

The Talmid



Talmid תלמיד a Hebrew word that means “a true disciple who desires to be what the Rabbi Jesus is.”

Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did. 1 John 2:6 (NIV)

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STUDY TO SHEW THYSELF APPROVED UNTO GOD, A WORKMAN THAT NEEDETH NOT TO BE ASHAMED, RIGHTLY
DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH. 2 TIMOTHY 2:15



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Love is in the Air

by: Dr. Eddie Ildefonso

Everyone talks about love. Just about everywhere we turn, someone is talking about love. In fact, it may very well be the most popular thing in our culture—we just love to talk about love, yet never before has love been more exploited, nor has it ever been more distorted. Love has become a meaningless word. And instead of standing firm in love, many Christians have been duped by the world’s definition of love, which proclaims self rather than sacrifice.

According to the world, we love in order to be loved. According to the Word, we love because God first loved us. Whereas the world falls in love, God’s people are established in love. The love that we possess, however, is not a fleeting whim that comes and goes with every

mood and circumstance; rather, it is a love that is beyond ourselves. Our love, true love, has meaning, meaning that cannot be stripped away by anything, any one, or any feeling. Our love cannot be shaken because it is grounded not in self but in sacrifice.

Jesus said, “**Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends**” **John 15:13 (NASB)**. In His once-for-all sacrifice, Jesus Christ demonstrated true love, the true love of God. By this great demonstration of love, love has been defined, and no worldly deception can seduce it.

Nevertheless, many people have misunderstood God’s love. Whereas some believe that God loves everyone unconditionally, the Word of God teaches that God’s love has been poured out in the hearts of His people for whom Christ died, demonstrating His love. It is not that God’s love is limited. Indeed, His general love of benevolence is shown to all creation. His special love, however, is demonstrated to those He saves. His saving love is directly applied to His children, the sons and daughters of His kingdom.

For many, this subject is a difficult one, and we, the editors of *The Talmid*, hope that this issue will encourage God’s people to know His love in all its splendor. In Himself, God is love; through Him, love is manifested, and by Him, love is defined. Therefore, as we seek to live *coram Deo*, **before the face of God**, we are confronted by the brilliance of God’s love for us, and we realize that God’s command to love Him with our entire being is not an option.

On the contrary, we love Him precisely because He loves us. For this reason we sing, “Oh, how I love Jesus, because He first loved me.”

Abundant Love

Love of Complacency

In his monumental biography of **Jonathan Edwards**, **George Marsden** cites a passage from Edwards’ *Personal Narrative*: “Since I came to this town [Northampton], I have often had sweet complacency in God in views of his glorious perfections, and the excellency of Jesus Christ. God has appeared to me, a glorious and lovely being chiefly on account of his holiness. The holiness of God has always appeared to me the most lovely of all his attributes” (p. 112).

If we take note of Edwards’ language, his choice of words to describe his enraptured delight in the glory of God, we observe his accent on the sweetness, loveliness, and excellence of God. He reports of enjoying a “**sweet complacency**” in God. What does he mean? Is not the term *complacency* a word we use to describe a certain smugness, a resting on one’s laurels, a sort of lazy inertia that attends a superficial sort of satisfaction? Perhaps. But here we see a vivid example of how words sometimes change their import over time.

What Edwards meant by a “**sweet complacency**” had nothing to do with a contemporary dose of smugness. Rather, it had to do with a sense of pleasure. This “**pleasure**” is not to be understood in a crass hedonistic, or sensual, sense but rather a delight in that which is supremely pleasing to the soul.

The roots of this meaning of “**complacency**” are traced by the Oxford English Dictionary (vol. 3), where the primary meaning given is “the fact or state of being pleased with a thing or person; tranquil pleasure or satisfaction in something or someone.” References are cited for this usage from **John Milton**, **Richard Baxter**, and **J. Mason**. **Mason** is quoted, “God can take no real complacency in any but those that are like him.”

I labor the earlier English usage of the word *complacency* because it is used in a crucial manner

in the language of historic, orthodox theology. When speaking of God’s love, we distinguish among three types of that love—the **love of benevolence**, the **love of beneficence**, and the **love of complacency**. The reason for the distinctions is to note the different ways in which God loves all people, in one sense, and the special way He loves His people, the redeemed.

Love of Benevolence

Benevolence is derived from the Latin prefix *bene*, which means “**well**,” or “**good**,” and it is the root for the word *will*. Creatures who exercise the faculty of the will by making choices are called volitional creatures. Though God is not a creature, He is a volitional being insofar as He also has the faculty of willing.

We are all familiar with Luke’s account of the nativity of Jesus in which the heavenly host praises God declaring: “**Glory to God in the highest. And on earth peace, goodwill toward men**” (**Luke 2:8–14 NKJV**). Though some argue that the blessing is given to men of goodwill, the root meaning is the same. The love of benevolence is the quality of good will toward others. The New Testament is replete with references of God’s good will to all humanity even in our fallenness. Though Satan is a malevolent being (one who harbors bad will both toward us and God), it can never properly be said of God that He is malevolent. He has no malice in His purity, no maliciousness in His actions. God **does not “delight”** in the death of the wicked—even though He decrees it. His judgments upon evil are rooted in His righteousness, not in some distorted malice in His character. Like an earthly judge weeps when he sends the guilty for punishment, God rejoices in the justness of it but gets no glee from the pain of those justly punished.

This love of benevolence, or good will, extends to all people without distinction. God is loving, in this sense, even to the damned.

Love of Beneficence

This type of love, the love of beneficence, is closely linked to the love of benevolence. The difference between benevolence and beneficence is the difference between disposition and action. I may feel well-disposed toward someone, but my goodwill remains unknown until or unless I manifest it by some action. We often associate beneficence with acts of kindness or charity. We note here that the very word “**charity**” is often used as a synonym for love. In the sense of benefi-

cence, acts of kindness are acts of the love of beneficence.

Jesus emphasized this aspect of God's love in teaching regarding those who benefit from God's providence: **"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on *the* evil and *the* good, and sends rain on *the* righteous and *the* unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?"** ([Matthew 5:43-46 NASB](#))

In this passage, Jesus enjoins the practice of love toward one's enemies. Notice that this love is not defined in terms of warm, fuzzy, or sanguine feelings but in terms of behavior. In this context, love is more of a verb than a noun. To love our enemies is to be loving toward them. It involves doing good to them.

In this regard, the love we are to display is a reflection of God's love toward His enemies. To those who hate and curse Him, He shows the love of beneficence. God's benevolence (good will) is demonstrated by His beneficence (kind actions). His sun and rain are given equally to the just and the unjust.

We see then that God's benevolent love and His beneficent love are universal. They extend to the whole of humanity.

But here is the chief difference between these types of love and God's love of complacency. His love of complacency is not universal, nor is it unconditional. Sadly, in our day, the glorious character of this type of divine love is routinely denied or obscured by a blanket universalization of the love of God. To announce to people indiscriminately that God loves them **"unconditionally" (without carefully distinguishing among the distinctive types of divine love)** is to promote a perilous false sense of security in the hearers.

God's love of complacency is the special delight and pleasure He takes first of all in His only-begotten Son. It is Christ who is the beloved of the Father, supremely; He is the Son in whom the Fa-

ther is **"well pleased."**

By adoption in Christ, every believer shares in this divine love of complacency. It is the love enjoyed by Jacob, but not by Esau. This love is reserved for the redeemed in whom God delights—not because there is anything inherently lovely or delightful in us—but we are so united to Christ, the Father's Beloved, that the love the Father has for the Son spills over onto us. God's love for us is pleasing and sweet to Himself—and to us—as Jonathan Edwards understood so well.

GOD IS LOVE

In contrast to the East, the Western church (Rome and Protestantism) has had difficulty doing justice to the distinct identities of the three persons of the Trinity. Augustine compared them to memory, knowledge, and will—merely three aspects of a single mind—while Aquinas held that the three are "relations" in the one divine being. This trend has been pervasive—John Calvin and John Owen are notable exceptions—but, with the reappearance of the Eastern Church on the radar, it is becoming recognized that equal justice should be done to the irreducible distinctions of the three persons.

This does not mean that we are to think of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit on the basis of our understanding of human personhood, such as it is.

Once Trinitarian theology introduced the idea of "person"—it did not exist before—it inevitably came to have an independent history of its own. Consequently, we face a danger of importing modern concepts of personhood into our thinking on the Trinity.

We can be easily tempted to base our thoughts on human analogies, such as that of a human father and his son. This is what the Arians (fourth-century heretics) did; concluding that since a human son came into existence at a certain point in time, the Arians asserted that the Son of God began to be and so is not co-eternal with the Father but is of another being than He. Instead, since God is Spirit ([John 4:21-24](#)), we should think of Him in a spiritual manner; for instance, He is not a sexual being. The solution lies by way of the Incarnation. God as Father is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. But what exactly is the **"Fatherhood of God"** in this context? It is simply that He is the Father Jesus has. In

short, we need to approach the matter from the other end. **Personhood** is to be understood in terms of the way God is three (insofar as understanding that is ever possible). He is an eternal communion of three persons in undivided union.

Peter Toon observes that “the Christian understanding of personhood flows from the Christian doctrine of the three persons who are God,” and so “if God is simply a monad then he cannot be or know personality. To be personal otherness must be present together with oneness, the one must be in relation to others” (*Our Triune God*, 1996, p. 241). C. S. Lewis agrees that God can only be love if He is triune: “All sorts of people are fond of repeating the Christian statement that ‘God is love.’ But they seem not to notice that the words ‘God is love’ have no real meaning unless God contains at least two persons. Love is something that one person has for another person. If God was a single person, then before the world was made, He was not love” (*Mere Christianity*, 1980 ed., p.174). And, we might add, if He were not love He could not be personal.

It is precisely on the question of love that the Islamic doctrine of Allah founders along with the Islamic doctrine of humanity. Only a God who is triune can be personal and, therefore, love. Human love cannot possibly reflect the nature of God unless God is a trinity of persons in union and communion. A solitary monad cannot love and, since it cannot love, neither can it be a person. And if God were not personal neither could we be—and if we were not persons we could not love.

In [Philippians 2:5–11](#) Paul says, have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus. The incarnate Christ followed a path of obedience and humiliation, leading to the cruel and shameful death of the cross. He looked not to His own interests but to those of others. Moreover, His loving self-sacrificial obedience is the fruit of His decision not to exploit His status “**in the form of God**” for His own advantage, a decision made prior to His taking the form of a slave ([vv. 6–7](#)). This is what the eternal Son is like. We are to follow suit.

[Hebrews 5](#) runs along similar lines, referring to Christ’s refusal to claim the office of high priest for Himself. Rather, He accepted His appointment from

the Father, which was a self-effacing act that cannot be restricted to His incarnate ministry alone, since the appointment to high priesthood preceded the work of high priesthood itself.

Since, as Jesus said, he who sees Him has seen the Father, we can say further that this is not only what the Son is like from eternity but it is what God is like, too. Thus, the Father allows the Son to bring in the kingdom; the Son leads us to the Father, while the Spirit does not speak of Himself but testifies of the Son. This was pointed out originally by Gregory of Nyssa, when he wrote that in their mutual indwelling the three seek the glory of the others. There is, he says, “a revolving circle of glory from like to like. The Son is glorified by the Spirit; the Father is glorified by the Son; again the Son has his glory from the Father; and the Only-begotten thus becomes the glory of the Spirit” (*On the Holy Spirit*, Philip Schaff, ed. NPNF 5:324). The persons of the Trinity live in an indivisible union of love, seeking the glory of the other. When God seeks His glory, He is not pursuing self-interest like a celestial bully. It is not that He is more powerful than we and so His pursuit of His own glory wins out, come what may. His glory is the divine Trinitarian glory of self-giving love.

According to John, this intra-Trinitarian love is the basis for our love for God and other people. Since God Himself is love ([1 John 4:16](#)), and since we have fellowship and communion with Him, love is the acid test of our discipleship. If we love others, we belong to Jesus Christ. If we lack love, we are not His at all. The reason for this is that God is a triune communion of persons. Love is intrinsic to who He is. Attributes like grace, mercy, justice, and even holiness are all relative to creatures. His holiness is His separation from His creation. It is relative to the creature. In turn, His wrath is relative to sinners, as the expression of His holiness in response to human sin. Love, however, belongs to who He is in Himself in the undivided communion of the three persons. That is why He is called love in such absolute terms.

The Father loves the Son. The Son loves the Father. The Father loves the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit loves the Father. The Son loves the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit loves the Son. This reciprocal love of the three persons exists in the unbreakable union of the undivided Trinity. Insofar as we are enabled to be “**partakers of the divine nature**” ([2 Peter 1:4](#)), “**from one degree of glory to another**” by the Spirit of the Lord ([2 Corin-](#)

[thians 3:18](#)), we are brought, in a creaturely way, into this communion of the love of God.

Of the Father's Love

As I write this article, I am reminded of the December 15, 2003 issue of the *Orlando Sentinel*. "CAPTURED," read the front-page headline, "feared dictator found alone in rat-infested hole." With sincere wonder, I remember gazing into the eyes of the worn and unkempt former Iraqi leader, asking myself: "Does God love this man—does He actually love Saddam Hussein?" In responding to this question, some might retort, "No way, not a chance—how dare you ask such a question!" However, others might say, "Of course God loves him, God loves everyone—how dare you ask such a question!" The real question, though, concerns not only Saddam Hussein but everyone throughout the entire world. The real question is, "**Whom does God love?**" Such a question is not just for theologians, it is a question for all—a question for the church and, indeed, a question for the world. Does God love everyone in the same manner? Does He love Saddam Hussein more or less than Osama bin Laden? Does He love them more than Adolf Hitler? Does He love them any less than the local abortionist? Perhaps He loves them less than the next door neighbor who hates the church, hates God, and hates everyone who professes Jesus Christ.

The love of God is foundational to our faith, yet it is one of the more misunderstood doctrines in the church today. We parade God's love on key-chains, tee-shirts, bumper stickers, and large banners at football games. We pronounce the unconditional love of God upon everyone, and we throw it about so whimsically that we have made it virtually worthless. As a result of the church's mishandling this most precious doctrine, the love of God has become but a whispering wind.

Still, for us, the question remains: **Whom does God love?** Is His love the same for everyone? Is it equally bestowed upon every person on earth? The answers to these questions are at the very heart of who we are as Christians. These questions, though difficult to ask, are necessary and must be answered. Nevertheless, our answers to these questions cannot come by way of our own feelings and attitudes how-

ever strong they may be. Rather, our answers to such questions must come directly from God's sacred Word. For it is His Word that reveals His character, and it is His character that conforms our worship of Him. As **Thomas Aquinas wrote: *Theologia Deum docet, ab Deo docetur, et ad Deum ducit* (theology teaches God, is taught by God, and leads to God).**

The apostle Paul identifies the Word of God as the "**sword of the Spirit**" ([Ephesians 6:17](#)). He calls us to arm ourselves with it and to handle it rightly ([2 Timothy 2:15](#)). Thus, in our wielding of the Word, we must be diligent in keeping to the task to which we have been called. We must not forget that our Enemy, like a roaring lion, prowls around seeking someone to devour ([1 Peter 5:8](#)). By the Enemy's craft, the world has carefully schemed; it has selected its own passages of sacred Scripture and uses these passages for its own ends. In its clever deception, the world uses passages concerning tolerance, unity, and love—all of which are used by the world to promote its own religion; though it shall be proven to be a religion of death, destruction, and eternal misery. Foremost in the minds of the men of the world are passages they have chosen to justify pluralism: "**Judge not, that you be not judged**" ([Matthew 7:1](#)). They use such passages to justify homosexual unity: "**There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ**" ([Galatians 3:28](#)). And, in attempting to justify themselves before a loving God, they use such passages to pronounce the unconditional, eternal love of God upon themselves: "**God is love**" ([1 John 4:8](#)).

What the world does not understand, however, is that in seeking justification for its own religion it is securing its own condemnation. The passages of Scripture the world promotes are contained within a unit—they do not stand alone. In not "**judging**," we are told that God is Judge ([2 Timothy 4:1](#)). In our union with Christ, we are told that He is Lord over men and women ([1 Corinthians 11:3](#)). And, concerning God's love, we are told that it is special ([Ephesians 2:4](#)). His is a unique love that is bound by His own immutable character ([1 John 4:9](#)). It is not something to be carelessly thrown about. Rather, it is to be cherished and praised ([Song of Solomon 2:4](#); [Ephesians 1:4](#)).

Throughout Scripture, God affirms His love for His people. In the Old Testament, God demonstrates His love in calling a people unto Himself ([Exodus 33:16](#)).

From out of the world He drew a holy people, a set-apart nation upon which He pronounced His covenant love ([Genesis 15–17](#); [Exodus 4:22](#)). In the Ten Commandments, the LORD gives credence to His commandment concerning idols. He declares, **“For I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments”** ([Exodus 20:5–6](#); [Exodus 34:7](#); [Numbers 14:18](#); [Deuteronomy 5:10](#); [2 Chronicles 5:13](#)). In reminding His people of His covenant of peace, God declares through the prophet Isaiah: **“My steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,”** says the LORD **who has compassion on you”** ([Isaiah 54:10](#)). Still, the Lord extended His covenant love to those foreigners who would enter His covenant, who would **“love the name of the LORD”** and be **“his servants”** ([Isaiah 56:6](#)). However, His covenant love was not without condition; for it is manifested in God’s oath to fulfill His promise of salvation ([Genesis 3:15](#)).

In the New Testament, the love of God is likewise covenantal in nature. Nevertheless, in the New Testament, God makes it more clear that His covenant love reaches not only to the nation of Israel but to all peoples. When Nicodemus came to Jesus by night inquiring of Jesus’ true identity and mission, this is made clear. After explaining to this ruler of the Jews how one is born-again, Jesus answered Nicodemus telling him very plainly that He came not to condemn the world but to save the world ([John 3:16–17](#)). It is clear that Jesus defined His salvation of the world in terms of all those who believe. No longer was the covenant love of God pronounced solely upon the nation of Israel. In the new covenant, God pronounced His love upon all nations throughout the entire world ([Acts 10](#); [Romans 1:16–17](#); [Romans 10:12](#)).

In the new covenant, the Gospel is preached to all people, and our prayers of supplication are offered on behalf of all people ([1 Timothy 2:4](#)). We are commanded to love our enemies and pray for them ([Matthew 5:44](#)). Yet, in praying for them, we pray that God would convert their souls. And we pray not only for our unbelieving relatives whom we

love, but we pray for our neighbors who hate us; we pray for our local abortionists, and we pray for the terrorists of the world. In this way, God’s love is expressed to all. For indeed, His love of benevolence is pronounced generally to all peoples throughout the entire world ([Luke 2:8](#); [John 3:16](#)). Still, even though God displays general love to all people in giving sunlight and rain, His special love is demonstrated toward His people in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us ([Romans 5:8](#)). This sweet love of God, (His **“complacent”** love in the traditional sense of the word), is set upon His people from the foundations of the earth ([Ephesians 1:4](#)). His love has been poured out into our hearts ([Romans 5:5](#)). He has secured us forever in His steadfast love ([Deuteronomy 5:10](#)), and He has established us in the love of Christ from which we shall never be separated ([Romans 8:31–39](#)). But not all are loved in this way; for He says, **“Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated”** ([Malachi 1:2](#); [Romans 9:13](#)). Esau was an enemy of God ([Hebrews 12:16](#)), but Jacob was blessed by God ([Genesis 32:29](#)).

We, the people of God, are led to repentance on account of God’s kindness to us ([Romans 2:4](#)), but those who do not fulfill the conditions of God’s love in Christ shall suffer His righteous judgment ([Romans 2:5](#)). And even though many say that God hates the sin but loves the sinner, it is not the sin that God condemns to hell. Rather, on account of His special love for us, He saves us from His wrath to come ([1 Thessalonians 1:9–10](#)), and He disciplines us precisely because He loves us ([Hebrews 12:6](#)). He enables us to love because He first loved us ([1 John 4:19](#)), and, in keeping His Word, His love is made complete in us ([John 17:8](#); [1 John 2:5](#)).

The love of God is a most precious love that God has set upon His people. Indeed, His love is bestowed upon all people without distinction of race, ethnicity, or class ([Romans 3:29](#)). Yet, it is not a love that is bestowed upon all people without exception ([John 17:9](#)), even though the Gospel is proclaimed to all people without exception ([Romans 10:13–15](#)). We see this truth displayed in the high-priestly prayer of Jesus upon the hour of His death; in praying for His followers, He said, **“I am praying for them, I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me ... I do not ask for these only, but for those who will believe in me through their word ... that they may be perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me”** ([John](#)

[17:9–23](#)).

For we are His covenant people whom He has redeemed by His own sacrifice. He is our Father whom we adore and worship. He is our King—we are sons and daughters of His kingdom and have been brought in to feast at His royal table. Indeed, the special, saving love of God has not been manifested to everyone everywhere. But, by His grace, He has set His love upon us and has made His face to shine upon us ([Numbers 6:24](#)). For 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 we have been saved ([Ephesians 2:4–5](#)).

Transforming Love

I remember about 23 years ago, a deeply distressed father sat for two weeks in a pediatric ICU, watching his three-year-old son slowly die. During those two weeks he read through, quite surprisingly, a book on the Gospel. He later wrote to me, “I want to say to you the Gospel really is for real life.”

I was puzzled by his statement. How did a book on the Gospel minister to this father in his hour of deep tragedy? I’d have thought a book about trusting God in times of adversity might have been helpful. But a book on the Gospel? How could it help at such a time? I pondered this question for several weeks. Then one day as I was preparing a message on the love of God, the answer came to me. In the Gospel, this father saw the love of God.

The apostle John wrote: **“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. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins”** ([1 John 4:9–10](#)).

I often say, “If you want to see the love of God, look first at the Cross,” because that is the preeminent display of His love. It was to the cross that God sent His only Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Propitiation, though a good Bible word, is seldom understood by today’s Christians. Perhaps the best

way to think of it is that it is the act of Jesus bearing on the cross the full brunt of the just and holy wrath of God that we should have borne.

All of us deserve the wrath of God because of our sin—not only the sin of our days as unbelievers but also the sin we commit everyday as believers. But if we have trusted in Christ, we will never experience one drop from the cup of God’s wrath. Jesus drank the cup in our place as our substitute. And John tells us that God, in His love, sent Jesus to do that for us.

There are primarily two occasions when committed Christians tend to doubt God’s love. The most common is when we are, for some reason, deeply aware of our sinfulness. Perhaps it is some persistent sin pattern in our lives or maybe the overall sinfulness of our whole being. At such times we tend to think, “How could God possibly love someone as sinful as I?”

In either instance, we need to look again at the Cross and see Jesus bearing those very sins that make us feel so guilty. And then we need to remind ourselves that **“For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”** ([2 Corinthians 5:21](#)). God took our sin—even that which causes such immediate distress—and charged it to Christ, and He took His perfect righteousness and credited it to us. God did this not because we were loveable but because of His own self-generated love. As John said in the above text, it was **“not that we have loved God but that He loved us.”**

The second common occasion that tempts us to doubt God’s love is in times of adversity. We might think: “If God really loved me, He wouldn’t allow this to happen to me.” At such times of doubt, we need to look again at the Cross and see God giving up His Son to die in our place ([Romans 8:32](#)). After all, it was in that context that Paul asked the question, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” And a few sentences later he answers his own question with a ringing affirmation that **“nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”** ([Romans 8:35–39](#)).

The great Puritan John Owen once wrote, “The greatest sorrow and burden you can lay on the Father, the greatest unkindness you can do to Him is not to believe that He loves you.” We might have expected

Owen to say that the greatest sorrow you could lay on the Father is to commit some scandalous sin that dishonors His name. Surely sin does grieve God, but Owen tells us that doubting His love grieves Him even more.

So when you are tempted to question God's love either because of your sin or your difficult circumstances, look at the Cross, and remind yourself that on the Cross God proved His love to you beyond all doubt. In fact, don't wait for those hard times. Take a good look at the Cross every day to fortify yourself against those times of doubt and discouragement.

However, as glorious as is the truth of God's love for us, John does not leave us merely to bask in that love for our own enjoyment. Rather, he makes a very pointed application: "**Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another**" ([1 John 4:11 NASB](#)). The implication is not only that we should love each other because God loved us but also that we should love others in the same way that God loves us. That is, because God loves us in spite of our sin and general unlovability, we should love one another—warts and all. That doesn't mean we ignore sin in another person's life, but it does mean that when that sin is directed at us, we forgive as God in Christ forgave us ([Ephesians 4:32](#)).

I believe the greatest demonstration of our love to one another is the readiness to forgive each other on the basis of God's forgiveness of us. Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant ([Matthew 18:21–35](#)) is very instructive on this subject. The first servant owed his master 10,000 talents—the equivalent of 200,000 years of wages for an ordinary laborer—a sum impossible to repay. The second servant owed the first servant 100 denarii—the equivalent of about one-third of a year's wages. In itself it was not an insignificant sum. Not many of us would want to write off a debt equal to one-third of a year's wages, but compared to 200,000 years, one-third of a year is insignificant.

The point of the parable is that each of us is the first servant. Our debt to God, because of our own sin, is a staggering one—an amount impossible to repay. By contrast, another person's debt of sin to me, though maybe significant in itself, is nothing compared to my debt to God. Therefore, when

someone sins against me, either actually or merely as perceived by me, I try to respond, "But Father, I am the servant who owes 10,000 talents." That helps me put the other person's sin in proper perspective, and it enables me to forgive freely even as God has forgiven me.

Every reader of *The Talmid* is familiar to some degree with [1 Corinthians 13](#)—the classic passage on love. But have you ever noticed how many of the descriptive terms of love in [verses 4–7](#) have to do with forgiveness or forbearance? Love is, first of all, patient, which expresses itself in forbearance and forgiveness (see [Colossians 3:12–13](#)). It is not irritable or resentful. Then, love bears all things and endures all things. These are different ways to express the same idea—forgiveness and forbearance. And we are to forgive as God in Christ forgave us.

Of course, there is more to love—whether God's love or ours—than forgiveness. God has promised never to forsake us ([Hebrews 13:5](#)), to supply our every need ([Philippians 4:19](#)), and to cause all events to work together for our good ([Romans 8:28](#)). He has even said the discipline He imposes on us from time to time is a sign of His love because it is intended to make us share more and more in His holiness ([Hebrews 12:5–11](#)).

In like manner, we are to love one another in the Body of Christ with brotherly affection ([Romans 12:10](#)). This means we look out for one another, encourage one another, pray for one another, and, as is appropriate, help one another materially ([1 John 3:16–18](#)).

Obviously, we can never love one another in the same way, or to the same extent, that God loves us. We can forgive, but we can never atone for another's sin. And God is sovereign in His love. He has the power to express His love to the full extent of His purpose. We cannot do this. Our desire often exceeds our ability to express our love in a tangible way. But we must never lose sight of His love for us, either as the basis of our relating to Him or to one another. John said, "**We love because He first loved us**" ([1 John 4:19](#)). Note that the object of our love is undefined. Does John mean we love God or one another? The context suggests one or the other. But I think it is likely the Holy Spirit led John to leave the object of our love ambiguous because both are true. We can only love God as we bask in His love for us. And we can only love one another as we continually ponder God's infinite love for us. Beloved, let us love one another for love is of God.



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DEFINING BIBLICAL LOVE

by: Pastor Gary Fleetwood

Trying to define the essence of biblical love is a daunting task. The question is simple - “Where does someone begin?” [1 John 4:16](#) makes a monumental statement when it simply declares that “**God is love**”. The word for “**love**” in that expression is the Greek word *agape*. This phrase is not expressing the fact that God simply loves, but rather it is stating that He is love, that love is His very nature, and that everything in His character is motivated and controlled by His divine love. It is not that God simply has the capacity to love, but rather that His very nature is love. Obviously, if love is a defining attribute of God’s character, then it naturally assumes that love should be an extremely defining attribute in the Christian life. [1 John 4:7](#) says that “**love is of God**”. I.e., God is the source and the very cause of this essential attribute. In fact, [1 John 4:8](#) goes so far as to state that love is a defining evidence of salvation when it asserts that “**he who does not love does not know God....**” It becomes clearly evident that the biblical love to which John is

speaking is a supernatural love and not something that is simply acquired. It must come from God.

From a purely theological perspective, the *agape* love of God would be considered a moral communicable attribute – one that He shares or communicates with believers. It is an attribute of God that we certainly may not understand fully, but one with which we can easily relate because God has placed within us the capacity to love. We love other people and we love our families and we love the church. So, believers are able to relate to this communicable attribute more so than one of the incommunicable attributes of God such as His omniscience. It is an attribute of God that can be learned and imitated. And the more that the believer comprehends a moral attribute, the better able he is to understand and relate to the work of the Holy Spirit in producing that quality in his life. Because it is a communicable attribute, Jesus declared that the greatest of all of the commandments was to love God and to love others – attributes that God is able to actually work into the very fabric of the believer’s life.

We know that love is not simply an earthly quality. In His high priestly prayer Jesus proclaims in [John 17:24](#) that the Father loved the Son.

²⁴“**Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world.**”

What this verse expresses is that the love of God is eternal in nature. God’s love has always been a part of His nature. So, when His love is demonstrated through the Incarnation and the cross, it is not something new, but something that has always existed. The ramifications of this truth is that wherever God is there will be love. Heaven will be a place of monumental love, a place where the inhabitants are fully secure in God’s love. It will be a place where love is a prevailing attribute. **Wayne Grudem** has expressed this in saying that “*It should cause us great joy to know that it is the purpose of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to give of themselves to us to bring us true joy and happiness. It is God’s nature to act that way toward those upon whom He has set His love, and He will continue to act that way toward us for all eternity.*”

In the Greek language there are three primary words translated by the English word “**love**”, but only two are

actually found in the New Testament – *agape* and *phileo*. The Greek noun *agape* or the Greek verb *agapao* will serve as the primary focus of this article. The Greek word *phileo* represents affection for someone or a fondness for something. **Kenneth Wuest** says that *phileo* is an “*unimpassioned love, a friendly love. It is a love that is called out of one’s heart as a response to the pleasure one takes in a person or object....It is a love of liking, an affection for someone or something....*” The Greek word often translated love, but not used in the New Testament, is *eros* and it represents a romantic and sexual love. *Eros* is a self-love because it only cares for others to the extent that they can provide some level of personal pleasure and gratification for the individual. It is a love that is absorbed in taking and not giving.

Generally, when the noun *agape* is used, it is associated with God and His love for us. It is a foundational New Testament word. Perhaps [Romans 5:6-8](#) gives the clearest of all biblical expressions of God’s love for individuals when it declares,

For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love (agape) toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

So, what is this love of God, this *agape* of God that would cause Him to even care about that which was unlovable? How is it defined in Scripture?

First, the love of God is not an emotion.

Agape is not a love that is driven by feelings or affections, or some kind of sentimental attraction for someone. It is critical to understand that the love of God, the *agape* of God, is **not** a feeling of the heart. That is not to say that emotion is never embraced by God’s love, but simply that God’s love is never initiated or driven by emotion. Human emotion has an innate tendency to fluctuate and waver based on circumstances. Many a couple was driven by emotion when they decided to get married. They “fell in love”. But then as the years and the circumstances and the novelty of their relationship changed, the emotions encountered in the early years of their marriage simply dwindled into a vast array of un-

pleasant emotions and feelings - discontentment, dissatisfaction, irritation, annoyance, anger frustration, even hatred. And in due time the marriage was dissolved because the emotions towards one another had drastically changed and the previous sentiments completely drained off from the relationship.

Secondly, the love of God is volitional. God wills to love, and He does so without respect for the lovable-ness of the object of His love. It is a willful, deliberate, intentional, and calculated choice. It is choosing to do something for someone else that they clearly do not deserve even when there is a great cost involved. Decisions are not made based on emotions or sentimental feelings. The target of God’s *agape* love is the undeserving, the unworthy, the contemptible, the detestable, and those who are despicable. They are the objective and the focus of God’s love. In the final analysis, Scripture is perfectly clear that no one has ever “**deserved**” salvation. No one merited salvation, no one earned God’s love. It could easily be said that God has loved us in spite of what we really were. The love of God that is developed in the believer requires that he resolve and purpose to demonstrate an indomitable kindness and benevolence even to those who may hurt and injure him. Jesus expressed it this way when he said these extremely challenging words in [Matthew 5:44](#),

“But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you....

This is the practical outworking of the love of God in the believer’s life. It is his choosing to love when he does not “*feel*” like loving, when his emotions have been depleted, and when his will seems weakened to do what he knows is the right thing. It is that moment when no matter what someone may have done or said, the believer chooses to seek that person’s good. It is this very choosing, this volitional effort, this exercising of the will apart from the emotions that demonstrates the genuine love of God. It recognizes the inevitable difficulties and foresees the arduous effort involved, but it still determines that seeking the highest good for others is what validates the love of God – both in the believer’s heart and in the life of those who are the recipients of this love.

Thirdly, the love of God is an action. It is something that God does as opposed to something that God

feels. What is important relative to the verb *agapao* is that because it is a verb it must involve an action. If there is no action involved, then there is no *agape*. The love of God cannot exist in a vacuum. W.E. Vine has stated this clearly when he wrote that “*love can only be known from the actions it prompts.*” He further states that the love of God “*was an exercise of the divine will in deliberate choice, made without assignable cause save that which lies in the nature of God Himself.*” If the love of God was conditional on our actions, no one would ever be saved. When someone loves someone else conditionally, when the conditions that form the relationship are not met, the individuals do not owe any further obligations to one another. It would be similar to someone having a job. Everything related to that employment is conditional. If the employee shows up for work and does their job, then the employer is obligated to pay him for that work. And if he does not pay his employee, the employee will not return to work. And vice versa. If the employee does not show up for work, then the employer is not obligated to pay the employee. Everything is conditional in the relationship. But that is the very opposite of the unconditional love of God. In fact, it is spiritually impossible to ever merit God’s love by fulfilling certain conditions. When God loves, He does so unconditionally such that when the believer fails, God still loves him as if he had not failed. It is an unconditional love.

1 John 4:19 makes a very interesting statement when it says that “**we love Him because He first loved us**”. I.e., God does not love us because we love Him – not at all. To the contrary, God loved us before we even knew Him, before we even desired Him, and before we had even one small measure of love for Him. **1 John 4:10** states it this way,

10In this is love (agape), not that we loved (agapao) God, but that He loved (agapao) us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

So, the natural question that this raises is what was there in man that evoked such a response on the part of God? What was there in man that could possibly have been attractive to God? And the biblical answer is that there was nothing, absolutely nothing. In fact, there was everything in man to cause God to loathe him, to detest and despise him. From God’s

perspective there was not one good thing that made anyone attractive to Him, but everything in them that His holiness confronts and challenges. **John 3:19** expresses man’s dilemma when it says,

19And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved (agapao) darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

Fourthly, the love of God is sacrificial. When the verb form for love (*agapao*) is used, it refers to loving someone unconditionally and sacrificially. It is a love that that is not dependent on how someone responds to the one giving the love. Obviously, just the very nature of that implies a divine and supernatural love. The greatest sin that man could ever commit was to nail the Son of God to a cross, but it was that very sin that became the source of their salvation. The nature of God’s love in that event was not in any way determined by the response of the ones for whom the sacrifice was being made. They were the perpetrators, the ones who condemned Him, beat Him, spit on Him, and physically nailed Him to a cross. The entire atoning work of Christ was not for the sake of receiving something that He needed. To the contrary, it was for the sole purpose of giving – of giving His very life so that the righteous demands of a holy God could be satisfied. And satisfied they were.

The love of God for the ungodly always involves acting on their behalf and doing for them what they do not deserve. It has to have a way to express itself, and that expression is found in the word “*sacrifice*”. Obviously, **John 3:16** has articulated this truth for nearly 2000 years. God “**loved**” and God “**gave**”. The whole of salvation is something that was determined before time began, before the foundations of the earth were even laid. And it was a choice that God made and He fully understood, as did the other members of the Trinity, that God the Son would become the sacrifice that would secure redemption.

God rendered to the undeserving the greatest sacrifice that could possibly be accomplished. It was a sacrifice that eclipsed any human understanding and surpassed any earthly wisdom. It was a sacrifice that had no measuring device for it cannot be measured. If the entire universe was made out of gold, it would not be enough to purchase one drop of the blood of Christ. The enormity of the word “**gave**” in **John 3:16** is without boundaries, and the magnitude of the sacrifice with-

out explanation. **F.B. Meyer** stated it this way when he said that “*Whenever there is true love, there must be giving, and giving to the point of sacrifice. Love is not satisfied with giving trinkets; it must give at the cost of sacrifice; it must give blood, life, all.*” This *agape* of God is a love that is willing to deny itself in order to accomplish benefit and blessing for the object that is loved.

When we survey the love of God, it should be a very humbling experience. It is something that should awaken an apprehension of our complete unworthiness and of God’s reciprocating kindness. The love of God discovered worth and value in that which had no worth, in that which had no value. The love of God revealed a preciousness about that which was insignificant, trivial, and unimportant. It found importance in that which was ugly and vile and wicked. This was no accident, some kind of cosmic miscalculation – not at all. To the contrary, this was the love of God acting and sacrificing as only *agape* could. Even though God in His sovereignty could have justly ignored and disregarded man’s needs and have been perfectly just in that decision, it was the love of God that prevailed. It was the love of God that triumphed on our behalf and overcame every conceivable obstacle that was arrayed against us. There was sin and its vileness. There was a loathing of the things of God. There was a hatred for the truth and a pervading spiritual darkness that despised the Son of God and His Word. There was corruptible speech and ungodly thoughts. There was blasphemy and unending wickedness. The list of spiritual obstacles was endless. But in the midst of that darkness, in the midst of that hatred and animosity and aversion to the Creator, there was the triumphant love of God – indescribable, incommunicable, and unspeakable.

Fifthly, the love of God is founded on the character of God. The *agape* of God is a love that is permeated and endued with a quality that reflects the Father and His character. It is filled with ethical and virtuous qualities, with a sense of obligation and responsibility, and with an enduring accountability to the one loved. This love is governed by the character of the one who loves. It is the character of God that gives rise to loving the unlovable. It is the character of God that allows Him to love those who do not love Him. It is the character of God that

chooses to demonstrate His love rather than conceal it. It is His character that eternally sustains His love. The greater the virtue of that character, the greater is the love. Those who lack character are unable to love, unable to sacrifice, unable to care about others. But that is not the case with God’s love simply because His character is without corruption of any kind. It is faultless and has no shortcomings, no imperfections, no defects or flaws. It is a perfect and enduring love.

Sixthly, the love of God is supernaturally produced in the believer. No one has the capability to love as God loves without God’s intervening help. For a man to think that he has the ability and the capacity to love sacrificially as God does is the height of spiritual arrogance and condescension. To give in a selfless way is supernatural and is only produced in the heart by the Holy Spirit. No one has this kind of love on his own. But the love of God should always be the goal and the objective of the Christian life. As much as is possible, the believers every desire should be to reflect God to others in a way that embellishes His sacrificial love.

In this regards I am reminded of a lady by the name of **Marilyn Laslow** who worked for Wycliffe Bible Translators in Papua, New Guinea. She and her sister spent nearly 28 years in a village that was 500 miles from the nearest civilization. She lived among a people group without any of the conveniences that we enjoy today. There were no stores, no pharmacies, no Wal-Marts, no electricity, no running water, no laundries, no automobiles – nothing but rain drenched thatched huts built on stilts and surrounded by water. Every day the men of the village would trek out on the river in search of a particular kind of tree that they would cut down, bring back to the village, open the tree up and glean some unpalatable source of food from it. The women would knead and bake it, place it on a large leaf, and have it for supper. And that was the lot of these tribal people day after day after day and generation after generation. And in that ominous and gloomy place **Marilyn Laslow** gave of her life sacrificially so that these people could one day have the Word of God. Virtually unknown to the world, she lived in complete obscurity without any modern luxuries. Just to receive supplies she had to make a 100 mile trip by canoe to an airstrip that was carved out of the jungle landscape, and then make the trip back. Yet through her incredible sacrifice, not only did her village come to Christ, but so did all of the surrounding villages. Her translation of the

New Testament provided the foundation for an incredible work of the Holy Spirit in which hundreds and hundreds of tribal peoples came to know Christ as their Savior. **Marilyn Laslow's** sacrifice was something that was supernatural and divinely initiated within her heart. To spend the best years of her life foregoing all of the comforts and advantages of a modern civilization that could have been hers was a supernatural work of God in the heart, and one that allowed God to accomplish His divine and sovereign work in the lives of people who may never have heard of him.

Seventhly, the love of God is unselfish. **John MacArthur** describes this aspect of the love of God as *“the love that gives....there is no taking involved....it seeks the highest good for another no matter what the cost...”* When the love of God is working itself out in the believer's life, there is always a personal cost involved. Something must be given, something must be bestowed. The *agape* love of God cannot simply be expressed with words – it must give something to someone. It must do something for someone. This is a love that is willing to give to others no matter whether or not it receives anything in return for what is given. Too often the expectation is that of a reciprocating love. I.e., someone gives with the anticipation that the one receiving will give back in return. But that is not characteristic of the *agape* of God. It is actually the opposite. It is an amazing element of God's love that He continuously gives and offers His love even when that love is not received or reciprocated.

So, how does all of this apply to the believer's life? How does a Christian translate God's supernatural love into their life? How does he find the strength to love someone who is his enemy and not to revile back when reviled as Jesus demonstrated in **I Peter 2:23**? How does a believer take that which is unconditional, supernatural, and sacrificial and embed it into their life? The Scriptural encouragements are many and there are a multitude of commandments that must be embraced. For instance, **I Peter 1:22** declares that we are to have a deep and fervent love for one another.

²²**Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart,**

But it appears that this kind of fervent love is predicated on **“obeying the truth”**. If a believer refuses to submit their life to the revealed will of God, then the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in them will be quenched (**I Thessalonians 5:19**). Scripture declares that love can grow cold (**Matthew 24:12**). And even though the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is guaranteed to take place within the believer's life, the practical extent and measure of that work is not as clearly defined and certainly seems to vacillate with the believer's response or lack thereof to the Word of God and the promptings of the Holy Spirit. For instance, the Word of God commands the believer to not love the world. **I John 2:15** says,

¹⁵**Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.**

Clearly the expectation of this verse is that the believer is to be actively involved in obeying this command and ordering their life in obedience to it. It is what **Romans 6** and **12** refer to as **presenting** ourselves to God.

The entire epistle of **I John** clearly attests to the fact that God's love being exhibited in the life of the believer is an essential evidence of regeneration. **I John 2:5** declares,

⁵**But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him.**

I John 3:10 says,

¹⁰**In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.**

I John 4:8 says,

⁸**He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.**

The Christian is commanded to **“walk in love”**. **Ephesians 5:1-2** says,

¹**Therefore be imitators of God as dear children.**
²**And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma.**

The word “**walk**” is clearly referring to how someone lives and to how they conduct themselves and lead their life before others. Most of the New Testament usages refer to a person’s ongoing behavior. It means that when someone walks in love that they have ordered their life to live prudently and with great discretion towards those who are outside. Everyone is watching how the believer lives.

The most graphic portrayal of a believer’s biblical love is identified in [1 Corinthians 13](#). The words are convicting and challenging. But despite the demanding aspect of these verses, they are a very succinct and concise portrayal of how God desires His children to live. The attributes are the epitome and embodiment of the love of God. All of the words used to describe love in this passage are not adjectives, but verbs. They are things that personify God and reflect things that people do. They are verbs that are descriptive of how the love of God in the believer actually acts and behaves. I.e., when it states that “**love suffers long**”, the words “**suffers long**” is one verb *makrothumei* in the Greek and is in the present tense, active voice. It denotes that love is continually patient and because it is in the active voice it is the individual that is exercising that patience. The word means “*patient endurance under provocation*”. The literal meaning of the word is “*long-tempered*”. This characteristic of love reveals the truth that love does not retaliate. It is love being actively and patiently demonstrated. The same is true of each of the other verbs. “**Love is kind**”, where “**is kind**” is the one Greek verb *chresteuetai*. The point of this is simply to articulate that these are not descriptions of what love is, but descriptions of what love does. Because the words are in verbal form, they describe actions, behaviors, and conduct. The love of God is never inactive, but always acting, always demonstrating, always seeking the best for others.

[1 Corinthians](#) says that love is patient and long suffering, kind, without jealousy, not boastful, not arrogant, not inappropriate in behavior, not self-centered, not easily provoked, not a record keeper, and not a rejoicer in evil and unrighteousness. To the contrary, godly love embraces and rejoices in the truth. This kind of love bears long with people, believes in people. It believes in God’s work in them and for them, and is always hoping for the best to

ensue in their lives. This is an enduring and continuing love that waits patiently and triumphantly as God’s work is accomplished in others over a period of time, and in many cases over an extended period of time.

To think that this kind of love can be lived out with our personal resources is blatantly arrogant and spiritually egotistical. The love of God is a love that can only be produced in the believer’s life by the Holy Spirit. [Ephesians 3:16-19](#) is Paul’s prayer.

¹⁶that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, ¹⁷that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—¹⁹to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Obviously the believer must be “**strengthened**” by the Holy Spirit to love as God loves. Without this work of the Holy Spirit, all of the believer’s efforts can only fail and produce great disappointment. It is spiritually impossible to love as God loves without the Holy Spirit. In [Galatians 3:3](#), Paul made this declaration,

³Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh....

In the same way that we cannot be a Christian without the Holy Spirit, neither can we live the Christian life without the Holy Spirit. The Christian life is a spiritual life and therefore needs a spiritual source to function properly. **Everything that God defines as a spiritual reality, either for us or in us, also carries with it a spiritual responsibility.** For instance, it is a spiritual reality that the believer is to be taught by the Holy Spirit, but it is also the believer’s responsibility to study. The biblical directive is that the believer is to love as God loves, but that can only be accomplished through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. He is the active source of the love of God for the believer.

One simple truth must be understood in this regards – **the love commanded by God is produced as fruit in the heart of the one who is surrendered to the Holy Spirit.** It requires a dying to what the believer desires. It requires a dying to personal desire for gratification. It requires a dying to feelings and emotions. It is not an

easy thing to continually give and to count no cost too great to benefit others. It is not easy to offer all that we have and all that we are to God and do all that we do for His sake and for His glory. These kinds of virtues do not simply happen. Rather they are developed and worked into the believer as he obeys what he knows is the truth and as he yields himself moment by moment to the leading and guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is when the love of God becomes the pivotal and guiding feature in the believer's choices and the galvanizing dynamic in his actions that he will truly be able to walk in love as commanded.

There is one final word regarding the supernatural love of God. It is a love that must be **proclaimed**. In so doing, however, the proclamation will never overlook or disregard sin in the one loved. It is not enough to simply say to someone that God loves them. The very reason that God has demonstrated His love through the Incarnation and the atoning death of Christ is because every individual is a sinner and desperately blinded to the realities of God's empowering love. In the final analysis, those who are willing to share the gospel and to share the love of God with others understand that rejection and refusal on the unbeliever's part is more often the norm than not. **J.C. Ryle** in his book called **[Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots](#)** gives the following story:

“‘Man,’ said a thoughtless, ungodly English traveler to a North American Indian convert, ‘Man, what is the reason that you make so much of Christ, and talk so much about Him? What has this Christ done for you, that you should make so much ado about Him?’ The converted Indian did not answer him in words, He gathered together some dry leaves and moss and made a ring with them on the ground. He picked up a live worm and put it in the middle of the ring. He struck a light set the moss and leaves on fire. The flame soon rose and the heat scorched the worm. It writhed in agony, and after trying in vain to escape on every side, curled itself up in the middle, as if about to die in despair. At that moment the Indian reached forth his hand, took up the worm gently and placed it on his bosom. ‘Stranger,’ he said to the Englishman, ‘Do you see that worm? I was that perishing creature. I was dying in my sins, hopeless, helpless, and on the brink of eternal fire. It was Jesus Christ who put forth the arm of His

power. It was Jesus Christ who delivered me with the hand of His grace, and plucked me from everlasting burnings. It was Jesus Christ who placed me, a poor sinful worm, near the heart of His love. Stranger, that is the reason why I talk of Jesus Christ and make much of Him. I am not ashamed of it, because I love Him.’”

What an eloquent story of how the love of God works both **for** the sinner and **in** the sinner. It is an undeniable work. **[Ephesians 2:4-7](#)** rightfully declares, **⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), ⁶and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.**

That is the One who loves us and the One that we love. He is **“rich in mercy”** and has loved us with **“great love”**. He has quickened us and **“made us alive together with Christ”**. He has **“raised us up”** and placed us in **“the heavenly places in Christ Jesus”**. And in the **“ages to come”**, His incredible love will continue to be manifested on our behalf. This is a transcendent love, a love of immeasurable infinitude, one that is not able to be fully expressed or fully comprehended. **[Ephesians 3:19](#)** says that it **“passes knowledge”**, that it goes beyond the boundaries of what someone is capable of knowing. And to make it all the more unfathomable, Paul's overwhelming doxology in **[Romans 8:37-39](#)** states,

³⁷Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. ³⁸For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, ³⁹nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Nothing could be more irrational than to conceive that anyone loved by God and a part of His kingdom could eternally perish and experience His everlasting vengeance. The love of God is securely and eternally rooted in His person, in His character, and in the sacrificial work of Christ in His incarnation and in His atoning death. **Because there was nothing in the believer that**

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initially attracted God to him, there is nothing in the believer that can eventually repel the love of God from him. [1 John 4:10](#)

states it this way when it says,

¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

[1 John 3:1\(a\)](#) declares,

¹Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!

The one attribute of God that is always prevalent is the unchanging nature of who He is. His eternal love never fluctuates, never wavers, never changes. And in a corresponding way, the one defining attribute that should always be characteristic of the genuine believer is that he loves God. He knows God, he has been irresistibly drawn to the place of genuine faith and repentance, he has been indwelt by the Holy Spirit, he is fully aware of God's eternal forgiveness and because of those things, he truly loves God. Our prayer should be that of Paul in [Ephesians 6:24](#),

²⁴Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. Amen.



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