



Lesson 3 – God Is Love

The word love gets used so much it has come to mean almost anything. You can love your spouse, your mother, your friend, or your teacher, but love is going to look very different in each case. We can also love football, pizza, getting a good grade, or snow. The meaning of our word “love” stretches all the way from meaning “I like this thing” to the love shared between a husband and wife in the most precious and intimate relationship possible. So what does it mean when Scripture says that “God is love?”

How would you define love?

Love is another one of God’s attributes that Scripture seems to especially highlight. For example, the Bible does not say that God is loving; it says that God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). Now, this doesn’t mean that love and God mean the same thing, as if we could write an equation love = God, but it does mean that love is an absolutely essential part of God’s character. True love flows from God, and our love for others shows that we have been born of God (1 John 4:7). God can never be not loving; He can never be anything other than love, because He is love.

What is the danger of going too far and saying that “God is love, and love is God?”

This puts us in an interesting place. Love is a word that we have a hard time defining. Yet love is an absolutely crucial part of God’s character. In this lesson, we will begin by looking at what God’s love is. Then, we will see the ways that God’s love demonstrates itself. Finally, we will see how we should respond to the love of God.

The Definition of God’s Love

If love is such a big word that can be used for so many different things, then what do we mean when we say that “God loves us”? If we aren’t careful, we may be thinking the Bible is saying one thing, when it is actually saying something different. One of the best ways to define love is to describe what biblical love is *not*. Biblical love is more than just an emotion, although it will include emotions. Love is more than a happy feeling because those will come and go. Biblical love is a commitment to give for the good of another.

How would your unsaved friends and neighbors define the word love? In what ways is this similar to and in what ways is it different from what the Bible means by love?

Defining God's love is quite the challenge. Since the Bible nowhere gives us a definition, any attempt we make is nothing more than our best effort. To a certain degree we are like people who have stumbled out of a dark cave into blinding light. We are overwhelmed by what we see, but we are so overwhelmed we have a hard time clearly seeing! We know that the beauty and power of God's love is a majestic and awesome thing, but we stumble around trying to find words to explain it adequately. The imperfect definition we will use for this lesson is: **God's love is a self-sacrificial giving to and delight in another.**

This involves both the actions of God – His love is seen in His giving for the good of another – as well as an emotional component – God delights in those He loves. Jesus makes it clear in John's gospel that the love of God begins with the love of the Father for the Son (John 5:20; 10:17), and the love of the Son for the Father (John 14:31). Love begins within the trinity with the Father, Son, and Spirit sharing an eternal love.

Why would it matter that God's love begins within the trinity, and not a love for His creation?

Because God's love begins within the trinity, it means that God is not dependent on us in any way. God is totally and completely loving without us. He has always been loving, from all eternity, even before the creation of the universe. God's love is a never-ending mutual giving and delight, a love that we as believers are invited to join (John 17:23)! But as we said earlier, this love is more than just an emotion. When it comes to God's love for His creatures, this is a love that flows out in specific ways.

How should the reality that God's love is eternal and that we as believers are brought into that love impact us?

The Demonstration of God's Love

One way we can get a clearer understanding of God's love is by looking at what God does as a result of His love. While we could probably throw more items on this list, we will look specifically at three demonstrations of love: God shows mercy, God sacrifices, and God pursues.

God's Love Moves Him to Show Mercy

God's love means that instead of giving us the wrath we deserve, He offers mercy. Ephesians 2:4 connects God mercy and love: God shows us mercy because of His great love. Mercy is related to pity, God pities or has compassion on those in a miserable condition, either because of their circumstances (i.e. the poor) or because of their choices (i.e. sinners). Hosea 11 demonstrates this dynamic well. The chapter begins with God's frustration over the love He showed Israel (11:1) and their rejection of Him (11:2-4). So God threatens to bring judgment on the rebellious people (11:5-7). But the story doesn't end there. God's compassion grows within Him, so that even though He will bring judgment, He ultimately will save His people (11:8).¹ Like a father or a wealthy benefactor whose heart is moved by those in need, God looks at His creatures, sees us in our desperate state, and is moved with mercy and compassion to act on our behalf.

How does God's mercy towards us help us think rightly about ourselves and our relationship with God?

¹ The Hebrew word for "repentings" (*nichumim*) could also be translated "compassions."

How can we better follow the example of God and show mercy? Why don't we show mercy to others when God does?

God's Love Moves Him to Sacrifice

It has been said that when God was asked how much He loved humanity, He spread out His arms and said, "This much," and then He died for us. The ultimate display of God's love was the death of Christ on the cross. God's love is a sacrificial love, a love which gives for the good of another. The most famous verse in all of Scripture is famous for a reason – John 3:16 reminds us that God so loved the world He gave his only begotten Son for our salvation. When discussing the trials, pains, and suffering of this world, Paul points back to the giving of God's Son as the ultimate proof that God loves us and is for us (Romans 8:31-39). If God is willing to give us the most precious gift that could possibly be given in the history of the universe – His own Son – then won't He freely give us *all* things?

Why do you think people are still suspicious of God even after He gave His Son?

How can we keep from forgetting this important truth, but also keep from being apathetic towards it?

God's Love Moves Him to Pursue

God's love compels Him to pursue sinners as well as His children. Jesus described His mission as coming for the spiritually sick rather than those who thought they were doing well enough (Luke 5:31). God sent Jonah to Nineveh to warn them about their impending doom so that they could be spared. Even though God never said that to Jonah, Jonah knew God well enough that He figured that's what God was up to and didn't want them to be forgiven (Jonah 3:17-4:2). The ultimate demonstration of God's love for sinners, of course, is that He sent His Son to die for us while we were still in rebellion against Him (Romans 5:8).

How should God's love for the lost and His pursuit of them change us?

What does it look like when God's love compels Him to pursue His own children? We often talk about "tough love" because we realize that people don't always enjoy the love they are shown. A parent might discipline a child out of love, but the child isn't necessarily going to enjoy it in the minute! Hebrews 12:5-12 uses this imagery to describe our relationship to God. The children that God loves He chastens, or disciplines. He does this, not because He doesn't love us, but because He does! If we accept that imperfect human parents discipline their kids to try and help them develop character, how much more should we be thankful that our perfect heavenly Father disciplines His sons and daughters?

Why do people often not like it when God brings discipline into their life?

What would be the best way to respond to God's discipline based on a right understanding of Hebrews 12?

The Response to God's Love

On one level a lesson like this should be unnecessary. Many who have grown up in Christianity have heard from a young age that God loves them. All who have been saved at some point have been brought to a place where they were overwhelmed by God's love for them. And yet it can be easy to allow the importance of God's love to fade in importance to us. Many who were once moved to tears by the thought of what God had done have slowly become used to the tremendous blessings they have.

How can believers keep from "getting used to" God's love?

As we study the love of God, there should be some real life effects in our life. We should find ourselves moved to love as God loves. Specifically, we should be compelled to love God and to love others.

God's Love Should Compel Us to Love God

A true, genuine love for another person has a way of creating love in response. The sincere love of a suitor has turned the heart of many apathetic young ladies. We were designed to respond to love, and this is true on a human level as well as in our relationship with God. John put it this way: "We love him, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). As we meditate on God's love, it should create within us a love for God and a desire to follow and obey Him. Paul was able to live for Christ with great determination because Christ "loved me, and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). In another place Paul would say that the love of Christ constrained him, that is, it motivated him to live rightly (2 Corinthians 5:14).

Why do we sometimes struggle to love God, even though He loves us?

How can we overcome this apathy?

God's Love Should Compel Us to Love Others

Jesus ties together the two greatest commands in the law: love God and love others (Matthew 22:37-40). This makes sense – after all if God is love and He loves people, then it would be weird for someone to love God and then not love other people. John picks up on this, especially in 1 John, where he argues that love for God will translate into love for others (1 John 3:17; 4:7, 20-21). Especially when it comes to Christians, it would be very odd for us to say that we love God with all that we have and all that we are, but we can't stand the people He has chosen for His family!

Why do we not like certain people? Why is it that God loves them but we don't?

What would you say to someone who said they really loved God but struggled to love people they didn't like?

God loves us. Those three words are perhaps the most surprising, most unexpected, and most hopeful words in all the world. That simple little message has meant more for the world than we can possibly imagine. The sinless Son of God was brutally executed because God loves us. Rebels have been converted to ambassadors because God loves us. The spiritually dead have been resurrected because God loves us.

And yet sadly, to many people this powerful truth has little impact. One poet mourned her own hardness of heart with these words:

*Am I a stone, and not a sheep,
That I can stand, O Christ, beneath Thy cross,
To number drop by drop Thy blood's slow loss,
And yet not weep?*

*Not so those women loved
Who with exceeding grief lamented Thee;
Not so fallen Peter, weeping bitterly;
Not so the thief was moved;*

*Not so the Sun and Moon
Which hid their faces in a starless sky,
A horror of great darkness at broad noon –
I, only I.*

*Yet give not o'er,
But seek Thy sheep, true Shepherd of the flock;
Greater than Moses, turn and look once more
And smite a rock.²*

Sadly, we too can find ourselves stone cold when we hear about the love of God. In such situations, we should pray to God to break our cold hearts and meditate on the beauty of what He has done. And as we do, we will find that God's love is like an ocean that seems to stretch on and on without shore. We will find that the simple truth we tell our children, "God loves you" is so deeply true and so deeply profound that the theologians will never reach the bottom of it. And so we continue to study, to learn about, and to be awed by the fact that God loves me. How much does He love me? Well, God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.

² "Good Friday" by Christina Rossetti. <https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/good-friday-0/>