

Doctrine of God Part 17 God Is Love

A. W. Pink on the Love of God...

“Three Things are told us in Scripture concerning the nature of God.

First, "God is a Spirit" (John 4:24). In the Greek there is no indefinite article. To say God is a spirit is most objectionable, for it places Him in a class with others. God is spirit in the highest sense. Because He is spirit He is incorporeal, having no visible substance. Had God a tangible body, He would not be omnipresent, He would be limited to one place; because He is spirit He fills heaven and earth.

Second, "God is light" (1 John 1:5), the opposite of darkness. In Scripture "darkness" stands for sin, evil, death; and "light" for holiness, goodness, life. "God is light" means that He is the sum of all excellency.

Third, "God is love" (1 John 4:8). It is not simply that God loves, but that He is Love itself. Love is not merely one of His attributes, but His very nature.

There are many who talk about the love of God, who are total strangers to the God of love. The divine love is commonly regarded as a species of amiable weakness, a sort of good-natured indulgence; it is reduced to a mere sickly sentiment, patterned after human emotion. The truth is that on this, as on everything else, our thoughts need to be formed and regulated by what is revealed in Scripture. That there is urgent need for this is apparent not only from the ignorance which so generally prevails, but also from the low state of spirituality which is now so sadly evident everywhere among professing Christians. How little real love there is for God. One chief reason for this is because our hearts are so little occupied with His wondrous love for His people.

The better we are acquainted with His love—its character, fullness, blessedness—the more our hearts will be drawn out in love to Him.

1. The love of God is *uninfluenced*. By this we mean, there was nothing whatever in the objects of His love to call it into exercise, nothing in the creature to attract or prompt it. The love which one creature has for another is because of something in them; but the love of God is free, spontaneous, uncaused. The only reason God loves any is found in His own sovereign will: "The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: but because the LORD loved you" (Deut. 7:7-8). God has loved His people from everlasting, and therefore nothing of the creature can be the cause of what is found in God from eternity. He loves from Himself, "according to his own purpose" (2 Tim. 1:9).

"We love him, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). God did not love us because we loved Him, but He loved us before we had a particle of love for 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. It is highly important if God is to be honored and the heart of His child established, that we should be clear on this precious truth. God's love for me, and for each of "His own," was entirely unmoved by anything in them. What was there in me to attract the heart of God? Absolutely nothing. But, to the contrary, everything to repel Him, everything calculated to make Him loathe me—sinful, depraved, a mass of corruption, with "no good thing" in me.

"What was there in me that could merit esteem,
Or give the Creator delight?
'Twas even so, Father, I ever must sing,
Because it seemed good in Thy sight."

2. It is eternal. This of necessity. God Himself is eternal, and God is love; therefore, as God Himself had no beginning, His love had none. Granted that such a concept far transcends the grasp of our finite minds, nevertheless, where we cannot comprehend, we can bow in adoring worship. How clear is the testimony of Jeremiah 31:3, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee." How blessed to know that the great and holy God loved His people before heaven and earth were called into existence, that He had set His heart upon them from all eternity. Clear proof is this that His love is spontaneous, for He loved them endless ages before they had any being.

The same precious truth is set forth in Ephesians 1:4-5, "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us." What praise should this evoke from each of His children! How quieting for the heart. Since God's love toward me had no beginning, it can have no ending! Since it is true that "from everlasting to everlasting" He is God, and since God is love, then it is equally true that "from everlasting to everlasting" He loves His people.

3. It is sovereign. This also is self-evident. God Himself is sovereign, under obligation to none, a law unto Himself, acting always according to His own imperial pleasure. Since God is sovereign, and since He is love, 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. Such is His own express affirmation: "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated" (Rom. 9:13). There was no more reason in Jacob why he should be the object of divine love than there was in Esau. They both had the same parents, and were born at the same time, being twins, yet God loved the one and hated the other! Why? Because it pleased Him to do so.

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. "In love having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to"—what? Some excellency which He foresaw in them? No. What then? "According to the good pleasure of his will" (Eph. 1:4-5).

4. It is *infinite*. Everything about God is infinite. His essence fills heaven and earth. His wisdom is unlimitable, for He knows everything of the past, present, and future. His power is unbounded, for there is nothing too hard for Him. So His love is without limit. There is a depth to it which none can fathom; there is a height to it which none can scale; there is a length and breadth to it which defies measurement by any creature standard. Beautifully this is intimated in Ephesians 2:4, "But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us." The word "great" there is parallel with the "God so loved" of John 3:16. It tells us that the love of God is so transcendent it cannot be estimated.

No tongue can fully express the infinitude of God's love, or any mind comprehend it: it "passeth knowledge" (Eph. 3:19). The most extensive ideas that a finite mind can frame about divine love, are infinitely below its true nature. The heaven is not so far above the earth as the goodness of God is beyond the most raised conceptions which we are able to form of it. It is an ocean which swells higher than all the mountains of opposition in such as are the objects of it. It is a fountain from which flows all necessary good to all those who are interested in it (John Brine, 1743).

5. It is *immutable*. As with God Himself there is "no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (James 1:17), so His love knows neither change or diminution. The worm Jacob supplies a forceful example of this: "Jacob have I loved," declared Jehovah, and despite all his unbelief and waywardness, He never ceased to love him. John 13:1 furnishes another beautiful illustration. That very night one of the apostles would say, "Show us the Father"; another would deny Him with cursings; all of them would be scandalized by and forsake Him. Nevertheless, "having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end." The divine love is subject to no vicissitudes. Divine love is "strong as death . . . many waters cannot quench it" (Song 8:6-7). Nothing can separate from it (Rom. 8:35-39).

"His love no end nor measure knows,
No change can turn its course,
Eternally the same it flows
From one eternal source."

6. It is *holy*. God's love is not regulated by caprice, passion, or sentiment, but by principle. Just as His grace reigns not at the expense of it, but "through righteousness" (Rom. 5:21), so His love never conflicts with His holiness. "God is light" (1 John 1:5) is mentioned before "God is love" (1 John 4:8). God's love is no mere amiable weakness, or effeminate softness. Scripture declares, "whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth" (Heb. 12:6).

God will not wink at sin, even in His own people. His love is pure, unmixed with any maudlin sentimentality.

7. It is *gracious*. The love and favor of God are inseparable. This is clearly brought out in Romans 8:32-39. What that love is from which there can be no "separation," is easily perceived from the design and scope of the immediate context. It is that goodwill and grace of God which determined Him to give His Son for sinners. That love was the impulsive power of Christ's incarnation: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son" (John 3:16). Christ died not in order to make God love us, but because He did love His people. Calvary is the supreme demonstration of divine love. Whenever you are tempted to doubt the love of God, Christian reader, go back to Calvary.

Here then is abundant cause for trust and patience under divine affliction. Christ was beloved of the Father, yet He was not exempted 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 not where to lay his head." But He did give Him the Spirit without measure (John 3:34). Learn that spiritual blessings are the principal gifts of divine love. How blessed to know that when the world hates us, God loves us!

A W Pink

James Ussher on the love of God compared to the love of His creatures...

And is (our) love such a thing in God?

No: the true Love of God is not such as our Love is.

What difference is there?

There is great difference two ways.

First, In time: for Love was in God before it was in us, or in anything created; for he loved himself and us also before the World was, John 17:23.

Secondly, They differ in nature and quality: for that Love which is in God is most perfect and pure, without passion; but in us it is imperfect, and matched with Passions, with impure Affections, and grief of the mind.

After what manner doth the Scripture express the Love of God?

In the Scriptures God doth compare himself to a Father and to a Mother loving their Children; to a Hen gathering her Chickens together under her Wings; to a good Shepherd seeking up his Sheep, and to divers other things.

And wherefore serve these Comparisons?

They are for our profit two ways.

First, To shew us that God's Love towards us, is most vehement and sincere.

Secondly, To make us bold in coming to him, and calling upon him. So for this Love Christ Jesus calleth us by all the Names of Love: as his Servants, his Kinsmen, His Friends, his Spouse, his Brethren, and by many names more: to shew, that he loveth us with all loves, the Father's Love, the Mother's Love, the Masters Love, the Husbands Love, the Brothers Love, &c. and if all Loves were put together, yet his Love exceedeth them all: for all could not do so much for us as he alone hath done.

What things doth God love besides himself?

Besides himself, God loveth all things else whatsoever he made: but he loveth not sin and iniquity; for he never made it, as St. John saith, 1 John 2:16. Again, he loveth his Son, being manifested in the flesh; and he loveth his chosen Children for his Sons sake, with whom he is well pleased, Matt. 3:17.

Object. 1. *The Scripture saith, That God doth hate all that work Iniquity: How then can God both hate and love one and the same Man?*

In every wicked Man we must consider two things. First, His Nature. Secondly, His Sin. His Nature is the Work of God, and that he loveth: but his iniquity is not of God, and that he hateth.

Object. 2. *God doth afflict his Children; therefore he doth not love them.*

Whom he loveth he correcteth, (Prov. 3:12) and therefore he correcteth them because he loveth them; even as a Gold-smith tryeth his Gold in the fire, because he loveth it.

James Ussher, A Body of Divinity, p. 55-58

Louis Berkhof on God's General and Special Love...

Besides his special love to the elect, orthodox Reformed divines speak of God's general love towards his creatures, as creatures, including all men, made in his own image, whether reprobate or elect. The command of Christ to love our enemies as even our Heavenly Father does is a clear demonstration of this truth.

Moreover, the Incarnation itself is proof of God's love for man...Richard Muller writes: "There could be no greater indication of the love of God for humanity than this personal union of human nature with the divine nature"...Because God is love, and this attribute is essential to himself, the general, benevolent love of God towards all his works of creation, is consistent with his special, discriminating, or electing love, to his chosen ones.

The goodness of God towards His creatures in general. This may be defined as *that perfection of God which prompts Him to deal bountifully and kindly with all His creatures.* It is the affection which the Creator feels towards His sentient creatures as such. The Psalmist sings of it in the well known words: "Jehovah is good to all; and His tender mercies are over all His works...The eyes of all wait for thee; and thou givest them their food in due season, Thou openest thy hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living creature," Ps. 145:9,15,16. This benevolent interest of God is revealed in His care for the creature's welfare, and is suited to the nature and the circumstances of the creature. It naturally varies in degree according to the capacity of the objects to receive it. And while it is not restricted to believers, they only manifest a proper appreciation of its blessings, desire to use them in the service of their God, and thus enjoy them in a richer and fuller measure. The Bible refers to this goodness of God in many passages, such as Ps. 36:6; 104:21; Matt. 5:45; 6:26; Luke 6:35; Acts 14:17.

He does not even withdraw His love completely from the sinner in his present sinful state, though the latter's sin is an abomination to Him, since He recognizes even in the sinner His image-bearer. John 3:16; Matt. 5:44,45. At the same time He loves believers with a special love, since He contemplates them as His spiritual children in Christ. It is to them that He communicates Himself in the fullest and richest sense, with all the fulness of His grace and mercy. John 16:27; Rom. 5:8; I John 3:1.

Louis Berkhof

Wilhelmus à Brakel on God's Love and Justice...

The love of God is the peculiar benevolence He possesses as the loving God Himself (1 John 4:8). His intra-trinitarian love is the delight that God has toward Himself (cf. John 5:20). This is the basis for the love God expresses toward His creatures, which can be classified as either general or special. The former relates to God's desire to bless all His creatures (Ps. 145:9), while the latter has the elect particularly as its object (John 3:16; Eph. 5:25). This is God's special fatherly delight in His elect as He views them through the lens of Christ Himself (John 16:27; Col. 2:10). This love causes the elect to be accepted for the sake of God's beloved Son (Eph. 1:4–6). Redemption appointed, redemption accomplished, and redemption applied all flow from this steadfast, ceaseless love of the triune God (Lam. 3:22; cf. Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:10).

The justice or righteousness of God is His continual perfection according to the standard of what is pure and right—which is Himself. Exercised toward His creatures, the justice of God consists in the execution of judgment, either by reward or punishment, according to what is deserved, as determined by the standard of His holy law. All His works are just (Gen. 18:25; Ps. 7:9).

Because He acts not in response to man but according to His own way, God is just both in damning some (Pss. 51:4; 119:137; Nah. 1:2–3; Rom. 2:5–6) and delivering others (Rom. 3:21–22). “His work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment” (Deut. 32:4).

The love and justice of God are not incompatible; both are natural to Him to the superlative degree. God’s love is always exercised within the bounds of justice, and He always enforces His justice in a loving manner. His love is wholly just, and His justice is entirely loving—this is the nature of God.

This means that, on the one hand, while He is loving God will not suffer men to trample on His holy law. For Him to allow the propagation of sin to continue would not be love. He must and will punish sin to the fullest degree. This should engender fear of sinning against a righteous God who “hatest all workers of iniquity” (Ps. 5:5–6). Noting God’s justice, men must fear and tremble, allowing the terror of the Lord to move them to seek remission for their great sins through the blood of Christ.

On the other hand, this means that God, within His justice, exercises His wondrous love through His Son, Jesus Christ. We see the love of the Father in sending the Son; the love of the Son in bearing His people’s sin; and the love of the Spirit in applying the benefits of salvation. All three Persons exercise the depths of eternal, sovereign, infinite, immutable love. No man, when gazing on this fountain, can help but stand captivated in amazement at the majestic love of the holy God.

The love and justice of God are understood best by observing the contours of the gospel. Therein God displayed publicly His righteousness (Rom. 3:21–26) and demonstrated His love (Rom. 5:8). Calvary’s cross is where God’s love and justice meet (Ps. 85:10). Within Christ, God’s justice is not against but for His people. Christ’s people are so fully united to Him that God’s justice will not permit them to receive anything but that which is Christ’s wage: eternal life in glory. Additionally, within Christ, God’s love is unrestrained in bestowing His gifts (Zeph. 3:17; James 1:17). The exercising of His justice and His love come together in the gospel, both for God’s glory and for His people’s good.

—adapted from Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, vol. 1, ch. 3