

The Love of God

“Could we with ink the ocean fill, and were the skies of parchment made, were every stalk on earth a quill, and every man a scribe by trade; to write the love of God above would drain the ocean dry; nor could the scroll contain the whole though stretched from sky to sky.” Personally, I don’t know of any words this side of the Bible that have better expressed the immensity of God’s love than these, which were found written on the wall of a prison cell in the early 18th century.

This morning I want us to marvel at the love of God, because His love is the foundation of every blessing we enjoy; indeed, it is the foundation of all goodness. Then I want us to hear the high call we have as God’s children to reciprocate that love to our Father, and extend it to one another, and the world around us. Because, as we’ll see, love, as revealed in God’s character and works, is the essential ingredient of all we do as Christians and as the Church. Without it, we can do nothing of eternal consequence. But with it, whatever we do cannot fail to be eternally consequential. Let’s pray, and then marvel at the love of God together.

This prayer is adapted from Eph. 3:14-21:

“For this reason I bow before you, Father, that according to the riches of your glory you may grant us to be strengthened with power through your Spirit in our inner being, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith—that we, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that we may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to you, Father, who are able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to you, O Father, be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

This is truly my prayer for this morning, that we would have the strength to comprehend the love of God together.

Advent is one of the best times to consider this love, for it is a celebration of perhaps the second greatest act of His love, if you can even really separate it from that greatest act of love: Jesus’ death for sinners on Calvary. John 3:16 is perhaps the best-known verse in the Bible, and tells us, “For God so *loved* the world that He sent His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” So, Jesus was born in that manger 2000 years ago, because of God’s love. The Gospel of salvation is the fruit of God’s love.

And it’s a love that God extends to all, even His enemies. Matthew 5:48, in calling His crowd to this love, Jesus implies that it is the manifestation of the perfection of God. So that to love our enemies, Jesus says, is to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. But love is not just the essence of God’s perfection; it is the essence of His uncreated being.

Twice in 1 John 4, that Apostle tells us “God is love”. It is here that we must first note that the definition of “love” is of vital importance, because, depending on how a person defines love, the statement “God is love” may not be true. God is love as He defines it, or more accurately, as He reveals it to be by His Word and works.

John, very helpfully provides the most concentrated form of this revelation of love in the context of chapter 4. Verses 9-10, directly following the first statement of “God is love,” says this: “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.” And so, we see that the love which God is, is active, initiating, visible, sacrificial, relational, unconditional, gracious, and just, to point out only a few of its characteristics we can glean from this passage.

While the definition is important, but the truth is precisely as monumental as it sounds: God *is* this love. All He is, is love, and therefore, all He does is an expression of love. And yes, this includes all the wrath, and judgement, and punishment. And while we don't have time to explore them, these things are all out-workings of His love. If you have any questions about how this is, I'd be happy to talk with you about it.

So, God is love as He reveals it to be, which is most clearly displayed in His sending Jesus to die for our sin. Then in verse 11 of this same chapter, John calls Christians to display this love to one another, saying, "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

More accurately in the context of 1 John, he's not calling Christians to a love in which they may or may not participate, but rather is saying that true Christians *will* display this love. I mentioned the phrase "God is love" from 1 John 4:8, but the full verse reads, "Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love." So, how are we assured we know God? If we see love, like the love displayed in the sacrifice of Jesus, being extended out from us toward others, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Friends, please see the seriousness of what John is saying here: if you do not love others, you do not know the God who is love. Selfless love is an essential mark of a follower of Christ, and serves as the basis for our assurance that we are His. It also serves as an evidence of that reality to the outside observer.

Jesus says in John 13:34-35, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Love between Christians is the proof of discipleship to the world. This is the only explicitly new commandment of Jesus that is recorded in the Gospels, although it flows naturally from Jesus' summation of the Law.

We find this in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all of whom record versions of the conversation Jesus' had with a scribe concerning the question of which was "the greatest commandment". Mark 12:29-31 records Jesus' response this way, "Jesus answered, 'The most important is, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'" The second is this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no commandment greater than these.'"

The greatest commandment to Jesus is two-fold: to love God holistically, and to love everyone with whom we come in contact as ourselves. The parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke's account makes it clear that this call to love is meant to apply to everyone we meet. And in Matthew's account of this story, Jesus says, "On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." Love is the essential mark of a follower of Christ, and it is the essential mark of every church that follows Christ.

In Rev. 2 we find the stories of four churches, we will look at just two. First, Jesus threatens to disown the church at Ephesus, a church of strong service, sound doctrine, and righteousness, because they had "abandoned the love [they] had at first". Then, at the end of the chapter, Jesus commends the church at Thyatira for their love along with their faith and service, before calling them to stop tolerating some false teaching within the church (some pretty serious false teaching at that, concerning what is referred to as "the deep things of Satan" in that chapter), and yet, Jesus does not threaten to disown them. It seems the imperfect church that operates in love is more pleasing to Jesus than the church that seems to have it all together, but is without love.

These passages are just a sample of the pervasive and emphatic theme of love throughout the New Testament, to say nothing of God's love displayed in the Old Testament. But while love is mentioned over 180 times in the 27 books of the New Testament (not to mention the passages that are clearly about love that do not necessarily use the word), it is not just the frequency of the topic that is notable, but the extremity of the claims.

Let's review what we've just seen. Love is the perfection of God. It is the motivation and goal of the Gospel. It is the new and greatest commandment; the summation of biblical morality. It is the proof, to ourselves and the watching world, of our discipleship. It is the purpose and life of the Church. It is the very essence of God's uncreated being. All of

which leads me to say that love is of first importance in the character and works of God, and ought to be of first importance in the life of every Christian and the life of every church.

But what does this love *look* like? As we already mentioned, the definition of love is important. So, let's turn to 1 Cor. 13 and define it. Let me remind us of the immediate context, while you open your Bibles there. In chapter 12 Paul ends his discussion of spiritual gifts within the Body of Christ saying, "And I will show you a still more excellent way." Let me tell you a few of the things this way is more excellent than: it's more excellent than apostleship, prophecy, teaching, miracles, and more. And what is this more excellent way? It should come as no surprise at this point, it is the way of love.

Let's read 1 Cor. 13:1-3. "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."

Here again we encounter shocking statements concerning the essential nature of love above anything else the Christian does. Let what Paul says sink in. Powerful manifestations of the Holy Spirit apart from love are obnoxious noise. Profound preaching, full of deep understanding and knowledge, that provokes acts of great faith, apart from love, is nothing. Radical acts of service and suffering, even martyrdom, apart from love, are of no benefit. And realize the implication that you can have these flashy trappings of successful Christian life and ministry, like the church at Ephesus in Revelation, and yet be without love. So, brothers and sisters, let us not judge the faithfulness of EBC primarily on how dramatically the gifts of the Spirit show up, or how profound the sermons are, or how much we give in service to the Gospel; rather, let us first judge our faithfulness by how much we love Jesus, and how well we love each other, and our neighbors.

And now, what does this love look like? As we move through these characteristics of love, really consider if this love is active within you. Remember, we're talking about the proof of our discipleship. And the last year-and-a-half has been a test of the quality of our love. Has it not? If you're like me, considering this description of love is not about discovering *if* there is anything I need to repent of and grow in; it is about discovering *what* I need to repent of and grow in.

1 Corinthians 13:4 begins by telling us love is patient. In the years I've considered this passage, I have often wondered if I would ever make it past this first attribute of divine love. Because just when you think you've developed adequate patience to be loving, more is demanded by love. In His self-description in Exodus 34, God describes Himself as "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger..." "Slow to anger," that's patience. And think of all God's loving patience has endured: man's fall and subsequent descent into evil so great it called for a cleansing of the entire world, Israel's long generations of fickle faithfulness to the God who delivered them from slavery, and the constant failings and slow progress the most zealous of us experience in our pursuit of Him. And yet, God is still faithful. Such is the patience of His love. In the light of which, my patience can hardly be called patience at all.

Our chapter continues, saying that love is kind. It is my opinion that kindness is very intentionally paired with patience. For you will find that the longer you patiently endure for love's sake, the more difficult it becomes to be kind. Personally, I can be kind to just about any person for a second; the next second is when the struggle begins, and it worsens with every second after. And so it is, that the struggle to be patient, becomes the struggle to be kind.

Next, we read that love does not envy or boast, which I take to be two sides of the same coin. The one side being that love does not focus on what it does not have (perhaps we ought to remember the context of spiritual roles and gifts at this point). And the other side is that love does not belittle or demean others on the basis of its greatness.

This lack of envy and boasting doubtless comes from the fact that love is not arrogant or rude. Love is not arrogant, meaning it is not too high in its assessment of itself, nor is it rude, thinking too little of others, but honors other people truly in thought and conduct. How would our conversations, as individuals, a church, and a culture be

transformed if each of us simply thought of ourselves with humility, and of others with honor? It is this quality that I think allows love to be able to resist the next impulse that is mentioned.

Love does not insist on its own way. Love is not self-seeking. It doesn't have to get its own way. If there was one attribute of love I could miraculously impute to every person in the world today, this one might be it. Although it's clear this attribute would be impossible apart from the ones already mentioned. Part of what this means for us, that love does not insist on its own way, is that we don't have to win every argument; we don't even have to participate in every argument. This attribute of love is well-coupled with the call of Eph. 4:29, which says, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear." We may well make great strides in our love, simply by learning to be silent more often. Love is often silent, which is not to say it doesn't care about truth, which we'll see in a minute. First though, we need to ask, how does love react when it doesn't get its way? Answer: peacefully and graciously.

For love is not irritable or resentful. Are these not the two temptations that follow on the heels of us not getting our own way? We are either drawn towards outward expressions of anger and irritation, or the inner turmoil of bitterness and resentment. The word for "irritable" here can also be translated "provoked" or "stirred up", so Paul's saying love does not get worked up and lash out. Nor does love stew on things, in fact, it doesn't even keep track of the times it doesn't get its way. How many of us just need to let go of wrongs we feel we've suffered at the hands of others? That is what love does, like the Father enthusiastically welcoming the prodigal home. Again, none of this is to say that love does not care about what is right or wrong, true or false.

No, for as v.6 says, love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Taking this in tandem with what we just read about love not insisting on its own way, we see that while love does not neglect or remain silent about righteousness and truth, neither does it force these things upon others. Love often bears the grief of watching the beloved walk in wrongdoing. A reality many know by experience. Which is why love's joy bursts forth when the beloved walks in truth and goodness.

This act of waiting for the beloved to choose truth and goodness necessitates that love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. The reality is that love cannot force itself upon the beloved; to do so violates the very nature of love as we seen described in these verses. And so, love is left to patiently and kindly bear, believe, hope, and endure all things for the sake of the beloved. Such is the burden of love to which we, the beneficiaries of God's love, are called to bear for one another, and for the world God loved so much, He sent His son to die for it.

Again, we are in the Advent season in which we celebrate God sending His Son to earth to save us. It was the Father's love that made Him send the Son, and love that made Jesus willing to come. And this love we've been considering, His love, is designed for humanity. Not an idealized version of humanity, but humanity as it is. He loved us while we were yet sinners. Likewise, we are not called to love idealized versions of each other; we are called to love each person as we find them; that is how Christ loved us, and that is the new command he gave us.

If you are a Christian, 1 Cor. 12 says God has given you gifts and a role to be used for the good of His Body, and by extension the world, but you need to know that the exercise of those gifts, and the carrying out of that role will require you to love people as they are, not as you wish them to be.

-To seriously attempt to love in this way is to discover that love *must be* patient and kind; and *must not* envy or boast; it *must not* be arrogant or rude. It *must not* insist on its own way; it *must not* give in to irritation or resentment; it *cannot* rejoice at wrongdoing, and *cannot help* rejoicing with the truth. It *must* bear, believe, hope, and endure all things. Because if our love is anything less, it will fail.

Please don't be discouraged by the loftiness of this call, for it is a thing we grow in, until one day it is realized in its fullness. Perhaps, you noticed that in my prayer from Ephesians at the beginning, we were called to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. To seek to know that which surpasses knowledge, implies an eternal pursuit. C.S. Lewis says it this way at the end of his book, *The Last Battle*, "All their life [the characters from *The Chronicles of Narnia*] in this

12-05-21

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world and all their adventures had only been the cover and the title page [of the story]: now at last [as they entered eternity] they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.” I would say that’s a good description of our pursuit of God’s love in this life, and the next.

So, while this love presents an impossible task for us here and now, it will one day be satisfied, for love never ends, and so will outlast all that grieves it, as we see in verses 8-13. Which says that one day we will have no need for prophecy, tongues, or even knowledge. According to these verses these things are partial, childish, and dim reflections of eternal realities we will one day see in perfection, maturity, and clarity. But not so with love. Love *is one of those eternal realities* that Jesus brought with Him from heaven and left with us on earth, and while our experience of this love in this life is only a taste of the feast to come, it is a *true* taste of an eternal thing. Love is eternal life we can experience now. And so, our chapter ends, saying that faith, hope, and love each have their place now, but love alone will last through eternity, beyond the point when our faith has turned to sight, and our hope to reality.