

## God is Love; I John 4:7-20

Dr. Don Carson wrote in *"The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God."* "If people believe in God at all today, the overwhelming majority hold that this God, however he, she or it may be understood, is a loving being." Carson added that while that is good and true, it makes the task of evangelism more difficult because, "when informed Christians talk about the love of God, they mean something very different from what is meant in the surrounding culture." (p. 9, 10) Carson added, "Nowadays if you tell people that God loves them, they are unlikely to be surprised. 'Of course God loves me; He's like that, isn't He? Besides, why shouldn't He love me?'" (p. 11-12)

That God is love cannot be denied by any Christian. The problems with the way the world views God's love are many. **First**, the world defines "love" differently than the Bible does. **Second**, the world places God's love above His other attributes, especially His holiness. **Third**, the world fails to understand that God's love places a responsibility on those who, because they have been redeemed, are being transformed into His likeness.

**First**, the world defines "love" differently from the Bible. Unfortunately, in English we have only one word for "love" and it is usually defined as some form of emotion. The Greek has 4 different words for "love," none of which was totally adequate to describe God's love. So, the early church selected "agape" because it had the fewest connotations to it, meaning they could pour into it the biblical meaning. The primary use of "agape" in Greek culture was that of deliberately being willing to love one. It was not totally devoid of emotion, but emotion was overridden by the decision to love.

When agape love is applied to God, the word expresses the idea that God purposely determines to love His creation and, in particular, man. God deliberately determines to love us because He is love. His love has an emotional element to it, but it is void of the common notion of love simply being an emotion. It is a deliberate response of His will.

Seeing love from the human view of an emotion allows Satan to trap us in one of many lies he tells. **First**, it allows Satan to tell us that God's love comes only to those who deserve it. Because as Dr. Carson noted, there is a cultural attitude that says, "Of course God loves me, why shouldn't He love me?" The assumption that follows is that there are those who don't deserve His love. Human love, corrupted by sin, loves only that which it determines deserves love. Satan's lie tells us we need to deserve God's love. The truth is that God's love to us is totally undeserved. He loved us while we were still sinners because His love is not simply an emotion but a *will* to love that flows from who He is, the God of love.

Another lie is that God will love us more if we do what is right and conversely, when we sin He loves us less. God's love never varies. He totally loves us all the time because His characteristic of love is consistent by its very nature. We may disappoint that love and, therefore,

His love may discipline us but nothing we ever do or not do will affect the depth of love God has for each of us.

That does not give us a license to assume we will always experience the implications of that love. Jude, in his short letter, wrote in verse 21 **“keep yourselves in God’s love.”** There are too many things about that to look at in any short study but remember that means we keep ourselves attached to Jesus, as He described it in the illustration of the vine and its branches. Jesus also said that if we are going to keep ourselves in His love we must obey His commands. We do not obey to earn His love but to allow His love to flow freely to us.

Another lie of Satan is that if we believe that God’s love is an emotion, so He loves some people more than others. If love is simply an emotion, then it can have variations. As an emotion I can love some people, like family, more than others. But God’s love flows from His will, so it is constant toward all. God loves the totally debased sinner as much as the most committed saint. How that love responds to each individual may differ, but His love does not. Further, we must never think that the love heart of God does not hurt when He must to say to someone, “depart from me for I never knew you.”

That takes us to the second problem society has in understanding God’s love. The world places God’s love above His other attributes, especially His holiness. In our thinking, love trumps everything else. Our society is not willing to accept the idea that a loving God will send someone to hell because they think love trumps justice. God’s nature cannot be split so we take what we want and ignore the rest.

The problem is that, while love is part of God’s essence, so too is His holiness. He is a holy God. Read Leviticus 19:1 and Psalm 99:9. God is holy, and His holiness demands justice. To minimize God’s justice is to minimize His holiness and that we cannot do.

But we must also remember that while love and holiness are descriptions of God’s essence, that is they describe who He is, justice is not part of His essence. Justice is His necessary response to sin which violates His holiness. For all eternity God will be both loving and holy but once sin against His holiness has been adequately dealt with, there will be no longer any need for justice.

The third mistaken idea of our current society is the failure to understand that God’s love places a responsibility on those who, because they have been redeemed, are being transformed into His likeness. Too many believe that God owes them His love and they have no responsibility to respond in any way beyond acceptance of it. Faith in the love of God what that love provided on the Cross becomes some kind of life insurance policy that is cashed in upon death. Nothing could be further from biblical truth.

Very simply put, God is love and if we are being transformed into His nature, we are being transformed into His love nature. That carries responsibility.

Dr. Carson, commentating on the command to love our enemies asked, “Who does that naturally?” The reality is that God’s kind of love is not natural to sinful man. When Paul wrote to the church in Galatia he said that such love, along with lots of other things that should characterize the Christian life, are the fruit of the Spirit. Only God’s transforming power can give us that love. The exciting message is that when we are aware that we lack the love we ought to have, we can ask the Holy Spirit to make us more loving.

God’s love at work in us has implications for our behavior. God’s love assumes ***we will love Him back***. Mark wrote in his Gospel that a religious leader came to Jesus one day and asked Him what the greatest commandment was. Read Mark 12:30 and I John 4:19.

William Barclay, in his book on *More New Testament Words*, wrote, “Christianity does not think of a man as finally submitting to the power of God; it thinks of him as finally surrendering to the love of God. It is not that man’s will is crushed, but that man’s heart is broken.” p. 17

God’s love in us also assumes ***we will love other believers***. That is not an option. Read what Jesus declared in John 13:34. Read I John 4:7-20 noting especially verses 8-9.

And God’s love in us ***compels us to love the lost***. Read what Jesus said in John 3:16. If God, who loves us with an infinite love also loves the lost enough to send His Son to provide life for them, must we not love them that way also? We need to love the lost enough that we, like God, will go to any length to reach them.

There really is so much to the love of God that we could spend a lifetime thinking about it and never fully understand it or its implications for us. Read Ephesians 3:17-19. That means we have the opportunity to grow in our understanding of how much God loves and what that love expects in return. The love of God is a subject we should never stop contemplating.

Never, ever tire of thinking about God’s love and what it means to each of us. Wake up in the morning and immediately remind yourself, *“I am loved by God today and so today I must love Him back and show His love to others.”*