

The Love of God

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TAKING CHRIST'S LOVE TO THE WORLD

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The Lord said to Moses, “*You cannot see my face and live*” (**Ex.33:20**), by which God meant that no one can see the inner being of God. All we can know of God is through His revelation of Himself through His actions and words which are a reflection of His character. We call His character qualities His divine “attributes.” These attributes point us back to His “absolute” attributes which are those essential core elements that comprise His being (sometimes these are called immanent attributes). We know who God is by His outgoing character and actions towards His creation and towards men and women. These attributes of character we call “transitive attributes” and they point us back to the absolute attributes of God’s inner being. Transitive attributes relate to His interaction with men and women. There is absolute consistency between who God is and what He does.

It is said by some that love is the primary attribute of God and that all the others stem from this one attribute of love. We all have a lot of sympathy with that view, but love does not actually explain everything about God’s nature. An old Puritan Thomas Watson said that God has 3 jewels in His crown – holiness, truth and love. I am much happier with this statement, although the Scriptures are much richer in their view of God; for example in **1 John** God is defined as “**Light**” (**1:5**) and “**Righteous**” (**2:29**) and “**Love**” (**4:8, 16**). These are clear statements about God and John applies these absolute attributes to the life of the believer. John says “*God is Light*” which means that in Himself He is light in His inner Being. He is Light and “*He is righteous*” and “*He is love.*” God works from the centre of who He is and all His actions are in absolute consistency with the Person he is. It is the work of Systematic Theology to identify the absolute attributes and observe how they are translated and applied to the human situation thus providing the opportunity to define also the transitive attributes (Selwyn Hughes writes about the “Divine attitudes”). When God reaches out to His creation and to humanity we speak of transitive attributes. **Immanent love** that found its fulfilment in the 3 Persons of the Trinity now makes men and women the focus of His **outgoing love**, showing tender and steadfast compassion and mercy to all. **Holiness** when applied into the human arena is termed righteousness. Justice is the application of His holiness with regard to the actions of men and women. But we have chosen to confine ourselves to the

absolute attribute of God's love, recognizing at the same time that God reaches out to humanity in transitive love.

Note how in the "High-Priestly Prayer of Jesus (**Jn.Ch.17**) He addresses Father as "Holy Father" (**v11**) but also speaks of Father's love for Him (**v24, v26**); He also addresses Father as "Righteous Father" (**v25**). I suggest you get one "Systematic Theology" as an investment to assist you in your thinking about God and list the absolute attributes and carefully observe how they are applied to men and women and the natural creation (including time and space). Now identify the transitive attributes. By the way, my most used book on Systematic Theology was written by a Baptist, Augustus Hopkins Strong (it is still in print).

Possibly the most important statement about God in the Old Testament (OT) is **Deut.6:4** which is known as the Jewish "Shema" – their public proclamation of their faith in the unity of God and their central prayer,

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" or

"The Lord is our God, the Lord alone" (that is, the only one) (Deut.6:4). (NKJV)

"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength" (Deut.6:5). (NKJV)

This is the new commandment that Jesus spoke about (**Jn.13:34; 15:12; 2Jn.5**) and is absent from the original "Ten Commandments" (**Ex.Ch.20**). The same commandment which is applied to God in **Deut.6:5** is further applied by Jesus to one another and called by Him the "second commandment," a further extension of this is that the bridal love of the Song of Songs is viewed by Jesus in the context of love to one's neighbour.

Returning to my first point which referred to the love of God in the context of Trinity we see this in its fullest expression in the relationship of the Father and the incarnate Son. The incarnation of the eternal Son makes God accessible and comprehensible in a revolutionary new way. John says in his gospel,

*“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth”
(Jn.1:14). (NKJV)*

This is recognized as the full biblical statement on the incarnation. John in his first letter expresses his wonderment at the accessibility of Jesus resulting from the incarnation,

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—” (1 Jn.1:1). (NKJV)

The baptism of Jesus is the context for Father’s most powerful and affirmative declaration of His love for Jesus,

“And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” (Matt.3:17). (NKJV)

The term “Beloved” is one of intimate and sacred endearment and is first used in **Gen.22:2** where God tells Abraham to,

“Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and get you into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains I will tell you of.”

It is significant that God chooses this word of Father’s love for his son and applies it here to Abraham’s love for Isaac which is about to be tested to the full. This chapter anticipates the cross and the intimate relationship of the Father to the Beloved as Calvary is faced by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus spoke of Himself as “the Good Shepherd” who lays down His life for the sheep –

“Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again” (Jn.10:17).

The love of God must be viewed in the context of the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but must then be viewed in the context of Christ’s life coming to its ultimate realization in the context of the cross. The ultimate test of Father’s love for the world is shown by His giving His only begotten Son to die for lost sinners,

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”
(Jn.3:16). (NKJV)

The unity of God in love and purpose must not be presented as in conflict regarding the work of salvation. Paul gives to us one of the keys to understanding in measure the work of salvation in the context of Trinity,

*“That is, that **God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself**, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation”* **(2 Cor.5:19).** (NKJV)

The agape love of God leads us to several key passages in the gospel narrative. We briefly touched on **Jn. Ch.14** where Jesus speaks of “my” commandment to love one another (v12) but He also speaks of His Father’s love for Him, “*as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you*” (v9). Remember the rich young ruler who refused Jesus’ invitation to follow him; we read -

“Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me”
(Mk.10:21). (NKJV)

The story of the woman who washed Jesus’ feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee is unique in the gospels because Jesus not only presents her to Simon as an example of service but also bears testimony to her *agape* love. Such a testimony is unique in the gospel narratives. In contrast we may examine the last chapter of John and note the interplay of divine *agape* love and human *phileo* love **(Jn.21:15-17)**. Peter sadly confessed that even his human love had failed him at the cross.

I would like to refer to the love of God in the context of salvation and then conclude with the love of God in the context of Christian experience. Both of these matters are dealt with in Romans Ch.5. There is no question that God loves all people, or that He does not care for the poor and marginalized people who inhabit our streets and find themselves in such need that all the resources of all the agencies and all

the social workers are unable to meet their need. The church has never been more aware of its responsibility to the poor and yet never so aware of its lack of resources to significantly help. God empathises with human need in a way no agency however Christian can. He weeps with all who suffer humiliation through abuse and poverty. He is exposed and vulnerable; we have chosen to reject the classical theology of His impassibility. Read again in the Old Testament those occasions when His anger boils over at human sinfulness and idolatry. We have read those times when God repents and changes His mind because He is distraught in the face of human sinfulness. He is touched by human woe. Have you read the little book of Hosea, how God tells his prophet to seek out a prostitute and marry her and then out of desperate insecurity and fear she returns again to her prostitution and she is again sought by her prophet lover? I can understand God loving Christ and Jesus loving His own disciples but God loves those who hate Him! God loves those who are living lives of unspeakable depravity. This is the love of God!

Paul expresses this love in **Romans (4:5; 5:6, 8)**. It was for sinners that Christ died, *“of whom I am chief”* says Paul (**1Tim.1:15**). This is the great central core of the gospel that God has saved sinners who were so far away from Him. Paul says that *“when we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son”* (**Rom.5:10**).

The story of the Prodigal Son expresses the Father’s heart perfectly. The son is not only forgiven and received back into his relationship with his father, but the father proceeds to show to him extravagant evidences of his love – the best robe, the ring, the fatted calf and the party! The crown of salvation is a restored relationship with God but the extravagance that follows is the discovery that we are part of the family of God and that Father gives to us the gift of the Holy Spirit. Paul says that,

“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” (**Rom.5:5**). (NKJV)

The love which is the core of God’s being and continually communicated between Father and Son through the Holy Spirit in context of the Trinity is now resident in the child of God making fellowship a reality with the tri-personal God and with the

family of God, the church. God indwells His people in all His fullness, the glory of God is the manifestation of His attributes in each Spirit filled believer **(Gal.5:22-23)**.

