

God Is Love

A dozen or so years ago I was at a retreat center in Colorado Springs with a group of about 25 men. One evening we sat around in a large circle sharing a discussion that came around to the topic of fathers and the impact that their fathers had upon each of these men's lives. The general thrust of the discussion was appreciation. The men expressed gratitude for the amount of time that their fathers had spent with them when they were young boys. But one man's words were especially memorable and really caught my attention. This was a man whom I knew quite well and admire and respect. He said that his father did not treat him well and was a not a good influence. He felt that the best thing his father ever did was to **not** spend much time with him. Sad to say, he was better off without his father's influence.

Certainly that is not true with our Father who is in heaven. He is the best influence that there is. None could be better. And one of the very best parts of God the Father is his love.

No one knows more about the love of God the Father than Jesus. There is an interesting comment in a prayer that Jesus prayed to the Father recorded in John 17:24. It is especially interesting to us because it is a prayer in which Jesus prayed specifically for us. In John 17:20 he prays for "those who will believe in me." That's us! Jesus was praying for us specifically during his lifetime 2000 years ago and he still is! He goes on in verse 23 to say in his prayer that God the Father loves us as he loves Jesus. That is an amazing declaration. We can understand how God the Father can have great love for his son but it is a difficult stretch to understand how he can love us as he loves his son.

In John 17:24 we find the line that I want to draw your attention to. Jesus says that God the Father loved him "before the creation of the world." That means that before the world came into being, before there was sin or Satan, before there was anything — God loved. God is a lover. Love is not primarily what God does. Love is primarily who God is.

A further explanation of the significance of that comes later in the New Testament in I John 4:16 in three of the most famous words in the Bible, "God is love." Even two and three year old children can learn these simple words.

"God is love" is a profound and wonderful truth but it is sometimes misjudged or misinterpreted. There are some people who try to twist it about and reverse the order. They claim that if God is love, then love is God. Or love is divine. To say that love is God-like is really a twisting of the meaning. We can say that blood is red but you can't reverse that and say that everything that is red is blood because of course it's not. "God is love" is not at all the same thing as the incorrect statement that "love is God." "God is love" means that love is essential to the essence and character of God. If you can imagine God without love you have imagined someone who is not God at all.

It is very important to understand that the love of God comes from who he is and not who we are. I John 4:10 is very direct. "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." When God loves us it's not because we're likable. It's not because we are attractive. It's not because of what we say. It's not because of what we do.

The love that God has for us begins not in reaction to us but in the fact that God is a lover. Love always comes

from him because of who he is — not in response to who we are.

I think that is extremely difficult for most of us to understand. You know how people say, "I saw her and it was love at first sight!" That is saying that I was really attracted to the way she looked. Or, "I remember the first day that we met. He was just wonderful! He was so kind and he said all the right things. I laughed at his jokes and our personalities were just magnetically attracted together and I fell in love with him!" That's a common way for us to think. We love someone because of the way they are. But if that person changes we can decide that we don't love

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that person anymore. We talk about falling in love but we also talk about falling out of love. So if the person toward whom we were so drawn becomes unattractive or instead of saying nice things says cruel things, then we can say, “Well, I used to love her or I used to love him but I don’t anymore.”

What this does is to describe love on the basis of the other person’s lovability rather than on the basis of our lovingness. It’s just not that way with God. The love of God starts with who he is and is not dependent upon who we are or what we are like.

I got a hint of understanding of this in a very memorable family moment. Charleen and I were driving home from the hospital with our first child. I was driving the car and Charleen was holding our baby daughter on her lap. (Those were the days before car seat laws!) She looked down at our daughter and said, “I love you” and I thought to myself, “You love her? You don’t even know her. You only just met her!” But you see it didn’t have anything to do with our daughter — the way she looked or the way she behaved — it had everything to do with her mother. It was mother’s love. Mother’s love is not always easy to explain or understand. Mothers can love people that the rest of us find very unattractive. Mothers can love people that no one else even likes. Mother’s love is something that flows out of who the mother is, not the loveability of the child or the adult.

And so it is with God. God’s love for us is not dependent upon what we say or what we do, how we look, how we behave or how we misbehave. It is a love that comes from who he is. God looks down on us even at our worst moments and says, “I love you.” God loves boys and girls and men and women who others would say are not attractive, who do not deserve that kind of love. But it’s good news that we don’t have to be handsome or beautiful or intelligent. We do not have to be well-educated or perfect or personable. God loves us because of who he is. He intensely loves us. It is God-love.

God’s love eternally gives to others. It starts out with who God is and who God is creates the attitudes that God has and the attitudes that God has lead to the actions of love. St. Paul wrote of his very personal experience of God’s love in

Galatians 2:20. “The life that I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

It’s attitude action. God’s attitude of love is a desire to always do that which is in the best interest of those whom he loves. That is a powerful and transforming realization. I think that being loved changes the way people live — it changes the way we think of ourselves.

On a totally human scale we see people who have been unloved for a long time and it takes a deep and terrible toll upon their lives. And then when they are loved, suddenly self-worth soars. Confidence is increased. They become different persons. It is even more so with the love of God. When we begin to understand that God really loves us then we have a motivation for living. Then we see ourselves differently than we saw ourselves before. That is one of the huge differences between Christians and non-Christians. Non-Christians go through life wondering if they are loved. Relationships may come and go and there’s no continuity. But as Christians we know we are greatly loved and we are not dependent upon human love that can change. If someone falls out of love with us, as painful as that may be, we know that we are still loved by God. His attitude is always that he passionately loves us.

You say, “I wish I could believe that. I really wish that I could think that and be transformed that way.” Let me give you a very practical suggestion that I think can have a huge difference. Make a sign that simply says “God loves you!” and tape it to your bathroom mirror or the rear view mirror in your car or your computer screen. Leave it up and read and reflect on it for one year. So it’s at least 365 times but if it’s multiple times per day it’s a thousand times or more until it is ingrained in your thinking. Don’t let it become routine. Take it as a personal statement from God to you. This is no clever trick. All it is is a declaration of something that is absolutely true. God’s attitude towards you unquestionably is that he loves you. We may not realize it, we may not fully believe it but that does not lessen the truth one bit.

And God’s attitude always leads to comparable actions. Jesus, in another one of the great lines in the New Testament in John 15:13, said, “Greater love has no man than this, that he lay

down his life for his friends. You are my friends.” Just saying it is not enough. God not only wants what is best for those he loves, he does what is best for those whom he loves.

The greatest example of that is that God the Father sent his son to die for us. The son of God volunteered to come and to die on the cross. He did it for us because he loves us — because we are his friends. That is God-sized love! That is astonishing. That is overwhelming. It’s love in action that Jesus gave his life out of love for us.

Back to that note on your bathroom mirror. Maybe we need to add to it. Take out a red pen and draw a simple cross below the words, “God loves you.” Then put it back up so that it will remind you that God’s love is more than words. He acted out that love. Jesus the Son of God came and died on the cross.

On those days when you’re feeling unloved or maybe even forgotten; when it seems as if God does not answer prayers or certainly does not answer them the way that we would choose for them to be answered, then read the note. And see the cross. Remember the words in John 3:16, “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Understand that the God who loved us enough to send his son is certainly not going to let us down now. He’s not going to abandon us in whatever is the current circumstance. Understand that God’s love will always be his eternal attitude expressed in his sacrificial action.

The question of course is what do we do with it. How do we respond to God’s love? If we understand it we cannot help but respond to it. In one of the most important teachings of Jesus, in Matthew 22:37, he told us what we’re supposed to do. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” That is to say that we are to love God back the same way he loves us. We are to have an attitude of love toward God and do in our actions that which is best for God. We are to love God passionately and completely with heart and soul and mind.

How do you do that? If I sit down in a chair and try to concentrate solely on loving God I find

after about ten seconds that my mind wanders. I start thinking selfishly not about how much I love God but about the things I wish God would do for me. So how do you get to really loving God with heart and soul and mind?

The place to begin is to focus on God and his love. Read about it; consume every piece of information available about the love of God; memorize it; meditate upon it; thank God for his love; worship God for his love. It is God’s love for us that triggers our love for him. It’s not as if we can somehow generate it ourselves. And when we are tempted in our lives to say or to do things that will hurt God our best remedy is to return back to his love for us. The principle is be loved and you will love. Be loved by God and you will love him.

Jesus added a very important second part in Matthew in 22:39 when he said, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The love of God is so wonderful and so filling that it changes us and then overflows to others. I’m convinced that when we experience the love of God we become different ourselves. We have a different attitude toward ourselves. We love ourselves — not in the sense of being narcissistic or selfish — but in the sense that we want the very best for ourselves in the same way that God wants that very best for ourselves. We turn away from self-destructive

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behavior. We turn away from selfishness. We begin to have right attitudes and right actions toward ourselves as we

fill up with this love of God. And then, and probably only then, are we able to love others as God loves us.

Then we love from the love inside of us. Then we love others independent of the way they are, independent of the way they look, independent of what they do. In other words, we are to love others as God loves us.

Now I know what happens. It’s great in theory but some people are exceptionally difficult to love. We fall into a common trap and blame the other person. We say that we can’t love people because they are impossible to love. We become highly critical of others because we need a good excuse for not loving them. But that is to misunderstand the whole matter. God’s way is that he

loves us on the basis of who he is not who we are. And we are to love others not on the basis of who they are but on the basis of who we are as those who are loved by God. God is love. God loves us. We respond to that love by loving him and ourselves and others.

Moses Mendelsson was the grandfather of the famous German composer. Moses Mendelsson was not a handsome man and he knew it. He was very short in stature and he had a back deformity that in that day they called a “humpback.” He went on a business trip to visit a merchant in the Germany city of Hamburg. While he was there he met or at least saw the beautiful daughter of the merchant. Frumtje was her name. He was enthralled by her but she’d have nothing to do with him. In fact she was repulsed by his appearance. After several days of attempting conversation with her he got up his courage for one last attempt. He walked up the stairs of the merchant’s place of business and spoke to her. But she didn’t answer. In fact she never even looked over his way. In a last attempt he asked her a question. “Do you believe that marriages are made in heaven?” She didn’t look at him but she answered him, “Yes. Do you believe marriages are made in heaven?” Moses Mendelsson answered, “Yes, I do. You see, in heaven at the birth of each boy, the Lord announces which girl he will marry. When I was born, my future bride was pointed out to me. Then the Lord added, ‘But your wife will be humpbacked.’ Right then and there I called out, ‘Oh, Lord, a humpbacked woman would be a tragedy. Please, Lord, give me the hump and let her be beautiful.’” According to the story Frumtje looked into his eyes and then reached out her hand and touched him. For something deep inside of her emotions had been stirred. She gave him her hand and later became his life-long wife.¹

Now compare that to the far greater love that God has for us. Love that is indescribable. Love that will not give up. Love that will not let us go. Love that volunteered Jesus Christ his son to take the agony and deformities of death on a cross before we were born. Even when God speaks and we refuse to turn our heads or listen to what he says or acknowledge that he’s there, yet he still loves us.

When we begin to understand his love, our

eyes and hearts turn to him and we reach out our hands and tell him we love him and want to spend the rest of our lives and eternity with him.

¹ Barry and Joyce Vissell, “True Love,” *The Wolfville Gazette*, Volume 3, Issue 1, August 1997. Published by OMNI Electronics, Nova Scotia Canada.

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