They will not believe that God loves them.

Now you might say, 'Who would purposely refuse to believe that God loves them?'

Answer: Those who wish to hang on to their own merit. Those who wish to retain the glory for God loving them.

To those who have given up on their own righteousness and standing before God, the conclusion is simple: "I am unloveable in myself. God's love must be out of His own nature in spite of me. Therefore, I accept in childlike trust that He loves me."

But the person who is still secretly nursing their own pride, their own control, their own righteousness, has a facade which says – 'I am too sinful, God could never love me.' But what are they saying? I must provide the reason for God to love me. In so doing, they are refusing to let the love of God be based upon God. They still want it to be based on them. That is why I said, it is not merely '*cannot*,' it is '*will not*.' Whether or not they realise it, such people are still proud, still operating on works and merit, still insisting that God love them for something they are, or do.

Such a person rightly concludes that God could not love them for their sin. But what they won't surrender is God's right to love them for His own sovereign reasons.

The incident in Simon's home illustrates this.

Luke 7:36-47 *Then one of the Pharisees asked Him to eat with him. And He went to the Pharisee's house, and sat down to eat. ³⁷ And behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at the table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil, ³⁸ and stood at His feet behind Him weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil. ³⁹ Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he spoke to himself, saying, "This man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner." ⁴⁰ And Jesus answered and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." So he said, "Teacher, say it." ⁴¹ "There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² "And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?" ⁴³ Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more." And He said to him, "You have rightly judged." ⁴⁴ Then He turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has washed My feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. ⁴⁵ "You gave Me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss My feet since the time I came in. ⁴⁶ "You did not anoint My head with oil, but this woman has anointed My feet with fragrant oil. ⁴⁷*

"Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little."

The woman did not have Simon's supposed reasons to believe that God loved her. She had given up on trying to attract God's love, and had given God all the glory for His love of her. Once she had made that act of complete trust – she bathed in love – for her sins had been great.

Simon on the other hand, thought his self-righteousness was the 'reason' God loved him. For Simon, God's love was not something he believed by faith, giving God all the glory. It was something he judged by sight, giving himself the glory.

You see, some people believe that it's one or the other – either I believe in total depravity or I believe in God's love. And they let the one rob the other. They think either, 'If God loves me, I can't be such a sinner', or 'I am such a sinner, God can't love me'. However, in both cases, we are drawing the reason for God's love away from God and putting it on ourselves.

We should start by giving God all the glory for loving us. That means removing every reason in ourselves that He should, and by trusting that He could, love us if He wanted to. It is an unloving response to God, to doubt and disbelieve what he says, isn't it? It is requiting love with mistrust. It is calling God's character into question. To respond to the Spirit of love with unbelief will not bring more understanding of God's love. Respond with loving trust, and it will become clearer.

2. We must obey the love of God like a loving slave.

Jesus made it very clear that the fruit of love is obedience, and the fruit of a lack of love is disobedience.

John 14:15

If you love Me, keep My commandments.

But He adds that the obedient believer does not only reveal that he loves God, he will experience God's love.

John 14:21 *He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.*

John 14:23-24 *Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. ²⁴ He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father's who sent Me."*

John 15:9-10 *"As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. ¹⁰If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.*

Jesus says – *'the more you obey, the more you are abiding in My love.'* The more you obey, the more you will experience the personal presence of Christ and His Father. In other words, the more you obey, the more the indwelling Spirit will reveal the love of God to you personally.

Why is this?

Just as we quench the Spirit's ministry with unbelief, so we quench the Spirit's ministry with disobedience. Love seeks to please. Someone who loves God wants to please Him and submit to His will. The person who seeks independence is pleasing themselves. At that point, it is hard, if not impossible, to sense the real and personal love of God for you.

If a man commits adultery, although his wife may love him, he will not sense or experience or feel his wife's love while chasing after another woman. He is pleasing himself at her expense; he will not feel loved by her, though it is true that she loves him. But, on the other hand, if he is sacrificing to spend more time with his wife, spending money on her, then he is denying himself to please her. In the very act of submitting his will to her needs, he will experience love for her and love from her.

The libertarian who talks about God's love, but makes no effort to submit his life to Christ, who never seeks to please Christ, will never truly experience God's love shed abroad in his heart. He is responding to God's love with selfishness, and there is no way a selfish heart can experience the true interchange of unselfish love.

Exodus 21:2-6 *If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years; and in the seventh he shall go out free and pay nothing. ³If he comes in by himself, he shall go out by himself; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. ⁴ If his master has given him a wife, and she has borne him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out by himself. ⁵ But if the servant plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,' ⁶ then his master shall bring him to the judges. He shall also bring him to the door, or to the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him forever.*

Here is the illustration of obedience. A slave obeys his master because he must. He is obligated to, whether he likes it or not. That is also true of us. We must obey God, even if it didn't bring us any benefits. But as the slave served his master in submitted, surrendered obedience, he came to know his master. He came to know his goodness. He came to love his master, and experience his love. So much so, that the thought of returning to self-rule seemed terrible to him. So he could make the choice to voluntarily continue under his master's rule forever, because it is in that position that he feels and experiences the goodness of his master.

But we might ask – ‘What if that slave had run away?’ ‘What if he had fought every commandment of his master?’ ‘What if he had asserted his independence at every point?’ ‘Would he ever have experienced such a delight in his master?’ It is only in lovingly submitting our wills to His, seeking to please Him over self, that we can come to know His love like we ought.

Believers are love slaves. We are God's property. We belong to Him. For us, the ear is ‘awled’ through every day. Each day we can say, (**Galatians 2:20**) *‘I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.’*

Therefore, I will not go out free. I will submit my will to His. I will seek to please Him. For in that posture of life, I come to know the love of God.

When we submit we are in the right place to experience God's love. Not only this, but when we obey, we are becoming more like Christ.

This is the point of Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3.

Ephesians 3:14-19 *For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵ from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, ¹⁶ that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, ¹⁷ that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ 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.*

If you yield to the Spirit, His ministry increasingly takes over in your life. As a result, Christ dwells in your heart by faith. He is at home. You are becoming like Him. The more like Him you are, the

more at home He is to reveal Himself to you. Thus, you come to know the length, breadth, depth and height of His love.

Therefore, it only follows that the Christian who seeks to have Christ's likeness dwelling deeply within him or her, finds themselves dwelling ever deeper in God's love. God hasn't loved them more; God's love has found more of Himself in them to love, and so they feel it.

3. We must seek the love of God like a zealous lover

In the Proverbs, we hear wisdom saying, *I love those who love me, And those who seek me diligently will find me. (Proverbs 8:17)*

That theme of seeking God diligently, with the whole heart rings out throughout Scripture.

Jeremiah 29:13 *And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.*

Hebrews 11:6 *But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.*

We are told to seek Him with the zeal and effort and diligence of a besotted lover, and the promised result is the reward of finding Him. Since we already have Him, what could the finding mean except more of Him? Illumination – God revealing Himself and His love to us all the more.

Psalms 119:2 *Blessed are those who keep His testimonies, Who seek Him with the whole heart!*

Spurgeon's comment on this verse is priceless.

'God is not truly sought by the cold researches of the brain: we must seek him with the heart. Love reveals itself to love: God manifests his heart to the heart of his people. It is in vain that we endeavour to comprehend him by reason; we must apprehend him by affection. But the heart must not be divided with many objects if the Lord is to be sought by us. God is one, and we shall not know him till our heart is one'

And then he quotes from Bernard of Clairvaux' hymn, '*Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee*':

'How good to those who seek !
But what to those who find? Ah, this
Nor tongue nor pen can show;
The love of Jesus, what it is,
None but his loved ones know.'

Spurgeon is right – love reveals itself to love. The one and only God is found by a heart that is one – undivided, single-minded, in its loving pursuit of Him. The undivided heart that seeks God, finds God. The Spirit of God - who is a flame of love - responds to desire that is hot, not cold.

Scripture is just full of this. God's love might be an objective fact, but you will not experience it subjectively until you lovingly seek.

Even if the heat is found in the intention, in the desire for the desire – it will be met with grace. The only thing the Spirit does not respond to is indifference. We always come back to this maxim - you have as much of God as you want. Be it unto you according to your faith.

People know as much of God's love as they wish to love Him.

I was struck by something in the biography of A.W. Tozer. 'He would sometimes go into the woods with a friend to pray. On one of those occasions, he got a far off look in his eyes and said to his friend, "Junior, I want to love

God more than anyone in my generation.”

We do not seek Him to cause Him to love us. We seek Him because it is in seeking that we find how much He loves us.

God's love is an immense, glorious unchanging fact. Gracious, sovereign, just, unchanging, infinite, and jealous. But for many Christians, it is just an idea, a piece of general knowledge, a bit of religious trivia. The reason is because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. His ministry must be responded to. It must be responded to with love.

You can think of it very simply, this way – *love reveals itself to love*. What does love do? Love believes. Love obeys. Love seeks.

Believe what He says about loving you, obey God's commands as a loving slave, and seek Him as a lover filled with desire would. This kind of heart will find God the Spirit opening up new vistas of God's love. The length, breadth, height, depth of His love will keep growing, and you will increasingly know what passes knowledge.