

THE LOVE OF GOD

THE EXPLANATION OF GOD'S LOVE

- “Love” is a word that is often thrown around without consideration of what it truly means
- It is often thought of as feeling or attraction, for everything from food and music to a spouse and children
- Sadly, today’s secular music, movies and media have warped our understanding of true love
- “Stripped of its true meaning, love is most often presented as mere romantic feelings, or even as illicit lustful desires. We are bombarded with talk of puppy love, falling in love, falling out of love, making love, free love and so on. From songs of the music industry to frivolous valentine cards at the mall, the meaning of love has been so diluted that it in no way resembles divine love. Sad to say, much of this drivel has become part of our thinking about God’s love. The result is a distorted understanding of God’s love that is nothing more than user-friendly mush.”¹
- Unsurprisingly, this feel-good message has become the dominant message in many churches today, a truth evident in the fact that most churches emphasize God’s love to the exclusion of his wrath, justice, holiness
- “...there is talk only of a ‘loving’ god who accepts people just as they are without requiring any commitment or change. In this scenario, God’s love is equated with accepting us, condoning our sins, and excusing our offenses.”²
- Many in the church today embrace the error that “God is only love,” as if love trumps all his other attributes

- But Scripture provides a much more profound understanding of what love is
- Different Greek terms reflect different expressions of love
 - *philos* = a love that likes another...brotherly love...the love of friendship, caring...a love of tender affection for a friend
 - *storge* = natural family love...the love between parents/children and husbands/wives....a familial affection...a family love
 - *eros* = passionate, sensual love...the love of physical desire...a sexual love based on attraction (not used in Scripture)
 - *agape* = the love of choice, action, selflessness, sacrifice... the love that seeks the very best for the other...a love of commitment
- The term *agape* is often used when referring to God and his love towards mankind
- It is not an emotional, shallow love, but an objective, well-reasoned love...a love that loves the person/object regardless of what that person has done and does not discriminate for lack of love reciprocated
- God’s love means that he eternally gives of himself to others...it is his propensity to do good to his creatures...God is the standard and embodiment of love

- We should be amazed and astonished at the love of God because it is the most profound truth ever known
- “God’s love is the most awesome thing about Him. It is not His justice, nor His majesty, nor even His blazing holiness, but the fact that He has made and keeps a covenant of personal commitment and love to His people.”³
- The highest expression of God’s love is the love that results in our salvation and our adoption into God’s family as his children

¹ Steven Lawson, *Made in Our Image: What Shall We Do With a User-Friendly god?*, 125-126.

² Ibid. 126.

³ Sinclair Ferguson

1 John 3:1 ~ See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him.

1 John 4:7-8, 16 ~ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love...16 We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

- It is not just that God is loving, it is that he IS love...it is not merely his behavior in view here, but his essential nature
- God is love in his innermost being...he loves because it is his nature to love
- Love is God's nature...it is not merely a relation that God has with those outside of himself or an activity in which he engages toward others...rather, love is God's very being
- "God is spirit" (John 4:24) meaning he is entirely spiritual in his essence...and "God is light" (1 John 1:5) meaning that his nature is truth and righteousness...and "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16) meaning that love is who he is in his being
- Thus, all love is from God since he is the origin and source of love
- It is God's love that provides the exemplar for all derivative forms of love

THE DESCRIPTION OF GOD'S LOVE

God's Love is Intra-Trinitarian

- The love God shows toward humanity is a love that first existed within the Godhead...the love of God is a triune love
- The love of God begins with divine self-love as God himself is the greatest good
- The persons of the Trinity love each other

John 3:35 ~ The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand.

John 14:31 ~ but so that the world may know that I love the Father, I do exactly as the Father commanded Me. Get up, let us go from here.

John 17:24 ~ Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world.

John 17:26 ~ and I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."

- As the Father has loved the Son, even so He has now loved believers
- "The greatest display of God's love for us is grounded upon his love for his Son...How can we describe such love, the greatness which dwarfs all the affection of men and angels in the universe? We may speak of the love of one creature for another, which can be very strong, or the love of a believer for Christ, which cannot be too much. However, Robert Traill (1642-1716) said, 'where God the Father is the lover, and God the Son is the beloved, who can tell what that love is...Here faith must believe and adore, and cry out, O the depths!'"⁴

⁴ Joel Beeke and Paul Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 792.

God's Love is Infinite

- God's love is without limit...it is so transcendent that it cannot be estimated...incomprehensible

Ephesians 2:4 ~ But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us,

Ephesians 3:18-19 ~ may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

- "The love of Christ is 'broad' enough to encompass all mankind... 'long' enough to last for eternity, 'deep' enough to reach to the most degraded sinner, and 'high' enough to exalt him to heaven."⁵
- No human mind can fully comprehend divine love...whatever we conceive of the love of God it is infinitely below its true nature
- The love of God far exceeds human reason, understanding, and experience

The Love of God

The love of God is greater far Than tongue or pen can ever tell.
It goes beyond the highest star And reaches to the lowest hell.
The guilty pair, bowed down with care, God gave His Son to win;
His erring child He reconciled And pardoned from his sin.

Could we with ink the ocean fill, And were the skies of parchment made;
Were every stalk on earth a quill, And every man a scribe by trade;
To write the love of God above Would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll contain the whole, Though stretched from sky to sky.

God's Love is Volitional

- God's love is a choice of his will, meaning there was nothing whatsoever in us to call it into exercise or prompt it
- We do not deserve God's love...there is nothing in us to attract or prompt his love...he chooses to love us simply because he is love
- He is always the pursuer in loving us, never the responder...he doesn't wait for us to love him (as humans usually do); rather he loves those who do not love him and are hostile to him
- In the midst of our rebellion against him, God took the initiative to reach out and love us long before we ever loved him
- He loved us when he saw nothing lovable in us!
- "The love which one creature has for another is because of something in the object; but the love of God is free, spontaneous, uncaused. The only reason why God loves any is found in His own sovereign will...God did not love us because we loved Him. Had God loved us in return for ours, then it would not be spontaneous on His part; but because He loved us when we were loveless, it is clear that His love was uninfluenced...God's love for me...was entirely unmoved by anything in us. What was there in me to attract the heart of God? Absolutely nothing. But, to the contrary, there was everything to repel Him, everything calculated to make Him loathe me..."⁶

Deuteronomy 7:7-8 ~ The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, 8 but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Ephesians 2:1-5 ~ And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, 2 in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. 3 Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),

⁵ John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, 137.

⁶ A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, 78.

- “Neither can we say that God has no wrath toward his elect people prior to their conversion, for they ‘were by nature the children of wrath, even as others’ (2:3). It is misleading to say that God hates the sin but loves the sinner, for David says of God, ‘You hate all who do iniquity’ (Ps 5:5; cf. 11:5). Augustine noted, ‘In a wonderful and divine manner, even when he hated us, he loved us.’ It is also not the whole truth to say that God is angry with sinners, but loves and forgives them when they trust in Christ, for ‘he loved us, even when we were dead in sins’ (Eph 2:4-5)...How then is it possible that God loved us when he hated us? Paul explains that God saved us because he ‘is rich in mercy, for his great love with which he loved us’ (Eph 2:4). God’s saving love flows from the great riches of his glory...he is able to love those who he hates for their sins, for his love springs from the bottomless riches of his own goodness. Furthermore, God’s saving love flows from his mercy to our misery. Even as he hated sinners for their sins, he loved them as his pitiful creatures.”⁷

1 John 4:10, 19 ~ In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins...19 We love, because He first loved us.

- God chose his people not because of something inherently worthy of love in them
- As such, he is the initiator and pursuer in His relationship with individuals

God’s Love is Sovereign

- Since God is sovereign and under obligation to no one, it necessarily follows that his love is sovereign
- “Because God is God, He does as He pleases; because God is love, He loves whom He pleases...The sovereignty of God’s love necessarily follows from the fact that it is uninfluenced by anything in the creature. Thus, to affirm that the cause of His love lies in God Himself is only another way of saying, He loves whom He pleases. For a moment, assume the opposite. Suppose God’s love were regulated by anything else than His will: in such a case He would love by rule, and loving by rule He would be under a law of love, and then so far from being free, God would Himself be ruled by law.”⁸

Romans 9:13 ~ Just as it is written, “JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED.”

Ephesians 1:4-5 ~ just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will,

- “God exercises sovereign freedom in how he loves each of his creatures. God is not like the sun, which mindlessly radiates light in all directions...In God’s freedom, his goodness to his creatures extends most broadly to all the universe, including the animals (Ps. 36:6-7), more specifically to the human race (Acts 14:17), and most particularly to his chosen people (Ps. 73:1).”⁹

God’s Love is Powerful

- Because God is a powerful God, his love is a powerful love
- Although we refused to love him, his sovereign love overcomes our stubborn hearts and draws us to himself
- His powerful love is evident in his effectual drawing to personal faith in Christ all those He had given to the Son

John 6:37 ~ All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.

⁷ Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 795-796.

⁸ A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, 79.

⁹ Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 797.

John 6:44 ~ No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.

- “Though we initially resisted Him, God’s love prevailed over our proud hearts and brought us into a saving relationship with Him through faith in Christ. Once enslaved to sin and unable to come to Christ, we were enabled to believe in Him by divine empowering.”¹⁰

God’s Love is Eternal

- Since God himself had no beginning, there is no beginning or end to his love
- His love reaches back to eternity past and stretches forward to eternity future

Psalm 136 ~ for his lovingkindness is everlasting (26x)

Jeremiah 31:3 ~ The LORD appeared to him from afar, saying, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; Therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness.

Ephesians 1:4-5 ~ just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will,

- It is astounding to think that God loves his people endless ages before they had any being
- He loved them before heaven and earth were called into existence
- And, since God’s love for us had no beginning, it will also have no end...it will endure throughout eternity future
- Although the world’s love is fickle and frail, God’s love is enduring, everlasting, steadfast, and stable forever
- His love is unending and unfailing

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

God’s Love is Sacrificial

- True love is a love that gives...and God’s love is most powerfully seen in him giving his only Son to redeem sinners
- Instead of giving us what we deserve, God has sacrificially given us what we do not deserve
- He has lavished his love upon us in the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ

John 3:16 ~ For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

John 10:11 ~ I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.

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

- “It is an infinite mystery that God has chosen to love us, unworthy sinners that we are, and deliver us from certain judgment. In the greatest display of love ever known, God gave His Son, Jesus Christ, to die voluntarily for the sins of people who were His enemies...The fact that God loves undeserving sinners like you and me is the mystery of all mysteries. Certainly, it is not inconceivable that we should love Him, given

¹⁰ Lawson, *Made in Our Image*, 133.

the fact that He is so great and glorious. But that He, the great God of heaven and earth, should love us – unworthy sinners that we are – now that is truly amazing!”¹¹

God’s Love is Holy

- God’s love never conflicts with his holiness...in other words, his love is not soft sentimentality that winks at sin
- His love is pure and unmixed with any romanticism

Psalm 11:7 ~ For the LORD is righteous, He loves righteousness; The upright will behold His face.

Hebrews 12:5-8 ~ and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, Nor faint when you are reprov’d by Him; ⁶For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, And He scourges every son whom He receives.” ⁷It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

- Nowhere is this more evident than at the cross where the love and justice of God collide

THE OBJECTS OF GOD’S LOVE

All of His Creatures

- God expresses his love to his creation by caring for its needs and demonstrating universal goodness

Psalm 119:64 ~ The earth is full of Your lovingkindness, O LORD; Teach me Your statutes.

Psalm 145:8-9 ~ The LORD is gracious and merciful; Slow to anger and great in lovingkindness. ⁹The LORD is good to all, And His mercies are over all His works.

Matthew 6:26-30 ~ Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? ²⁷And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? ²⁸And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, ²⁹yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith!

- He provides for all his creatures by making sure they have ample supplies and ample protection

Job 38:41 ~ Who prepares for the raven its nourishment When its young cry to God And wander about without food

Psalm 104:21 ~ The young lions roar after their prey And seek their food from God.

Psalm 147:9 ~ He gives to the beast its food, And to the young ravens which cry.

Matthew 10:29 ~ Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.

Humanity in General

- God extends to all people his “common grace”...his love which is not redemptive
- Even the wicked are the beneficiaries of his love

¹¹ Lawson, *Made in Our Image*, 124.

- Unbelievers are allowed to marry, have children, work, advance in their careers, enjoy good food, travel, etc
- They can also enjoy the beauty of God’s creation and the blessings of it

Matthew 5:45 ~ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Luke 6:35 ~ But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men.

Acts 14:17 ~ and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.

- “This general love gives many benefits to people – all the happiness they enjoy in this world... – but does not in itself accomplish their salvation.”¹²

John 3:16 ~ For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

- God truly does love the evil, sinful world of humanity that is in rebellion to him

His People

- This is evident in the OT in his love for Israel over the other nations

Deuteronomy 4:37 ~ Because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them. And He personally brought you from Egypt by His great power,

- In the NT, this is most evident in the many verses which state that God has a special love toward his children, a particular love for the redeemed

Romans 1:7 ~ to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints

Romans 9:10-13 ~ And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; 11 for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God’s purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, 12 it was said to her, “THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER.” 13 Just as it is written, “JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED.”

Ephesians 1:3-5 ~ 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, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love 5 He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will,

Ephesians 2:4 ~ But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us

Ephesians 5:25 ~ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her,

Colossians 3:12 ~ So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved...

1 Thessalonians 1:4 ~ knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you

2 Thessalonians 2:13 ~ But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth.

¹² Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 798.

Titus 3:3-6 ~ For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. 4 But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, 5 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,

- God does not love everyone with the same kind of love, just as he is not gracious to all in the same way (*common grace vs. special grace*)...the elect are the special objects of his divine love by which he chose
- Therefore, since the objects of the Father's love are particular, so are the objects of the Son's death...there is a vast difference between God's common love for all mankind and the design of his Son's death
- It is out of his love for humanity that God "desires that none perish" (2 Pet. 3:9; 1 Tim. 2:4)...God has compassion of those who are lost
- Yet in his sovereign will, God chooses to set his saving love on those whom he has chosen before the foundation of the world

THE IMPLICATIONS OF GOD'S LOVE

Worship and Thank God for His Love

- When we consider the immense love God has shown us undeservedly, how could we not worship him?

Exodus 34:8 ~ Moses made haste to bow low toward the earth and worship.

Psalms 100:4-5 ~ Enter His gates with thanksgiving And His courts with praise. Give thanks to Him, bless His name. 5 For the LORD is good; His lovingkindness is everlasting And His faithfulness to all generations.

Love Others Sacrificially with the Love We Have Been Shown

- The Gospel both reveals God's love for us and requires that we love each other as God loved us

1 Corinthians 13:4-6 ~ Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, 5 does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, 6 does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth;

Ephesians 5:1-2 ~ Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; 2 and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.

1 John 4:7-11 ~ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. 11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.