

§ 3. Doctrine of God

Lecture 20

God's Love

We've been studying the moral attributes of God and have concluded the section on God's holiness. Today we want to turn to the other facet of God's moral character, and that is God's love. If God were simply a God of justice and not a God of love then we would be in deep trouble! So we are very grateful to be able to study not only the holiness and justice of God, but also God's wonderful love. Let's look at some scriptural data concerning God's love.

First of all, the Scriptures indicate that *God's nature is loving*. God is essentially loving. 1 John 4:7-21:

Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. 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 loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins.

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. In this is love perfected with us, that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love. We love, because he first loved us. If any one says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also.

Notice that according to John the love of God is not something that is adventitious to God – a contingent property that God simply happens to exhibit. It belongs to the very essence of God – God is love. So love is of the divine nature and is manifested toward us. So God is not only a God of holiness and justice, but he is also a God of love. As one author has said, "Thank God for God!" that God is like that.

Secondly, *God's love is unconditional*. That is already indicated in the passage that we just read. God loves us not because we loved him, but because he first loved us. So God's love is not contingent upon our loving him first. His love is unconditional.

But this isn't a New Testament peculiarity. This is also true of God's love expressed in the Old Testament toward his people Israel. Look at Deuteronomy 7:7-8 where God describes why he chose Israel as his own.¹ He says,

It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the LORD loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Here the Lord says it is not something about Israel that made them particularly lovable or worthy. It is simply God's sovereign choice. He simply has chosen them. He loves them. There wasn't anything about Israel that made it particularly worthy of God's love. God's love is unconditional.

This same truth is taught in the New Testament. For example, look at Ephesians 2:4-5, Paul's letter to the church of Ephesus. Paul says, "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)." Here Paul says even when we were spiritually dead in our sins, God loved us with this great love, and then made us alive in Christ. This is an expression of his grace, his unmerited favor toward us. It is God's unconditional love.

Finally, look at the letter to Titus – Titus 3:3-5, which is one of the richest passages in the New Testament, I think. There Paul says,

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by men and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit.

Notice what Paul says here. The goodness and loving kindness of God is exhibited toward us not because of deeds of righteousness that we had done but simply in virtue of his own mercy. It is simply an expression of the unconditional love of God. The word here for loving kindness is *philanthropia* from which we get our word "philanthropic." It

¹ 4:56

is the will or the love of God toward people. God loves people. Therefore, he has sought to extend his grace to us and save us. So the first quality that we want to highlight of God's love is its unconditional nature.

Secondly would be *God's love is immutable*. It is changeless. God is not going to withdraw his love from you at some point in the future. Jeremiah 31:3 speaks of God's unchanging love. There the Lord says, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you." So God is not going to get tired or fed up with us and withdraw his love. His love will not grow old and stale. It is an everlasting love that he has extended to us.

Finally, *God's love is universal*. It is not extended just to some persons, but it is universally extended. John 3:16, Jesus says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Notice that the object of God's love here is not his people. It is not the church. It is not the elect. It is "the world." It is the unbelieving world of people that Christ has come to save that God loved so much that he sent his only Son to die for them.² This is a universal love that is extended to every person that God creates.

So God's love is unconditional; it is immutable; it is universal.

What might we say about the love of God? I think what we want to say is that God's love is a peculiar type of love which the New Testament authors refer to as *agape* love. This is not the ordinary sort of love that human beings exhibit one toward another. This is a word that is used to describe God's love which is this unconditional, impartial, universal love that is extended to humanity. God's character is such that he is as loving as he is holy. Neither of these can be compromised. They are equally attributes that belong to the very essence or nature of God. God is as loving as he is holy.

This, of course, leads to a great paradox. It means that God loves the sinner just as intensely as he hates his sin. God hates his sin because it violates the holiness of God. Yet, God loves the person who is perpetrating and guilty of that sin. Romans 5:8 says the following: "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." This is the remarkable thing about God's love – it is extended not toward those who are redeemed, who are his people, who have sought his grace. It is extended to the enemies of God – to people who are sinners and who have their faces opposed to God. It is those that God loves so much that he sends Christ to save them.

I think that we have a tendency to soft-pedal this. We don't understand this kind of love. We think surely there must be something about us that makes us lovable that would prompt God to love us. So we tend to portray lost people as little lost lambs that are wandering from the fold of God, and God reaches out to bring back these little lost lambs

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that are innocently straying from the fold. We don't understand that in the scriptural view, we are not innocent lost victims. We are hateful rebels who have opposed God to his face and who shake our fists in his face in opposition to him. That is why Paul refers to us as enemies of God. When we were enemies of God, Christ came and died for us. Yet that is the tremendous truth in this paradox. As sinful and opposed to God as we are, as unworthy of his love as we are, nevertheless God loves us just as intensely as he hates our sin.

So it is the love and the justice of God together which prompt his redemption and which motivate us to seek God and to find him. I remember very well as a non-Christian when I first heard the Gospel of Christ, I was overwhelmed by the message of God's love. The thought that the God of the universe could love a worm down there on that speck of dust called planet Earth like Bill Craig just overwhelmed me. It staggered me to think that the God that created the entire universe could love me. Yet at the same time, I realized that, as a sinner whose heart was black, I stood under the condemnation and the wrath of this holy and just God who loved me. Together these brought me to Christ. The love of God drew me but the justice and holiness of God impelled me into Christ's arms.³ The love and justice of God work together to bring people to Christ.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I've listened to many Roman Catholic theologians talking about God's love. Sometimes they talk as if . . . when they quote 1 John saying "God is love" they say that God is what God is at his very core and essence, and everything else flows out of that. So God's holiness flows out of the fact that God is love. God's power flows out of the fact that God is love. God's knowledge flows out of the fact that God is love. So God is the foundation and all the other attributes are kind of the out-growing or the flower of that. I just wanted to know what you would think about that?

Dr. Craig: I don't see that at all in the passage. I think what John is saying is that love belongs to the essence of God, but clearly the property being loving is not the same as the property of being holy or just. In fact, they would seem to be opposites in many ways. A person who is perfectly, implacably just will not show mercy or love. They are in one sense opposed to each other. That is why we have this paradoxical situation. Similarly, there are other properties of God like his spirituality or his incorporeality or his omniscience or his eternity that are not expressions of his love. These are just different properties. So I would say that God has quite a number of essential attributes that belong to his very nature and it is overly simplistic to try to reduce them all to one attribute and see the others as flowing out of it.

Student: I was going to get your response to . . . we say God's love is unconditional but how is that not universalism, for example, and how can we say that it is unconditional when salvation is conditional upon faith, for example?

Dr. Craig: When I say it is unconditional I mean that there are no conditions that a person has to meet in order for God to love him. I think that is straightforwardly true. God loves not only the elect; he loves the damned, as well. He loves those who reject him and reject his grace and separate themselves from him forever. I do not think we should compromise the love of God by saying God doesn't really love the non-elect or he doesn't really love the people who reject him and separate themselves from him forever. It seems to me that the testimony of the New Testament is that God loves the world and as the Scriptures says he is not willing that any should perish but that he wants all persons to come to a knowledge of himself. So I think his love is unconditional.

Now salvation has conditions on it. That is true. Salvation requires a response of faith on the part of the person who has to accept God's grace, but that is not to say that God's love is conditional for that person. So don't confuse those two, I would say.

Student: I was just going to make a comment about God's love. It is also very clear in Scripture that he disciplines those he loves. If you read in Hebrews 12:7-8:

It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

I think it is clear that we get a – this is probably not the best word to use – a judgment of sorts by God, at least in this life, in order to discipline us.

Dr. Craig: Yes, it says that his discipline is because of his love. If he didn't discipline us then he wouldn't be a loving parent. A loving parent isn't one who lets the child just run rampant and doesn't try to shape that child to have a moral mature character. That is a good reminder.⁴ It also reminds us, I think, of the fact that suffering is not incompatible with God's love. I had thought that that would be something that one might raise in connection with this lesson, though I chose not to – namely, the problem of suffering. If you say God loves us in the way you've described then how can he allow such horrible suffering to come into the lives of people, and even his own children. I think your reminder is a good one. Love is not inconsistent with suffering at all. There may be discipline that needs to be taken by God as a loving heavenly Father that will ultimately be for our own good if we respond to it in the right way.

Student: One more quick comment as far as the universality of his love. I don't know which verse it is – I believe it is in the Gospel of Matthew where Christ says “the rain falls on the righteous and unrighteous alike.”

Dr. Craig: Yes, I am going to say something about that verse later in the application section.

Student: I was thinking about the problem of distinguishing a Christian who really is acting morally because of being receptive to God's grace versus the non-Christian who is just acting decently because they have a decent nature but aren't really in submission to God. To parse those two, I was thinking about what makes the Christian receptive to grace in a way that a non-Christian who has loved and who has seen evidence of God in the world but doesn't consciously rebel but simply doesn't believe or is of a different religion or something like that. What separates these?

Dr. Craig: That is very difficult to answer. With respect to Christians, at least, there is this poignant saying by Jesus that he who has been forgiven much loves much. Those who have been saved out of a life of conscious sin will often have a sort of love for God that is deeper than the person who is, as you say, just sort of always dutifully lived the externals of the Christian life. I think that is one reason that having a healthy robust doctrine of sin is really very helpful for us spiritually. Because we are all wretched miserable sinners. Even the best of us – all of us – ought to fall under that category of he who has been forgiven much. But we often don't realize it because we think we are rather decent chaps after all if we haven't done gross sins. But a robust doctrine of sin should help us to respond to God with a deeper love and devotion if we really understand how much we've been forgiven.

With respect to the non-believer, why is it that the non-believer doesn't have that deep sense of sin and need of forgiveness? I think if the unbeliever really did grasp how morally wretched he is and that God has sent Christ to die to forgive him that might evoke in that person a deeper sense of the love of God. But without that deep consciousness of sin, I doubt that people will really come to know Christ and serve him. You've got to have that sense of your own need first.

That is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Scripture says that God sends the Holy Spirit to convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment. Unfortunately some people resist the Holy Spirit. They don't allow him to convict their hearts. They suppress or repress the Spirit. I was just reading this week Stephen's speech in the book of Acts prior to his martyrdom. He said of the Jewish leaders of his day, “You hard-necked people. . . . You always resist the Holy Spirit” (Acts 7:51). That seems to be what many unbelievers do. So they do not have this deep sense of need or of the love of God for them that would

evoke love in their own hearts. That is about the best I can do in response to that question.⁵

Student: You might say God's love is expressed even to the unbelievers because he doesn't annihilate them – they have a life, they get to be their own god into eternity, and suffer that alienation. Satan said to Adam and Eve in the garden, *You will be like gods. You'll know good and evil.* Part of that was true, but he didn't tell them the result of that was they would know separation. God knew separation first when he separated Satan and the angels from himself. So they get the full circle of that situation, but they are not annihilated. That was one thought that came to mind on this.

Dr. Craig: We will talk more about the fate of the damned after death. Some people believe in annihilationism. They would think that that would be an extension of God's mercy, actually, to annihilate the damned rather than allow them to suffer forever. We will come back to that question when we get to the state of the soul after death and the doctrine of the last things. I am inclined to see the doctrine of hell as an expression of God's justice and holiness rather than an expression of his love. I see heaven and salvation as the expression of God's love, and hell as the expression of his wrath and justice and holiness.

Student: The other thought I had was if we say – and I agree that God's love is an attribute rather than something substantial, because if we say God is love then as A. W. Tozer pointed out the flip side would be *love is God* and that is not true substantially.

Dr. Craig: Yeah, it is not an identity statement. The word “is” here is not an “is” of identity. As Clinton says, it all depends on what the meaning of the word “is” is. *[laughter]* For example, you could say “Cicero is Tully.” That is to say, that is an identity statement. Those were two names of the same person. But if you say, “Cicero is the greatest Roman orator,” that is not an identity statement. That is a predication. It is ascribing a property or an attribute to Cicero. Similarly here, as you say, when John says “God is love” he is not making an identity statement. He is making a predication that God has the property of love essentially. It belongs to the nature of God.

Student: I am trying to understand this whole love thing. Going to the very beginning when there was nothing except God, I am trying to understand the point of love. Is there really a point to it? As I think through it, there is a triune God so it goes around. It is my understanding now the triune God always existed because I am looking at verses where Christ was begotten. It sounds to me like there was a beginning to the triune God.

Dr. Craig: The classic doctrine of the begetting of the Son is that it is eternal. It is like the sunshine from the sun. The sun never exists without its rays. Obviously, the sun doesn't

come from the rays. The rays come from the sun. Similarly, the church fathers said that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father.

Student: I guess that is what I needed to be reminded of. Thank you.

Dr. Craig: We will talk about this when we get to the doctrine of the Trinity because this is a very important point that has been made here. If I am right that love is of the very essence and nature of God then when there was nothing (when there were no human beings to love) then whom did God love? There isn't anybody else to love other than God.

Student: That is exactly what I was trying to understand. If there was no Trinity and there is just the Father then what is the point of love?

Dr. Craig: And this is, I think, a very good argument for a plurality of persons within God over against Unitarianism which says that God is just one person. For example, Islam is a form of Unitarianism. There is just the one person that is God. But if God is essentially loving, it is of the nature of love to give oneself away to the other.⁶ A Unitarian God cannot do that; cannot be essentially loving. This gives, I think, a very persuasive reason for thinking that there is a plurality of persons within God himself so that within the godhead there are eternal love relationships that have existed forever and now are manifested toward human beings with the creation of the world. We will get back to that when we get to the Trinity. But I think you've seen a very important implication of the notion that God is essentially loving. It suggests a doctrine of the Trinity.

END DISCUSSION

Next time we will look at some practical application of this attribute of God's being loving to our own lives.⁷

⁶ 30:05

⁷ Total Running Time: 31:25 (Copyright © 2015 William Lane Craig)