

The Love of God

Ephesians

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Bible Text: Ephesians 3:14-19

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...careful attention as I read it. This is verses 14 through 19 of Ephesians chapter three.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.¹

Please bow with me just briefly again in prayer.

Our Father, as we come to consider the subject of your love, you being love, Lord, we pray as Paul has prayed here that you would give us the strength, you would give us the ability to be able to comprehend in a significant way that love with which you have loved us and to be with us no, oh Lord. Help us with the task at hand. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

In the year 2000 the Bible scholar D A Carson published a little book. It was a series of lectures he had delivered entitled *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*. And in the introduction to this book he wonders if people will think that he has somehow lost his senses in titling the work this way because people don't usually ascribe or define a study of the love of God as a difficult thing. They don't tend to associate difficulty with the doctrine of the of God. The trinity? Yes. Predestination? Maybe. But the love of God? What is the problem with the love of God? What is so difficult about the doctrine of the love of God?

Now many of you will probably assume that when Carson speaks about the difficult doctrine of the love of God he is saying that it is difficult because of or in light of the current cultural conceptions about love, that we have a hard time really defining and speaking clearly about the doctrine of the love of God because of all the competing

¹ Ephesians 3:14-19.

conceptions that are out there about what love is. And that is where the difficulty lies. That is the hard thing about the love of God in our culture nowadays.

Now while that is certainly true and there is an element about our cultural context that makes a difficulty with this doctrine, one which Carson himself cites. He does note that, yes, some of the competing philosophies now have made it difficult for us to understand this conception right. That is not really the issue when we talk about the doctrine of the love of God being a difficult doctrine.

The real difficulty with the doctrine of the love of God is our ability to understand it and comprehend it. The difficulty of the love of God is its profundity, its depth and our lack of ability to be able to plumb those depths.

You see, when we come to discuss the love of God we are not talking about something you can quantify. We are not talking about something you can systematize. You can't take it out and set it on a table and analyze it. When we begin to approach the subject of the love of God we are approaching God himself and we are asking questions not just about things he has made or things that he has done. When we come to the love of God, the subject of the love of God, we are talking about the very nature and being of God himself.

You see, the only proper way to actually approach this subject this morning, the only right frame of mind to be in as we decide to consider the conception of the love of God is that we recognize that we are on holy ground. And we take off our shoes, therefore, and we humble ourselves because God is love.

I want to begin this morning by considering the God who is love. We are not told that much about the very nature of God in the Bible. That is, there are not that many "God is" kinds of statements in the Bible. The Scriptures begin with God in action. He is doing things. And that conception of God continues all the way through. We mostly know God through the things he has done. We don't get a whole lot of insight into as to what kind of stuff, in a sense, God is made of, what he actually is. But there are three of these "God is" statements in the New Testament and each of those statements is profound.

The first is found in John 4:24, "God is spirit."²

The second is found in 1 John 1:5, "God is light."³

And the third is in 1 John four, actually repeated twice, "God is love."⁴

That God is spirit means that he has no body and that he is not subject to the weaknesses and limitations that are associated with being physical. That God is light means that he is all good and he is perfectly holy and righteous. I think A W Pink summarizes it the best.

² John 4:24.

³ 1 John 1:5.

⁴ 1 John 4:8, 16.

He says it means that he is the sum of all excellencies. And that God is love means, well, what does it mean? What does it mean that God is love?

Well, first off, we can at least conclude from this statement that there is something to be said about who God is. We need to recognize that love is not so much something that God does, but rather it is something that he is. It is something said about his very being.

Technically, the love of God is not one of his attributes. Technically speaking it is part of his very substance. It is something that he is. It is his very nature, not merely something that he does. And so it is not enough to say that God loves as if there is some kind of standard like God is a nice God, however we might define that, and God sort of fits the definition of being nice. We don't say God loves. Technically, God himself is love.

I want to consider, though, now with you and God's attributes. Now, if God is himself love, if God is love itself, we can begin to approach some understanding of this concept by considering some of God's other attributes. In other words, if God's very nature is love, then if we looked at some of his other attributes, that is going to give us an understanding a big about love, because whatever God is in his attributes is going to be a characteristic, truly of love.

We are only going to be able to look at a few of these this morning so we need to understand this concept of love in light of the excellencies of these other attributes.

I want to begin with infinite. The Bible tells us, clearly, that God is infinite. He fills the heaven of heavens. There is no limitation to him other than his own perfections. In other words, the things that God is limited in is that God cannot sin. God cannot be untruthful, things like that. But we need to recognize that there is no way, there is absolutely no way to measure him. There is no way to define God in any kind of box way. He is infinite which blows every conception of measurement that we have.

Job says of him:

Can you find out the deep things of God?
Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?
It is higher than heaven—what can you do?
Deeper than Sheol—what can you know?
Its measure is longer than the earth
and broader than the sea.⁵

And, therefore, we need to recognize that the love of God knows no bounds either. If God is infinite and if God is love then God's love is infinite even as he is. In other words, God's love is limitless and its depths cannot possibly be plumbed. It is this love, this limitless, infinite love with which God has loved you. God loves you with an infinite

⁵ Job 11:7-9.

love and that is why Paul will say just a few verses earlier than our text in Ephesians 2:4-5, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us.”⁶

Paul describes this love as great love.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.⁷

You see, it is an infinite, bottomless great love with which God has loved us.

Secondly, since God does not change, since there is no shadow or shift within him, his love can never change either. In other words, once an object of the love of God, always an object of the love of God. God does not change and so neither can his love. His love will never fluctuate. His love cannot be diminished. His love cannot be increased. God cannot love you any more than he loves you right now and God cannot love you any less than he loves you right now.

We have not even gotten to the section this morning on the inter trinitarian love of God, that is the way that the Father loves the Son and the way that the Son loves the Father. But we must note here that when Jesus prayed in John 17 to the Father in that prayer he reveals something amazing to us. He tells us and he prays that God and that we would understand that God loves us even as he loves his own Son.

Do you recognize that? God does not love Jesus any more than he loves you? The same love with which he loves Jesus is the same love with which he loves you. And this love with which he loves Jesus, this eternal love, it cannot be increased. It cannot change. It can't go up. It can't go down. The love of God is unchangeable.

A third attribute you can view the love of God in light is eternal. Since God is eternal and love is his nature, his love is eternal as well. Not only will God's love never fluctuate, it will not go up or down, God's love can never end. God's love can never end because God's love never began. There was never a time when God did not love you.

It is reported in Jeremiah 31:3, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.”⁸

God has no beginning and no end. God just is. And, therefore, his love has no beginning and no end. God's love just is and it will always be.

That is why Paul declares in Romans 8:38-39. “For I am sure.”⁹ Paul says with absolute certainty:

⁶ Ephesians 2:4.

⁷ Ephesians 2:4-5.

⁸ Jeremiah 31:3.

⁹ Romans 8:38.

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.¹⁰

God's love is eternal.

Fourthly, sovereign. Because God is sovereign his love is sovereignly set forth as well.

Do you recognize that God's love cannot be provoked? His love cannot be elicited. His love cannot be attracted. His love cannot be prompted in any way from you. There is absolutely nothing you can do to gain the love of God. And, thus, there is absolutely nothing you can do to lose the love of God.

God didn't begin loving you because of something in you in the first place therefore his love upon you is not dependent upon anything in you as it continues on. You are not why God loves you in any respect. He is why he loves you. He declared to his people Israel back in Deuteronomy seven exactly this.

“It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you.”¹¹

Why does the Lord love you? Because he does. You will never find another answer to that in Scripture. The reason why God loves you is because he does. That is why he loves you. His love for you was entirely unmoved by anything outside of himself. It was a sovereign act. He did not look out and see you and say, “Hey, I like that.” He simply, profoundly and sovereignly loves you.

And, finally, since God is light and in him is no darkness at all, his love is holy and perfect and pure. There is absolutely no contradiction or inconsistency with the love and holiness of God. This God who is described as holy, holy, holy, our thrice holy God, is love and the God who is love is holy.

You see, just as God's love is sovereign and unprovoked we need to also see that it is not some sensual, emotional, passionate thing. It is not like our love. It is not based on passion. God's love is based on principle. The principle his love is based on is his own holiness. It is a holy love. God's love is eternally and inescapably connected with his holiness.

We read in love he predestined us to be saved from our sins, not to stay in it. You see, when God loves somebody he changes them. He delivers them from the penalty of their

¹⁰ Romans 8:38-39.

¹¹ Deuteronomy 7:7-8.

sin. He delivers them from the stain of their sin. All the effect... God's love is holy and it works holiness within us.

See, this is no cheap, sentimental, effeminate love. It is a love so holy that justice could not be ignored. Righteousness could not be ignored, but it had to be satisfied even at the cost of God's own son. This is the striking thing that we tend to miss when we quote and we read John 3:16.

“For God so loved the world...”¹²

That is the import of that passage because God so loved, he gave his only Son. That is a holy, righteous love.

Well, this is only a beginning of a look at the attributes of God. We cannot continue on going through more of his attributes, but we need to understand the love of God in light of the other things that are said about God in Scripture.

And I hope that this is enough to at least get us to stand in awe of this amazing statement. God is love.

Secondly, though, I want you to see the love of God in God's tri unity. This is something very profound and maybe even a little bit mind bending here, but we need to recognize that love assumes a relationship. Love assumes a relationship and although we do not have time to really get into this this morning, it is only possible that it could be said of the God of the Bible that he is love in his very nature. We need to grasp this. It could only be said of the God of the Bible that he is love in his very nature.

In other words, it could never be said of Allah, “Allah is love.” It could never be said of Allah that he is love because Allah could not love without someone else or something else to actually express love to. But this is not the case with our God. Being a plurality in unity he has eternally be loved by nature because his very being has existed from all eternity, mutually expressing and receiving perfect divine love among the members, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In other words, from all eternity the Father has loved the Son. And in return the Son has been expressing love back to the Father and, thus, from all eternity this other oriented dimension of love, the outgiving nature of love has been happening and could only happen eternally within the trinity. This is admittedly heavy and it is profound and it is, in a sense, mind blowing, but it is clearly what Jesus taught about love and his relationship with the Father. And even as he teaches this he says this, then, becomes the basis for your love.

In John 17 Jesus prays:

¹² John 3:16.

...that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.¹³

You see, God being love in his very nature can only be possible if he is also multi personal.

Do you recognize that statement? God is love. A perquisite to that is that God is also a trinity, that there is multi persons that from all eternity the very essence and nature of God was that he was loving. He is love in himself.

Not only, though, is there an essential correspondence between the trinity and the nature of God being love, there is a wonderful part each member of the trinity plays in giving forth this love to mankind. Again, we don't have time this morning other than just to scratch the surface here, but I want us to concentrate just for a moment on the role of the Holy Spirit in the love of God.

Notice Romans 5:5. In Romans 5:5 Paul says, "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."¹⁴

Just as a side note, this word "pour" is exactly the same word used to designate the baptism of the Holy Spirit. And, thus, you have pouring and baptism yet again associated in Scripture.

But Paul says here that the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit and, thus, we see the work of the Holy Spirit. And note this. This is the universal work of the Holy Spirit. This is the kind of the work of the Spirit that is said to have... be going on in every single believer is to pour into our hearts the love of God. This is what Paul is praying for in Ephesians three.

You see, the Father loves us. The Son puts that love into tangible action by coming and dying in our place. And the Holy Spirit brings us into an individual and personal experience of that love by working it into our hearts and helping us to understand it. That is how God works with this love as he pours it out upon mankind.

My hope is as we looked a little bit about this God who is love, you will begin to understand why Carson titled his book *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*. These are high and lofty things, things hard to understand the depth of one. I hope you are

¹³ John 17:22-26.

¹⁴ Romans 5:5.

beginning to catch something of the profundity of this subject and why Paul is praying. Paul spends time praying that we could come to understand this.

Secondly, though, this morning, I want us to look at the love of God and our lives, the love of God and your life. We have hinted at this a little bit this morning, but we need to see, as well, that this is not just some abstract doctrine of mind bending proportions. The love of God is not something that we just sit back and we gawk at as like it is an interesting topic to toy with or something that we take out and we impress our friends with or something like that, this immense and eternal God that we have been talking about. This God is real and his love is real. And this God really loves us personally.

Again, we can only touch these subjects now in a cursory way. I want us to consider, though, the love of God in redemption. Over and over and over again when we read that it was God who loved us and that is why he sent Jesus to die for us. We need to recognize the order there. Too many people have misunderstood the love of God and they have often thought and even taught that God can only love a holy being like himself and that God could only love those who have had their sins forgiven or something like that. But that is not what the Bible teaches on the subject.

It would seem like that is the case because he is a holy God. It is an easy mistake to make. But the great mystery of all time, the great mystery of all time, ultimately is God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, while we were ungodly, while we were his enemies Christ died for us.

The reason why you have been redeemed is because God loves you. He doesn't love you because you are redeemed. The reason why you are redeemed is because God loves you.

Do you want some practical every day traction from this high and lofty doctrine of the love of God? I want you to think about the love of God and God's providence.

I can think of no better expression of this than A W Pink, what he wrote on the subject. Arthur Pink wrote, "Here is abundant cause for trust and patience under divine affliction. Christ was beloved of the Father yet he was not exempt from poverty, disgrace and persecution. He hungered and thirsted. Thus, it was not incompatible with God's love for Christ when he permitted men to spit upon and smite him. Then let no Christian call into question God's love when he is brought under painful afflictions and trials. God did not enrich Christ on earth with temporal prosperity, for he had nowhere to lay his head. But he did give him the Spirit without measure. Learn, then, that spiritual blessings are the principle gifts of divine love."

Oh, if we could learn that lesson that the spiritual blessings are the principle gifts of divine love. There is no incompatibility with affliction in this life in God's love for you and that is made clear in the person of Jesus Christ. God loved his Son with that same eternal love with which he loves you and, yet, he also ordained that his Son would go through great affliction.

A third area to consider is the love of God in privilege. I want you to listen closely at this point. You would think that when we speak about the love of God and privilege that we have already stated everything we could say about that. We have stated the greatest privilege that we can imagine, our redemption. What a great privilege. We have been saved from our sins.

But there is an amazing aspect of the love of God and privilege that comes up virtually every time that Jesus speaks about the love of God and that is the aspect of intimate friendship. Love in the Bible is translated into intimacy of friendship and all the privileges that are involved in a close relationship, a close friendship, but especially what is highlighted when the Bible talks about love and friendship is the part about friendship that we might call being in the know. Friends tell friends secrets. Friends disclose private matters to one another. Friends are privileged to know certain things about the other one that nobody else is. Friends reveal themselves to each other. They tell each other what they are doing, why they are doing it, what they are thinking.

In John 5:20 Jesus says, “For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing.”¹⁵

John 15:15 Jesus says, “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”¹⁶

John 17:25-26 Jesus prays:

O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.¹⁷

Those whom God loves, those who are his friends he reveals himself to. He reveals his plans to them. He reveals his ways to them.

Psalm 25 explicitly states this in verse 14. And we are going to be singing in a moment here Psalm 25 together. “The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant.”¹⁸

You know, that there is an alternate translation to the Hebrew word that is sometimes translated “friendship.” Do you know what it is also translated often? The [secret] of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant.”¹⁹

¹⁵ John 5:20.

¹⁶ John 15:15.

¹⁷ John 17:25-26.

¹⁸ John 25:14.

¹⁹ Ibid.

This is the privilege of being loved by God. He not only saves you. He reveals himself to you. He gives himself to you.

As Jesus said in John 14:21, “He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.”²⁰

I hope as you go back and read through the gospel of John, John ties together the love of God and God’s manifesting himself to those he loves indelibly together, beautiful picture and a beautiful study.

And, finally, love involves duty.

As many passages that speak of love and friendship in the Bible, there are those that speak of love and duty together. Over and over again Jesus speaks of his unique relationship with the Father, this love relationship in terms of doing whatever the Father gave him to do.

In John 14:31 Jesus states, “I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father.”²¹

And, thus, because our love for Christ is to flow from and be modeled upon his love for the Father, Jesus tells us, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”²²

You see, the relationship is there first. Love is there first, then duty. The relationship is not established by duty. It is established by love first and then comes the works, then comes the duty and, thus, the duty is pleasant and the burden is always light.

Brother and sisters, we cannot plumb the depths of God’s love. The difficulty of the doctrine of God’s love is our ability to be able to understand it and fathom it.

When we come to the love of God we come to the very being and nature of him and that is why Paul is praying in Ephesians three, that is why Paul prays here:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.²³

²⁰ John 14:21.

²¹ John 14:31.

²² John 14:15.

²³ John 14:14-19.

You see, Paul understands that if we were to come to understand the love of God, if we were to be able to comprehend that in our hearts, we would be filled with the fullness of God because God is love.

Let's pray together.

Oh Lord and God, you who are love, we long to know you more and we pray now that you would strengthen us so that we might be able to comprehend with all the saints in a greater measure the love that you have for us in Christ. Oh Lord, do this work in our hearts. Fill us with the fullness of yourself. Love us and reveal yourself to us, oh lover of... We pray this through Jesus who loved us and has pledged to love us even to the end.