

## The Twin Dangers Of Taking God's Love Out Of Context and Describing His Love As 'Unconditional'.

### ***What's The Problem?***

I am writing this piece in an attempt to counterbalance two trends I have noticed in the Christian community which I think have become unbalanced.

Firstly, I believe there is an over-emphasis on God's love at the expense of all His other attributes, and secondly, we hear a lot of people talking today about God's 'unconditional love', a phrase which never appears in the Bible. If we over-emphasise one aspect of God, i.e. His love, and forget about His many other attributes, we may end up worshipping someone who isn't God at all, an idol.

I believe, with the apostle John, that God **is** Love; love is God's essential nature and essence. **And** I believe that God's love is expressed through all the other aspects of who He is, i.e. He is Holy, Righteous, Just and Merciful. He is Angry, He Punishes, He is Gracious, Pained and Severe. He Disciplines, He Forgives, He is Jealous, Good, Glorious, Kind, Patient, Majestic and has a sense of Humour!

It is **all of these attributes taken together** which give us a fuller picture of God and shed light on the essential nature of His love. If we do not set God's love in the wider context of His other attributes, we are likely to have a distorted view of His love and the way it operates.

What do people mean when they talk about God's 'unconditional' love? If they mean His love towards us is 'undeserved', I would agree. If they mean it is 'unearned', I would also agree. But sometimes those who use the term, give the impression that we don't have to do anything to receive/experience/avail ourselves of God's love. The need for confession, repentance and on-going faith then gets squeezed out. It is this, I think, which is dangerous.

Of course, none of us can stop God **being** love, but we can live in such a way as to prevent His love from reaching us.

If we use the illustration of God's love shining like the sun, we can either bask in the warm glow of the sunlight, or we can choose to live in a darkened room.

Although the sun's light is shining on us all, we can take ourselves out of that light. The tragedy is, of course, that the light of Christ has indeed come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

It is the same with God's love; there are conditions attached to receiving it.

Someone wrote to me recently and said, "the unconditional love of God runs like a golden thread throughout the Bible." I think this statement needs qualification. If God's love was 'unconditional', it would indicate to me that His love is given freely to the loved one **no matter what**. I do not believe this is true, though I do acknowledge that God is patient in extending His love and mercy towards those who may initially reject Him.

In writing this article, I will try not to over-balance in the opposite direction (always a danger when you are 'opposing the motion'), but please read the whole piece and do check out everything for yourself from the Bible.

Sometimes I think we over-emphasise God's love because we read it **into** the Biblical account (eisegesis) rather than beginning with God's Word and seeing what comes **out** of it (exegesis). So, I would like to begin by drawing attention to the fact that God's love is not spoken about in the Bible as much as we may think it is. Explicit Biblical examples of God (subject) loving people (object) are few and far between. On the other hand, love shown between human beings is mentioned much more frequently. I am differentiating between the two.

Of course, we could say that love between human beings **all** originates from God anyway, so **all** human love is a representation and manifestation of God's love. But this then begs the question, "If we believe 'God is Love', do we also believe that 'Love is God'?" We would then have to define what we meant by 'love' (which I will do later on).

***The Missing Love?*** Starting with the book of Genesis, we notice that there is nothing at all about God's love in this book (human love yes, e.g. Abraham's love for Isaac, but God's love, no). Apart from the first two chapters, the book of Genesis is a tragedy. (And even chapter 2 introduces God's first 'condition' i.e. "you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die").

In Genesis chapter 6 we read, "The Lord was **grieved** that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with **pain**. So, the Lord said, "I will wipe mankind whom I have created, off the face of the earth...." (Gen.6:6&7). All this was because "the Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time." (6:5).

Neither can these sobering verses just be left in the distant past related to the time of Noah, for Jesus said, 'as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man'(Mt.24:37). In the future, we are going back to those days.

I have found that those who believe in, and proclaim, God's 'unconditional love', often have a very naïve view of how depraved human nature can become and the shocking things human beings are capable of.

Of course, also in the book of Genesis, the Lord in his mercy calls out some individuals to begin to put His rescue package into effect, but God's overwhelmingly expressed feelings in the book of Genesis appear to be those of grief and pain, not 'unconditional love'.

The first verse of the book is the wonderfully majestic, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth". But the final verse is, "And after they embalmed him [Joseph], he was placed in a coffin in Egypt." What a tragic end to a book that began so gloriously.

But moving on, having said there is nothing about God's love in the book of Genesis, there's one verse in Exodus about God's love (Ex. 20:6). There's nothing in Leviticus and nothing in Numbers. There are four verses in Deuteronomy (Deut. 4:37, 7:12&13, 10:15, 23:5). There is nothing in Joshua; nothing in Judges; nothing in Ruth (though the story of Ruth is one of her selfless love); nothing in 1 and 2 Samuel and one verse in 1 and 2 Kings (1 Ki.10:9).

We could notice in passing that the love God extended in Ex. 20:6 and the Deuteronomy verses, was exclusively to His people and to those who 'love God and keep his commandments'. To be recipients of God's love is, therefore, conditional upon our obedience.

There is a lot about love in Song of Songs, but it is all about romantic and sexual love between a man and a woman. God's name is never mentioned, though some may interpret the book as an allegory of God's love for us.

There are very few verses about God's love in the book of Psalms though the important word 'chesed', translated 'kindness' or 'loving kindness', is ascribed to God 23 times.

There is very little about God's love in Isaiah, (43:4 & 63:9 being exceptions); Isaiah emphasises God's Holiness.

There is very little about God's love in Jeremiah (31:3 is an exception); Jeremiah emphasises God's Judgement.

There is very little about God's love in Lamentations – 2 verses out of 154. God's anger is emphasised.

There is very little about God's love in Ezekiel; Ezekiel emphasises God's Glory.

But **we** emphasise God's love at the expense of these other aspects of His nature.

This prepares the way for two other surprising facts in the Old Testament.

Firstly, that Jews only **spoke** about God's love to one another, not to outsiders (though they were to **demonstrate** God's love to everyone – Lev. 19:18 & 34).

Secondly, when God spoke through his prophets to the nations surrounding Israel, He never once said He loved those nations.

Usually it was other aspects of God's nature that were emphasised e.g. "The Lord is angry with all nations; his wrath is upon all their armies. He will totally destroy them; he will give them over to slaughter. Their slain will be thrown out, their dead bodies will send up a stench; the mountains will be soaked with their blood." (Is. 34:2&3).

In order to know God's love, they would have to change their ways.

The danger of speaking about God's love to those who are not Christians is that they are likely to throw it back in your face! They will say, "How can you believe in a God of love who sends the coronavirus? How can you believe in a God of love who sends people to hell? How can you believe in a God of love when there is so much suffering in the world?"

If we were to talk to atheists like Richard Dawkins and Stephen Fry about God and his love, we would experience their acute anger! Perhaps we should follow Jesus' example and never speak about the love of God to unbelievers.

### ***What about Jonah and the Ninevites?***

What was the message Jonah proclaimed to the Assyrians in Nineveh? Was it, "God loves you"? No, his message was short and stark: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed."

And then there was an amazing reaction, both from the people and from God.

The people believed God, fasted, put on sackcloth as a sign of their repentance and stopped doing their evil deeds. **And then**, God had a change of mind. He was able to demonstrate His compassion and forgiveness towards them and didn't bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

If this means anything at all, it surely means that God's compassion reaching them was dependent (conditional) on their repenting, believing and changing their behaviour. He couldn't reveal that He was a God of love and forgiveness until and unless they repented. If they hadn't repented, they would have experienced His anger and destructive powers.

Tragically, that's what eventually happened. The people of Nineveh returned to their old ways and about 150 years after Jonah's visit, they were utterly destroyed. Their destruction is graphically portrayed in the book of Nahum which I would suggest you only read if you have a strong stomach.

### ***Things God hates***

We need to understand that there are things that God always hates. Self-indulgent luxury is one; drug and alcohol addiction is another; robbery is another; divorce is another; violence and bloodshed is another.

God hates occultism in all its forms; corruption; lack of concern for the poor and needy; fraud; pride; lying; grumbling etc.

Proverbs 6:16-19 lists some of the things God hates including 'a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.'

I was always taught as a young Christian that 'God hates the sin but loves the sinner.' But are those who persist in doing all the things He hates able to experience God's love? Only if they repent.

What does it actually mean to say that God loves 'unconditionally'? Whose perspective is that from?

### ***The Dream***

Let me tell you about a guy who once came to see me who was thinking of leaving his wife and committing adultery with another woman. He wasn't a Christian, but he knew I was and wanted to know what I thought. In the event, I didn't need to tell him, God intervened and told him directly. This is how.

The night before he came to see me, he told me he had had a dream. It was a complicated dream, in full colour, set in a bathroom, and it involved, among other things, mirrors and different coloured toothbrushes. As he told me about his dream, I said quietly to the Lord, "If you want me to understand the meaning of this dream, let me know."

I was amazed when, about 10 minutes before he was due to leave, the Lord showed me exactly what every part of this intricate dream meant. It wasn't very pretty. It was a warning telling him what would happen if he went ahead with his plans. I said to him, "the Lord has told me what your dream means, do you want to know?" He said, "Yes". And when I told him, he went as white as a sheet, he swore, got up and left. I have never seen him since.

He left knowing that there were conditions for him to fulfil if he wanted to experience God's love.

### ***Hosea ~ Unrequited Love.***

It would be easy to 'soak' in the few, but wonderful, verses which talk about God's love in this prophetic book, (e.g. 2:19;11:1,14:4), rather like relaxing in a luxurious bubble bath. But alas, this is another account of God's faithfulness and his people's waywardness, dramatically acted out in Hosea's life and marriage.

It's hardly an example of God's 'unconditional love'. In fact, it is God's last word to the 10 northern tribes of Israel before they were carried off into exile.

God had decided that He was **'no longer going to show love to the house of Israel'**. (1:6)

God had entered into a covenant 'marriage' relationship with his people but they had gone off with other gods/goddesses.

Hosea was told to marry Gomer who was already an adulteress. He had 3 children with her but one of them wasn't his. He experienced all the pain and heartache of marital breakdown and unfaithfulness.

The emphasis in Hosea is not on 'unconditional love' but on 'unrequited love'. God's love had been shining on His people but they had preferred to live in the darkness and so God was now no longer going to shine his love on them.

In his 'Word on the World' in January 2018, Chris Wright from the Langham Partnership wrote this: - "Right now, we are living in a terminal phase of western civilisation that is experiencing the inevitable results of prolonged idolatry: the outworking of God's judgement in processes glaringly illustrated in the story of Old Testament Israel."

### ***Can we stop God loving us?***

In thinking about God's so-called 'unconditional love', it seems to me that this is a very important question to ask.

Sometimes people say to me: "Well, God's attitude towards us remains one of love whatever we do. We can't stop God loving us." It's true we can't stop God being love, but I think we can take ourselves outside the orbit of God's love and stay outside.

Surely love can only be expressed and experienced in the context of faithful, loyal, affirming relationships. God can only **be love** because He exists as 3 people in loving harmony within the Trinity. Outside of relationship, love ceases to be experienced. For love to **be** love, it has to be shared, personal, dynamic and reciprocal.

Moving on, at this point there may be those who are thinking, "Well, the Bible references so far are all Old Testament, surely things are different for us with Jesus under the New Covenant?"

Not so, God is entirely consistent throughout the Bible.

### ***The Bronze Snake and the Cross***

I want to follow through now to the New Testament by comparing and contrasting two scriptures, one from the Old Testament - Numbers 21:4-9 - with probably the most well-known, misunderstood and mistranslated passages in the New Testament - John 3:14-21. This is the comparison that Jesus himself is making in conversation with Nicodemus, which John has written down for us.

Jesus takes Nicodemus (**'the'** Teacher in Israel) back to a passage he would know well, the bronze snake in the wilderness.

The people of God were travelling from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go round Edom. But they were impatient and grumbling, the food was miserable and there was no water, so they spoke against God and Moses.

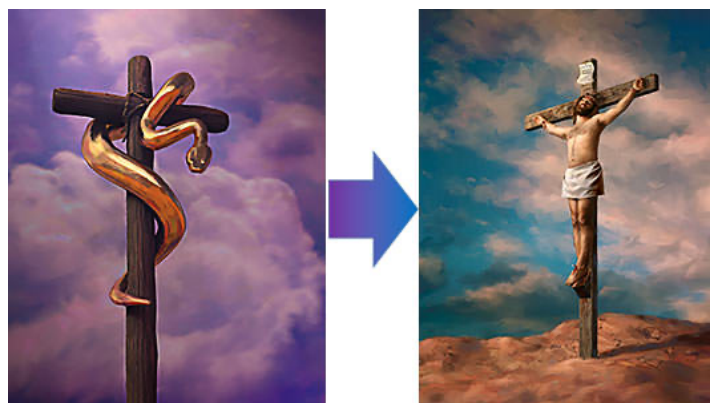
By this time, even God had had enough, so he sent poisonous snakes among them which bit them, and many died.

The people then came to Moses with a prayer request, “We have sinned, ask the Lord to take the snakes away from us.”

So, Moses prayed. But the Lord didn’t answer Moses’ prayer. The snakes remained. Instead, God instructed Moses to make a snake and put it on a pole.

Moses made it out of bronze, hoisted it up on a pole and everyone who had been bitten by a snake simply had to look at the snake and they didn’t die, they lived. Looking at the snake on the stake was the antidote to the poison coursing through their veins. If they didn’t look, they were dead men and women; if they looked, they lived. The choice was theirs.

And Jesus said to Nicodemus, “In the same way, when I am lifted up on the Cross, everyone who goes on believing in me will not perish, but will go on having eternal life. The people who don’t believe in me are condemned already.”



**This** is the way in which God has demonstrated His love for the world; it is a love we can know and experience only as we keep on confessing our sins, repenting and believing in Jesus.

We are reminded of this when we take Communion. It is interesting that in some of the early Christian writings e.g. Gregory of Nyssa, the Eucharist is spoken of as ‘an antidote to the poison of sin.’ We need to keep looking, keep believing, keep confessing and then we will keep on having eternal life.

It’s true that the Cross demonstrates the extent of God’s love for us in that ‘while we were still sinners Christ died for us’(Rms. 5:8), but the tragedy is that if we speak of God’s ‘unconditional love’, folks may misunderstand, think they are OK as they are and don’t need to do anything. They are not OK as they are.



### ***The little word 'If'***

Although the apostle John is widely regarded as the 'apostle of love' it would not be true to say he was the apostle of 'unconditional love'. One of John's favourite words is the little word 'If'. 'If' is a conditional word and it was a word Jesus used all the time, as John faithfully records.

Jesus said: **"If** anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. (Jn. 14:23)

**"If** a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit." (Jn.15:5)

**"If** you obey my commands, you will remain in my love." (Jn. 15:10a)

"You are my friends, **if** you do what I command." (Jn. 15:14)

And read 1 John 1:5-10 for five more '**ifs**'.

### ***What about the 'Prodigal' Son? – Lk. 15:1-32***

There is no doubt of the Father's love for his prodigal son, after all he **was** his son. But it was a love which could only operate in the context of a loving relationship. In that sense it was, therefore, a conditional love. As soon as the son decided to take himself outside the orbit of his Father's love and depart to the far country, he was now, as far as the Father was concerned, **lost** and **dead**.

Yes, his Father, as an ongoing expression of his love, must have continued to personally grieve for his lost, dead, son, but no love could be shared between them **until** the son decided to have a change of mind and a change of direction (repentance) and return home. Once the prodigal had returned home, the Father said (twice over) "Let's celebrate, because this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." (vs 24 & 32)

If we believe that God **is** love, we also have to acknowledge that His love allows our freedom to choose. Our freedom to choose then allows the possibility of sin i.e. going our own way separated from God. And sin requires a Redeemer.

### ***No Sermons about Love in the book of Acts!***

Moving on, it is a surprise to many that the apostles, in the book of Acts, never ever preached about God's love (never mind His unconditional love).

They preached about repentance, believing in Jesus, receiving the Holy Spirit, the resurrection, righteousness, self-control, judgement to come, but never about God's love.

**By way of contrast, we have over-emphasised God's love at the expense of these other things.**

The essence of Peter's preaching in the book of Acts was, "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven" (2:38); "he warned them and pleaded with them, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.'" (2:40); "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out" (3:19).

Similarly, Paul says that the centrepiece of his message to those in Damascus, in Jerusalem, in all Judea and to the Gentiles, was, "I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds" (26:20).

I am not advocating a return to 'Turn or Burn' evangelism, and we may need to be creative in the ways we call people to repentance today, but we must remember that repentance, resulting in a change of behaviour, is at the heart of the gospel we proclaim.

### ***Love in the book of Romans***

There are some wonderfully encouraging verses about God's love in Paul's letter to the Romans (which I will come to) but Paul doesn't begin there.

He begins by describing the gospel, not as a gospel of love, but as a gospel of righteousness: - "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith" (1:17). So, Paul begins by emphasising God's righteousness.

He then goes on immediately, with the disturbing revelation that the wrath of God is being revealed (present tense) against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth.

For not only do we suppress the truth about God, we exchange the truth for a lie and then believe the lie instead of the truth. Rather than worship and serve the Creator, we worship created things instead.

I remember visiting a man at his home and as I arrived, I noticed the front garden was full of dahlia flowers. As I went to the door, I could see that the back garden was full of dahlias as well. When he let me in, I noticed there were paintings of dahlias on the wall in his lounge, his bookshelves were full of books about dahlias, and the conversation we had was about the diseases that attack dahlias. Believe it or not, he told me he was President of the local dahlia society!



But claiming to be wise, the man had become a fool (1:22). God never figured in his life at all.

Paul then goes on to assert (three times, not just once), another shocking reality, namely, that God gives up on people if they persist in their idolatry. “God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts”, “God gave them up to dishonourable passions”, “God gave them up to a base mind” (1:24,26,28).

And then, remembering that Paul is writing to Christians, Paul warns us that God is a God of Judgement, and if we are doing the same things as those we judge, we are showing contempt for God’s kindness and patience and storing up God’s wrath and anger against ourselves (2:1-8).

When was the last time you heard a sermon on the wrath and anger of God?

I fear we are hooked solely on the love of God.

Someone once asked me to go and hear the Rev. Ian Paisley speak at a local conference centre. It was during the time when the IRA were causing lots of trouble and there were police dogs and soldiers with AK47 rifles everywhere to protect him and us. I had to take my passport to get in!

I know he wasn’t everyone’s cup of tea, maybe because he preached about the wrath of God, but the particular evening I heard him, he spoke powerfully about the love of God. I was introduced to him, his wife and family afterwards and it struck me what a warm, loving family they were.

I think he could speak powerfully about God's love **because** he believed in God's wrath. He reminded me of these verses from Paul:

"God demonstrates his own **love** for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's **wrath** through him." (Rms. 5:8&9)

We can only glory in the wonderful love of God in sending Christ to die for our sins, against the dark background of His wrath. If we don't proclaim God's wrath, we may be diluting the love of God and rendering it insipid.

Paul reiterates this in Ephesians 2:3b & 4: "Like the rest (of mankind) we were by nature objects of **wrath**. But because of his great **love** for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ."

We all know about God's past anger and wrath in the Old Testament; we have just seen in Romans 1 how God's wrath **is** being revealed in the present; and we will have to reconcile ourselves to the reality of God's and Jesus' wrath in the future (Rev. 6:15-17; 19:15&16).

Only by placing God's love in the context of his other attributes (here His wrath) will we be better able to understand 'how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.' (Eph.3:18)

### ***Nothing can separate us, except.....***

Back to Romans and especially now the end of Romans 8, where Paul lists a whole number of things which are unable to 'separate us from the love of Christ' and 'from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.' (8:35-39).

It is a list which assures us that none of the things mentioned can dent the security we know and experience in God's love for us. Hallelujah! We are more than conquerors through him who loved us. And, although none of these external things are able to separate us, it is tragically possible for us to take **ourselves** away from God in Christ and separate **ourselves** from his love.

Someone wrote to me recently to tell me of a high-profile worship leader who has now declared himself not to be a Christian any more. Of course, the question we ask is, "Was that person ever a Christian in the first place?" And the answer is, "We don't know."

But what we do know is that the Bible says it **is** possible to be a Christian and then fall away. In which case, the writer to the Hebrews says, it is impossible for them to be brought back to repentance because they are ‘keeping on crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace’ (See Hebrews 6:4-6).

Paul draws attention to the same possibility of being cut off from God in Romans chapter 11. He wants Gentile believers in Jesus to understand that if some of the Jewish branches of the faith had been broken off because of unbelief, then it’s also possible that they could be broken off:

“Consider therefore the kindness and sternness/severity of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, **provided that you continue in his kindness**. Otherwise, you also will be cut off” (Rms. 11:22).

‘Provided that’ is another conditional phrase that we need to take note of.

### ***The nature of God’s love***

It is very easy for us to misunderstand God’s love.

In the Old Testament, there is only one Hebrew word for ‘love’, the word ‘**Ahava**’. It comes from the root word ‘ahav’ and is a word more associated with giving than receiving. C.S. Lewis calls it ‘Gift-Love’. It describes an action rather than an emotional feeling.

In the New Testament, four different Greek words are used which are usually translated by the one English word ‘love’. This raises difficulties as we may not know what kind of love is being described.

‘**Epithumia**’ indicates a strong desire of any kind. It can be good or evil. It is used positively of Jesus e.g. “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer”. Negatively, it is used of the “lusts of the flesh”.

‘**Eros**’ is used positively of romantic and sexual attraction between a man and a woman.

‘**Philia**’ refers to a kind of brotherly/sisterly love or a love between friends ‘We get on together, we like each other’, ‘I like him/her’.

Sometimes ‘Epithumia’ love, ‘Eros’ love and ‘Philia’ love may come close to us being able to identify them with God’s love. At other times, they may not.

These 'loves' may be what C.S. Lewis calls 'Need Loves'. We need people to show us warmth, affection, acceptance, appreciation etc.

But the word **always** used to describe God's love for us is none of these, it is the word '**Agape**'.

'**Agape**' is a commitment of the will to seeing a need in a person and being determined to do something about it. It is closest in meaning to the Hebrew word 'ahava' and is the word used everywhere in the New Testament to describe God's love, including John 3 :16.

God doesn't love us because we are gifted, rich, pretty or have other desirable qualities. God doesn't love us because we are loveable, quite the reverse, he sees us as sinners who need to be saved; people who have the poison of sin running through our veins and who need to look to Jesus and live.

And Jesus, through his death and resurrection, is available to everyone who will confess their sins, repent and put their trust in him. This is the nature of God's special agape, giving love for us.

**Have you ever wondered how it is that God 'loved the world' (Jn. 3:16) and yet tells you and me 'not to love the world or anything in the world' (1 Jn.2:15)?**

How do we resolve this paradox? I suppose we could say it's because God loved the world in an 'agape' sense whereas the world we have to avoid is the world of lustful cravings and boasting which often masquerade as 'love'.

But there is a much more important distinction to be made between these two verses, which doesn't come out in our English translations, and is to do with the tenses of the verb 'love'.

In John 3:16 the tense is aorist; Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross is a one-off demonstration of God's sacrificial love for the world, never to be repeated. In 1 John 2:15, 'do not love the world' is present continuous tense. We are not to 'fall in love' with the world in any on-going sense. Essentially, the world is against God. "Don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred/enmity towards God. Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." (James 4:4).

When God looks down on the world, He doesn't have any great affection for it other than an intense longing that people will repent and believe in Jesus. His feeling, overall, must be one of grief, in the same way Jesus grieved over a rebellious Jerusalem. His grief is an integral part of His love.

Indeed, in Jesus' prayer in John 17, Jesus specifically says he is **not** praying for the world, but for his disciples who are in the world.

In my pastoral ministry, I have sometimes officiated at wedding ceremonies where the couple told me quite frankly that they didn't want to have any children. This world was not a place in which they wanted to introduce new life.

But God **has** demonstrated His love for the world specifically by sending His Son to die on the Cross for our sins. We all now have the choice of accepting, or rejecting, His Son, His salvation. The choice is ours.

Once we do come 'home' to God, then he does delight in us as children adopted into His family.

Incidentally, the word Paul uses for love in the famous 1 Corinthians 13 passage on love is always 'agape'. It is a reading popular at marriage ceremonies and it reminds us that if a marriage is not based on God's 'agape' love (along with 'philia' and 'eros') it may struggle to survive.

So, when we talk about God's love, it is important to know what kind of love we are describing.

We may also notice that although the English word 'love' occurs 551 times in the NIV version of the Bible (though only 310 times in the KJV) it is being used to describe the whole range of what we call 'love'. It may not be describing God's love at all.

The number of times the Bible actually references God's explicit agape love is rare, though again, as in the OT, we are called, as disciples of Christ, to demonstrate God's giving, self-sacrificial, agape love to one another and to our neighbours.

### ***Jesus and the Rich Young Man – Matthew 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-22***

This encounter provides, I think, another clear example of the way in which God and Jesus love us. This young man who came to Jesus had a lot going for him. First of all, he was asking the right questions, 'What should I do to inherit eternal life?' Most young people today are asking the wrong questions e.g. 'How can I be happy/pretty?' 'How can I have lots of friends on Facebook?' 'How can I earn more money?'

He was polite, respectful, sincere, upright and bursting with promise and potential. He was also rich, so in our 'unconditional love' world, we might have been encouraging him to join our Church covenant giving scheme right away!

And we read, 'Jesus looking upon him, **loved** him (agape love - Mark 10:21). Jesus saw his need and offered him a way for that need to be met.

But the young man refused to receive Jesus' love, preferring to love his many treasured possessions instead. And he went away, sad and grieving. Tragic. He had underestimated who Jesus was, he had overestimated his own goodness and he had never estimated the cost of discipleship.

He went away understanding that if he was to have a relationship with Jesus, certain conditions were necessary. He would have to choose between loving money/possessions or loving Jesus; loving both wasn't an option.

I am fully convinced of God's love for us all, but to experience it is conditional, and this young man wasn't willing to meet the conditions and pay the price.

### ***Love and Fear***

It is a well-known psychological technique that if you want to get rid of a fear all you have to do is to replace it with a bigger one! Perhaps we have seen this working out recently in our national life here in the UK.

A few months ago, there were lots of fears as to what would happen after 'Brexit'; then there were fears around 'Climate Change'; but in recent weeks we haven't heard anything about those fears. They have been replaced by a bigger fear (for now), the fear of coronavirus.

John writes that, 'perfect love drives out fear' (1 Jn. 4:18) and this is wonderfully true. But there is one kind of fear that love is not meant to drive out and that is the 'Fear of God'.

We are told throughout the Bible that the 'Fear of God' is the beginning of wisdom. It is a healthy, awesome respect for a Holy God. This healthy fear of Him will supplant any unhealthy fear we may have. It is the greatest (and only) fear that Jesus wants us to have.

In a short passage bookended by instructions 'not to be afraid', Jesus told his disciples not to fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul (e.g. adversaries, viruses etc.). Rather, fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell i.e. God (Mt. 10:26-30).



And Paul reminds us that there are 3 things which should motivate us in our witness and evangelism: the fear of God, the love of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit. Fear, love and power go together (See 2 Cor. 5).

### ***Love and Fellowship***

John, in his epistles, sees how paramount God's agape love is in terms of our relationships with each other as fellow believers. Not only is this agape love the mark of me, as an individual, being in God and Him being in me, it is also to be **the** mark and witness of the Church.

Compare these two verses: "No-one has ever seen God, but God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." And, "No-one has ever seen God; but if we love each other, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us." (Jn. 1:18 and 1 Jn. 4:12).

It is as though God becomes visible and is incarnated in and through the loving relationships of His people.

Isabelle Hamley writes (LICC Word for the Week, 24/2/20):

"We are invited to live out God's vision for our churches: not as a collection of individuals, who each follow God in their own way, but as a people - interdependent, loving one another, whose vision is set by God, whose life is shaped by the values of the Kingdom and the teaching of Jesus."

Jesus ended his prayer in John 17 by asking his Father that the love the Father had for him, would also be in his disciples (17:26). By this will everyone know that we are his disciples, if we have love one for another.

### ***Love and Truth***

But love must be accompanied by truth. Love without truth can be dangerously off-key and sentimental, rather than scriptural. On the other hand, truth without love can be hard and legalistic.

So, in John's second and third epistles, he emphasises Love **and** Truth. And it is this balance that we must strive for.

### ***Love in the Book of Revelation***

When God was looking around for someone to whom He could send the revelation of Jesus Christ, via an angel, whom did he choose? Yes, he chose the 'apostle of love', John.

But the love of God and Jesus hardly appear in the entire book of Revelation.

Apart from a wonderful introductory doxology, “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood...”(1:5), apart from a reminder that Jesus loves some of the folks in the church in Philadelphia (3:9), and apart from a reminder to the church in Laodicea that Jesus rebukes and disciplines those whom he loves (3:19), there is nothing else.

This must have come as quite a shock to John, as he struggled to write down the prophecy.

In conclusion, I would like to summarise and highlight the following: -

- God is Love; it is **the** essential description and essence of who He is.
- We should not over-emphasise God’s love at the expense of His other revealed characteristics, which, taken together, inform us of the nature of His love and how it operates.
- We should be cautious in speaking about God’s love to unbelievers other than pointing them to the Cross of Christ.
- Love can only be fully expressed in the context of committed, on-going relationships.
- Although God’s love for us is undeserved and unearned, we can only continue to experience His love as we keep on confessing our sin, keep on believing in Jesus and keep on obediently following him.
- God has demonstrated His agape love for the world supremely through the one-off sacrificial death of His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (Jn. 3:16 and 1 Jn. 4:9 &10).
- Ongoing, self-sacrificial, agape love is **the** hallmark of being a Christian. It is by our love for our brothers and sisters in Christ that we show we are Christ’s disciples.
- We are also called to demonstrate God’s agape love generally to everyone.
- God’s love is greater than faith and hope. One day, faith and hope will not be necessary. God’s love will remain.

In the light of all this, we may need to adjust our witness, our lifestyle and even the way we explain the Gospel we are proclaiming.

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