

# The Love of God

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Date: 06 December 2020

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[ 0 : 00 ] Many years ago, the noted theologian, Karl Barth, spoke at Harvard Divinity School to a packed lecture hall filled with young theologians.

Well, after his lecture, during a Q&A, question and answer time, someone stood and asked this question.

Dr. Barth, what is the greatest thought that has ever crossed your mind? The greatest thought that's ever passed through your mind?

Well, every student in that hall leaned forward, you know, sort of like when E.F. Hutton speaks, the old commercial. They wanted to hear what Barth would say.

They were expecting some kind of deep, complicated statement. Well, Barth paused for a few minutes, thought it over, and then he replied, the deepest truth to ever enter my mind is this.

[ 1 : 16 ] Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Now, that is even more impressive because Barth was not theologically conservative.

He was what was called neo-orthodox, more in the liberal camp. And he was speaking to students at Harvard Divinity School who were liberal as well.

It's impressive that anyone would say that. Any theologian of his caliber would say that, but especially coming from his theological bent.

Barth's answer was deep, but it was not complicated. Think with me for a minute. The idea that Jesus and God the Father loves us.

Isn't that a mystery? Think about yourself. Think about human beings. We are sinners by nature. It just comes naturally, doesn't it?

[ 2 : 28 ] And we are sinners by choice. We choose sometimes to just do what I want to do when we know it's not what God wants us to do.

There's a lot of times, let's just be honest, we choose to live life our way instead of God's way. That's one way to describe sin.

Well, we don't deserve God's great love as seen in John 3.16. We deserve only God's judgment and punishment for the way that we have disobeyed Him.

But I want you to think, God chose. God chose from within Himself, not because of what He saw in us, you or me, but from within Himself, God chose to be gracious, to be merciful.

And mercy is giving us what we do not deserve. God chose to be gracious and merciful by sending His Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross as our substitute, to pay the penalty for the sins that we are all guilty of.

[ 3 : 49 ] This demonstration of God's love is summarized in one of the Bible's most well-known verses. And if you look at it and think about it, there's a lot of depth there.

But it's uncomplicated. Another clear and concise and uncomplicated description of God's love is this.

But God chose His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Now that's the real meaning of Christmas.

That's really what Christmas is all about. Romans 5.8, John 3.16. Now I know when you think about Christmas, you see the trees decorated and all these things, it's beautiful.

I know we have our family traditions, and I have mine, and they're great. We should celebrate them and enjoy them. There are certain things about Christmas that comes to our mind that's just fun.

[ 5 : 00 ] It's just family. Enjoy that. Don't feel guilty. But at the same time, let's understand what Christmas is really all about.

It's about God sending His Son into this world to save us. You know, the angel made that clear to Joseph before Jesus was born.

Mary told Joseph she was pregnant with the Son of God. An angel had appeared to her and made this known and done this supernatural work within her.

And Joseph, yeah, uh-huh. Who would have believed it? Well, God sent another angel to make it known to Joseph that what Mary said is true.

Look at this. She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.

[ 6 : 05 ] That's not all you find in Matthew 1 in that section around verse 21. But God made it clear to Joseph, just as He had Mary, that He was doing something unique once and for all, sending His Son into this world to save sinners.

Mary believed it and responded in obedience. Joseph believed it and responded in obedience. As soon as Jesus was born, this good news about the birth of the Savior was also proclaimed by an angel, this time to shepherds.

Look at this. Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

On this first Sunday of December, we're starting our Christmas celebration. As Brian's already shared, we're going to have a real special Christmas celebration next weekend, Saturday at 6.30, Sunday at 8 and 10.30.

A great opportunity for you to invite people to hear the real Christmas story, to hear the good news about who Jesus is and why He came into this world.

[ 7 : 29 ] I hope you'll take advantage of that. But as we begin our Christmas celebration, I want us this morning to focus on the love of God. The love of God as seen in sending Jesus into this world to save us.

Now, the love of God is sometimes misunderstood, if not in the world in general, often misunderstood, mischaracterized.

And so I think for us to get a real picture of what the Bible teaches about what the love of God is, we've got to look at what the love of God is not. So let's do that.

What God's love is not. God's love is not the essence of who God is. You know, if you're going to summarize who God is, most people want to say God is love.

Well, God is love. The Bible says that word, that phrase very clearly. That's correct. The Bible also says God is holy. The Bible, and it emphasizes emphatically God is holy.

[ 8 : 37 ] The Bible also emphasizes that God is just. God does what is right. It talks about God being sovereign. You cannot really and truly summarize God's character in one phrase.

He is holy. He is just. He is righteous. He is love. The Bible makes much of God's love, and rightly so.

But the Bible makes much of God's holiness. The Bible even makes much of God's wrath. The point I'm trying to make is we've got to be careful that we do not elevate God's love above all of his other attributes.

If we do, we distort the true picture of how God has revealed himself to us in Scripture. You see, I've said this many times.

God's not who you think he is. God's not who I think he is. God is who he is, and he has revealed who he is to us in his word and in the clearest picture in his son Jesus.

[ 9 : 55 ] So we've got to be careful that we don't just come up with an attribute of God that we like, like his love, and just sort of blow it up to the point that it overshadows all the other attributes that the Bible equally emphasizes about God.

If we distort the picture of God to other people or ourselves, we have created a version of God which is no God at all, which can be an idol, a concept of God that is anything but the one he presents of himself in Scripture.

So God's love is important. It is a true characteristic of who God is, just as he is holy. He is just. He is sovereign. He is merciful.

God's love is also nothing like the popular concept of love, let's just say, presented in today's media. Today's culture, the idea of love is far from God's love.

You know, how is your, your thoughts about love shaped, developed? Aren't they, don't they a lot of it come from, from the media, from movies, TV, from music?

[ 11 : 22 ] Most, you know, if you sort of looked at all the songs that have been written in every, in every, every type of song, every type of music, there are more songs that have been written about

love than anything else.

Love is most often presented as something romantic or lustful.

We're taught to think in terms of falling in love, falling out of love, making love.

The popular idea of love today, people just think about, talk about, you see everywhere you turn.

That does not resemble God's love, as we're going to look at in a moment.

You know, there are some churches, some whole denominations, and preachers in these churches and denominations, that misrepresent God's love, with their feel-good messages, that try to avoid offending anyone, try to avoid making anybody feel guilty about the way that they live.

[12:39] Some preachers do this by, they refuse to teach about God's holiness, or God's wrath.

That would be taboo for the feel-good preachers.

They never call anyone, based on what the scripture says, they never call anyone to deal with their sin, confess it to God, repent of it.

Some even say, they won't mention the word sin. Some, some, never make a demand, based on scripture, to obey God.

You know, the Bible, never gives the impression, that God's love, somehow lessens his holiness, and his requirements, that we be holy.

You ever thought about that? Peter talks about, in his letter, 1 Peter, that God is holy, and because God is holy, we are supposed to be, as Christians, because we love him, because as our father, we want to be like him.

[13:47] It's important for us to understand, what God's love, is not, because it is so misrepresented, in today's culture.

But let's look at what God's love is. That's what we need to focus on this morning. God's love can be summed up, as self-giving. God's love is, he gives of himself.

We see that in John 3, 16. For God so loved the world, that he gave. Have you ever thought about the fact, that there was nothing, in us, to attract, or prompt, the love of God.

We don't think that way, do we? Think about, the people you love. Think about your spouse. When you first got to know that person, there were some things about them, that you noticed, and you liked.

You were attracted to. Now, they were not perfect, you saw some flaws, but you, got to know that person, and you took an interest in that person, because there were things about them, that you liked, that you wanted to get to know them better.

[15:06] There were some things about them, to put it in a selfish way, they were worth you investing in. And it wound up, your spouse, you're married to them.

There's things like that, about a person, who becomes your friend. There's things in them, that attracts you. Makes you think, they would make a good friend. That's how we think.

That's not how God thinks. God loves us, as that scripture from Romans 5, it says, while we were still sinners. While we were rebels.

While we didn't care about him. While we were disobeying him. God chose to love us.

Paul describes our unlovable position like this. In his letter to the Ephesians, he's writing to a church, he's writing to Christians. And in chapter 2, the first two verses, Paul is describing how we all are, before we become Christians.

[16:09] He says, and you were dead, and the trespasses and sins, in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work, in the sons of disobedience.

Someone described, what Paul is saying there, I don't have a reference to give you, but someone described what Paul is saying like this. We were dead fish, floating downstream, in the polluted waters, of this world's corrupt system.

We were nothing more than spiritual corpses, following the devil, and living a lifestyle of disobedience to God. Dead fish, floating downstream.

Not a pretty picture, is it? But that did not stop God, from choosing, of his own volition, to love us.

As Paul goes on to describe, in verses 4 and 5, of that same chapter, look at this. But 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, you have been saved.

[17:28] Now, God's love, cannot really and truly be understood, apart from this dark background, of our sinfulness.

Keep that in mind. Everybody in your world, that you love, there's something admirable about them. Something drew you, within them.

There was nothing in us, that drew God to us. He just chose, to be merciful, to be gracious, and show us his love.

That's not, that's not the only way, we need to think of God's love. There are many, positive qualities, to it. Look at this. God's love, is an initiating love.

In 1 John, we read this. We love, because he first, loved us. We're talking about, this is what I just have been talking about.

[ 18 : 31 ] God, of his own volition, chose to love us. He didn't reach out to us, after we first, reached out to him.

How did you reach out, to your first boyfriend, or girlfriend? Think back, for most of us in this room, to elementary school. Maybe middle school.

Did you just go up to her, or him, and tell them that you liked them? Would you go out with me, however you would have said it?

Most likely, in elementary school, middle school, you didn't make your move, until you found out, from somebody else, how they felt about you.

Maybe you asked, one of her friends, what does she think about me? Or maybe you sent, one of your friends, to find out, what does he think about me?

[ 19 : 33 ] You think he's interested. You think she would go out with me. That's sort of the way we work, isn't it? We're afraid, we're reluctant, to initiate, something.

Well, God doesn't work that way. God doesn't wait. But, he chooses, to love us, to draw us to himself, to have a relationship with us.

God's love is, he initiates it. It's an initiating love. God's love is eternal. It never ends. God said to the prophet, I have loved you with an everlasting love.

In Psalm 136, there are 26 verses, that repeat this phrase, his love endures forever. It's hard to imagine, isn't it?

We don't count on, human love lasting forever. In the best situations, death, death, separates us.

[ 20 : 39 ] That special, close, fellowship, love, does not last. In the best situations, because death, will separate you.

But there are people in this room right now, you know what it's like, to be hurt by a friend, or a spouse, who just walked out of your life.

You had a loving relationship. But all of a sudden, one day, they chose to end it. And they left.

Before they left, they may have looked you in the eye and said, I don't love you anymore. Or I don't want to have anything to do with you anymore. You're not my friend.

God will never do that. God will never walk away from you, if you're his. God will never get fed up with you.

[ 21 : 47 ] He will discipline you at times, if you're his child, because he loves you. But God will never walk out of your life, he'll never look at you, you'll never have this with God, I don't love you anymore.

We have God's promise that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Look at this from the end of Romans. Paul writes, for I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

God's gonna love us through thick and thin. God's gonna love us on our deathbed. And God's gonna love us in his presence in heaven forever.

If you can't believe that, don't believe anything about him. That's his word. That's guaranteed. Trust God. He will never stop loving you.

God's love is unchanging. God's love is unchanging because God's unchanging. Malachi says it real simple. I, the Lord, do not change. Have you ever thought of this?

[ 23 : 14 ] There's absolutely nothing that will cause God to love you more, nor to love you less. Think about it.

There's nothing you can do that cause God to love you less. There's things you can do to me that I will love you less. And if you say otherwise, you're lying.

There are things that people can, maybe have done to us, and we do love them less. There are things that people do for us.

And we love them more. If you want me to love you more, I can give you some things that you could do for me. And I'll love you more.

God doesn't work that way. God, certainly think about this. We can certainly please God and disappoint God by the things we do or fail to do.

[ 24 : 29 ] God does reward faithfulness. The Bible talks about that in a lot of different ways about God's rewards. And God does discipline His children.

God does not love us more when we please Him, nor does He love us less when we displease Him because God's love is unchanging.

You know, God's love is so unlike ours, it's just hard to imagine. But here's a story that may help us grasp the magnitude of God's love.

It's too long to put on the screen. I'm going to read most of it to you. During the Revolutionary War, there was a man named Peter Miller. He was a committed Christian.

He had a neighbor who hated him intensely. And one of the reasons was because Miller was a Christian.

[ 25 : 36 ] And he was an unbeliever. His hatred was such for Peter Miller that he sought to do whatever he could to aggravate him, to hurt him, to harm his things.

Well, this unbelieving neighbor, he had a lot of issues. He was a traitor. And one day, he was put on trial.

And he was found guilty of treason. And he was sentenced to death. Now, when Peter Miller heard about it, it bothered him that his neighbor, mean as a snake to him, an enemy to him.

But it bothered him to think he is going to be executed as an unbeliever. And so he heard that General George Washington was about 60 miles away.

And so he decided to go and see Washington and ask him to pardon his neighbor. He went and Washington heard his plea.

[ 26 : 52 ] Miller gave a good defense. But Washington said, no, I will not pardon your friend.

Miller responded, he's not my friend, General. In fact, he is my worst enemy. And Washington was sort of taken aback.

He said, you have walked 60 miles to meet with me and plead for the life of your enemy. That changes the whole picture.

And Washington decided to pardon Miller's neighbor. He wrote it out, gave it to Miller to go where his neighbor was being held before he was executed.

Miller went. He got there just in time. His neighbor was being walked out to be hung. When the neighbor saw Miller there in the crowd, that neighbor just shouted out with bitter anger, old Peter Miller has come to seek his revenge by watching me hang.

[ 28 : 10 ] But that man was amazed as Peter Miller stepped out of the crowd, approached the guard, pardoned in hand.

He was set free. Peter Miller demonstrated the uncommon, undeserved love of God for sinners like us.

And that's really the message of Christmas. God sent his only son into this world to die for us. Sinners, rebels, oh, disobedient people.

God sent his only son to suffer his wrath that we deserve because of our sin. God sent his son to suffer that so that we would not have to.

God sent Jesus to this world to die for us so that we could be forgiven, so that we could be made right with God, become children of God, live eternally with him and enjoy his love.

[ 29 : 31 ] That is God's love in action. Jesus coming into this world, dying on the cross. what I want to ask you now, how have you responded to God's love?

Have you given up your rebellion or just your indifference? Have you truly turned from your sin, changed your mind, repented? Have you truly put your trust in Jesus?

Are you continuing to trust him and follow him, obey him as the Lord of your life? If you have it, I encourage you to do so right now. I know the majority of people, overwhelming majority of people in this room, you are a professing Christian.

Let me ask you, are you on a regular daily basis living in close fellowship with God? Are you enjoying his love?

He's your heavenly father. Are you enjoying a loving relationship with him? are you loving him in return?

[ 30 : 43 ] Let's pray together. Father, show us how you see us this morning. Make it clear how we need to respond to you and your love as seen in sending Jesus to save us.

Lord, if there are people in this room who are not truly your children, make it clear to them and call them to faith in Jesus right now. Father, if there are Christians in this world that, in this room, that are not enjoying the closeness of fellowship with you, they're not enjoying your love, show them why.

If there's sin in their life, dear God, make it clear and help them to confess it now and draw close to you. Lord, if they are putting everyone and everything in their life ahead of you, there's just no time for you.

There's no time to be still and know that you are God and experience your love. Help them, dear God, to rearrange priorities, to do whatever it takes, to spend that time with you, to truly make Jesus the most important person in their life.

Lord, help all of us in this room respond to you in a way that Christmas really will be a time of celebrating our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 32 : 40 ] Not just his birth, but his presence in our life every day. Let's just in an attitude of prayer listen to the Lord and respond to him as he speaks to you.

Let's do that in the next few minutes. Let's do that in the next few minutes. Let's do that in the next few minutes.