

God Is Love

In his first general epistle, John tells us in 1 John 4:7-12,

7. Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. 8. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. 9. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only 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 expiation for our sins. 11. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12. No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and His love is perfected in us.

What is love? Many of us toss around this word very cavalierly, and we end up trivializing it. From the Barney the purple dinosaur theme song to tourism marketing slogans to the adulterer looking for an excuse for his committing sin, the word "love" is so misused and overused in our society that we hardly know what to think when someone says, "I love you." I must confess that I have found myself recently saying "I love sandwiches" and "I love my wife" in the same sentence. I **hope** she realizes that of the two she is at the top of the list!

What are some characteristics of God's love? How does it differ from our "modern" conception of love? Let us, then, examine four characteristics of God's love.

(1) God's Love is Unconditional

In the world around us, people are loved on the basis of their performance. So athletes and movie stars excite us with their athletic prowess or their performance in a movie and we say, "We love you!" When someone pleases us, when someone stimulates us, we appreciate what they do and use the term "love" to describe our response.

But God's love is **not** based on our performance! God's love, instead, is given unconditionally. Consider Romans 5:6-8:

6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

When did the Apostle Paul say Christ died for us when? Was he responding to something good in our performance? Was he saying, "Oh, that so and so, he's such a fine man! Look at all he has accomplished! Because he has been so good, I will shower My love on him"? No, not at all. These verses use the words

"powerless," "ungodly," and "sinners" to describe us. Christ died for people like this, not for people who look like they have it all together.

So why did God love us? God's love is based only on His sovereign choice; God's love is based only on His mercy.

Consider two verses that highlight this point: Deuteronomy 7:7 and Ephesians 1:4:

“The Lord did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath He swore to your fathers.” (Deuteronomy 7:7)

“He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will.” (Ephesians 1:4)

Nothing made us attractive to God! On the contrary, we were despicable to God because of our sins. But *despite our problems* it was God's pleasure, it was God's will, to predestine us to be adopted as His sons. It was always His plan from the beginning that the church made up of the saved washed in the blood of His Son would be the means by which we could become His children for eternity.

So God's love is unconditionally bestowed *because it is the result of His sovereign choice*. God's love has nothing to do with our goodness; God's love has nothing to do with our performance.

Now I do not know about you, but to me this truth is tremendously freeing. I do not have to look over my shoulder all the time, wondering if God is going to abandon me because I blew it. I do not have to worry that God might change His mind about me because of my poor performance. *God already knows the worst about me – and He still chose to love me!* God's love is unconditional – delight in that statement.

(2) God's Love is from Everlasting to Everlasting

In a moment of intense feeling, we say, "I will love you forever!" – yet within years, or months, or even weeks, those feelings change, and we so often renege on our promises. There are many individuals sitting in prison right this very moment who made this statement of eternal love for a spouse but later they completely abandoned their vow by murdering the person for whom they had proclaimed to hold eternal love!

What about God's love? Consider these verses from Psalm 103:

15 As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; 16 the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. 17 But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear Him, and His righteousness with their children's children.

The Psalmist compares our lives to flowers that dry up and are gone. Human love is like that, too. Love that we promise to last forever may disappear in a very short time. But God's love is **"from everlasting to everlasting."** What does this mean?

"From everlasting to everlasting" can mean "from the beginning of time to time without end." As the verse in Ephesians puts it, God showed His love for us by choosing us **"before the creation of the world."** So from the very beginning of time God has loved you. And this will continue for all eternity, as we share in His glory, in His beauty, praising Him in His presence for ages and ages. Think about this: there never was a time when God did not love you; there will never be a time when God does not love you!

Yet **"from everlasting to everlasting"** can refer not only to the time dimension but also to the relational dimension. He is, after all, your Creator, the One Who formed you, the One Who knit you together in your mother's womb. He loved you from the moment you were first conceived, and He has nurtured and cultivated this relationship with you until now. And on and on into eternity He will continue to nurture and cultivate this relationship, so that you will know Him better and better, so that you will see Him face to face, so that this love relationship will flourish and bear fruit in unimagined ways. God's love is from everlasting to everlasting!

So God's love is given unconditionally, and from everlasting to everlasting. But in between the beginning of time and our joining Him in His heavenly kingdom, could His love ever fail?

(3) God's Love Never Fails

Human love fails. Even in the best of relationships, we let our loved ones down. Indeed, today many couples *plan* on their love failing, by signing pre-nuptial agreements concerning the disposition of assets in the case of divorce.

Does God's love fail?

Admit it: Sometimes we feel like God's love fails. Certainly the children of convicted murderers of their spouse must wonder about the love of God, having lost their mother or father to death and their mother or father to the courts. Certainly the people in various parts of the world must wonder about the love of God, when ten per cent or more of their country has been brutally murdered. In these terrible times of tragedy, is God there?

Consider these verses from Isaiah:

Isaiah 54:10: **“Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet My unfailing love will not be shaken nor My covenant of peace be removed,” says the Lord, Who has compassion on you.**”

Isaiah 43:1-2: **“But now, this is what the LORD says – He Who created you, O Jacob, He Who formed you, O Israel: ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are Mine. 2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.’”**

God promises us that even in the most violent cataclysm, even if some gigantic volcano were to be picked up and thrown into Mattoon, God's love still will endure. We belong to Him, and He will stay right with us – forever.

Now look at the verses from Isaiah 43 carefully. Does God promise to keep us from troubles? Does God say, "I love you so much, I will give you an easy and comfortable life?" No, not at all. Rather, God promises to be there *in the midst of our troubles*. God says, "The path you must take may be through the rivers, but you will not drown; the path may be through the fire, but you will not be consumed in the flames."

God's love does not imply that He wants to make you comfortable. God uses these trials for our own good, in ways we can never understand while we are suffering. But He promises us that He will *always* be there with us, regardless of the circumstances, regardless of the way things may look to us. God's unconditional, eternal love never fails.

(4) God's Love is Both Individually and Corporately Given

Have you ever felt, "God loves people as a group, but not *me* individually"? Have you ever found yourself saying, "God doesn't really love *me!*"

When circumstances seem to conspire against us, when we can't understand what God is doing, when we don't feel His presence while passing through the fire, we have a tendency to question God's love for us, we have a tendency to feel self-pity. We even begin to doubt whether or not the Apostle Paul knew what he was saying when he wrote in Romans 8:28, **“We know that in everything God works for good with those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose.”** We fail to remember that we have been told by God in His word several times, **“I will never fail you nor forsake you”** (Hebrews 13:5).

Unfortunately, this type of human love in which a love for the group is proclaimed but no love for the individual actually exists is actually quite prevalent, particularly

among those in the entertainment industry. Many musical performers and actors and actresses from Hollywood preach love, peace, harmony and “why can’t we all just get along” for humanity as a whole, and yet they have the highest rates of divorce and broken relationships among their group. John Lennon wrote and sang *All You Need Is Love* and *Give Peace a Chance*, and yet he left his first wife, Cynthia; he was estranged from his oldest son, Julian; and his long time business partner, song collaborator and former best friend and best man at his first wedding, Paul McCartney, were hardly on speaking terms as they were engaged in an ongoing lawsuit at the time of John Lennon’s untimely death. A philanthropist may give his money and/or time to help humanity but then turn around and treat individual men and women as if they were dirt. He supposedly loves all of mankind, yet not a single man can be found whom he likes.

Charles Dickens paints a vivid picture of such a person in the character of Mrs. Jellyby, one of his memorable characters in his novel *Bleak House*. Mrs. Jellyby is working on starting a philanthropic project at “Borriboola-Gha, on the left bank of the Niger.” And this engages her attention to the extent that, in her first scene in the book, one of her children gets his head caught in a railing and another tumbles down the stairs – yet she never notices and is totally oblivious to her surroundings. Dickens says her eyes seem “to look a long way off. As if . . . they could see nothing nearer than Africa!” She loves the idea of serving mankind corporately, but she fails to serve even her own children individually.

But God's love is both corporately and individually bestowed. Think of the biblical phrases that express God's love for a group:

God so loved **THE WORLD**.

Christ loved the **CHURCH** and gave Himself up for her.

We are **TOGETHER** the body of Christ.

Paul expresses this beautifully in his letter to the Ephesians, using body, building, and marital images to show how we all together are becoming what God intends us to be, His perfect bride, His well-functioning body, His superb piece of architecture.

But God also loves us as individuals. The images of Him as our Father and we as His children, as those adopted into His family show His love for each of us. God is not Mrs Jellyby, loving us as a whole but neglecting our individual needs. God is the Father Who knows His individual children, Who cares about their bruises and scrapes, the Father Who tenderly holds them in His arms when they need comfort.

Furthermore, He tells us (as we saw in Isaiah 43) that we are summoned by name, that the very hairs of our head are all numbered. His love for us is not a

love that looks to the good of all but neglects the good of individuals; His eyes are not looking at the common good so much that they cannot see the good for each one of us. No! God is indeed building His church, and we are a part of that great work; He is summing up all things in Christ, and we are part of that summation. But God is so great that He never loses the individual trees by looking at the forest as a whole. He is tending and cultivating each individual tree, even while He manages the whole forest in such a way that both tree and forest are perfected.

So, yes, God loves the bride of Christ, and is perfecting the church as a whole. But God also loves *you* individually, you, Modelle, you, Ric, you, Hope, and you Jasper. God loves each of us individually and He cares about each of us individually.

We have only just touched on the wonders of God's love, this love that is:

Unconditionally given

From everlasting to everlasting

Never failing

Given for **YOU** individually

So, Christians: Have you allowed the world's view of love to color your vision of God?

Have you been struggling, fearing that your poor performance as a Christian will cause God to quit loving you?

Have you been fearing that God's love will change, or have you felt that the difficulty of your circumstances show that God does not love you?

Have personal trials and tragedies made you doubt God's love, strength, and faithfulness?

Consider verses on God's love, and meditate on them, and pray over them. As the Psalmist says:

“Whoever is wise, let him heed these things and consider the great love of the Lord.” (Psalm 107:43)

Be wise. Heed these things. Consider God's great love. Or is all this foreign to you? Do you not know the love of Christ? John 3:16 says, ***“God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”***

The invitation is open to you. Believe in Him, ask Him to be your Savior and Lord, repent and turn to Him, be baptized into His body and He will welcome you into His loving arms.

Consider the great love of the Lord – and respond.