

GOD LOVES**1 JOHN 4:7-10; ROMANS 5:6-10**

Frederick Douglass grew up as a slave in Maryland in the early nineteenth century. He escaped and became a leading abolitionist who fought to end slavery forever. He and his mother were separated when he was but an infant. It was a common custom for slave owners to part children from their mothers at a very early age. Her new home was about 12 miles from her son's home. Nonetheless, young Frederick's mother several times found ways to see her son. She made her journeys to see him at night, traveling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day's work. She was a field hand, and a whipping was the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise. She would spend as much of the night with her son as possible. She would lie down with him and get him to sleep, but long before he woke up she was gone. Imagine the power of a mother's love! Frederick Douglass' mother worked all day long in the scorching heat of the tobacco fields, and then, when her body was crying for rest, she walked 12 miles in the dark to see her son. After comforting him and holding him as he fell asleep, she had to walk another 12 miles back. She gave up a night's sleep. She risked getting a severe whipping if she were discovered, or if she got home late. But nothing could keep this mother from her son.

This morning I want you to think with me about a kind of love that is even greater than a mother's love. The Bible says, "God is love." A huge majority of Americans believe God exists. Most of them also believe God is loving. But the only place where we're told anywhere that God is loving is in the Bible. So, here's what's interesting. If you reject or you're not sure the Bible is the inspired Word of God and therefore true in all it affirms, how can you be so sure God is actually loving? Nature can't tell us God is loving. Reason alone won't lead you to that conclusion. On what do you base your conclusion? Again, the only place we're told God is loving is in the Bible. If you think the Bible is accurate about that aspect of God's nature and character, on what basis do you refuse to believe everything else the Bible teaches about God?

"What's Most Important About You? What You Think About God." That's the title of our current message series. Who you believe God to be – or not to be – determines everything about how you live your life consciously or subconsciously. Therefore, it's the single most important thing about you! Today I want us to think about the wonderful fact declared in Scripture that God is love. The Bible doesn't mean God is love in the sense that love itself is God. Instead, when it says God is love it means love is one of God's essential attributes. His attributes are simply things that are true of God's nature or character. Love, then, is essential to who God is and how He acts at all times and in every way. Love permeates and fills up every other attribute of God. For example, God's love permeates and fills up His power, His goodness, His justice, His knowledge, His wisdom, His holiness, His perfection, and so on. Nothing God does, has done, or will do is ever contrary to or violates His love. It's impossible for God to be unloving. Here's the first of three simple, but important truths about God's love.

GOD'S LOVE IS HIS GOOD WILL.

When you love someone, you want good things for that person all the time. You will never harm or wish harm on him or her in any way. You want to do good to and for that person in every way possible. God is like that in a perfect way. Do you remember what the angels said to the shepherds on the first Christmas night? The old King James Version of Luke 2:14 says, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” In other words, God’s love is His goodness demonstrated. God is, by nature, generous and kind. God wants and wills the best for you and me. God finds delight in blessing you, protecting you, providing for you, guiding you, and helping you. Someone observed, “This is true love to anyone: to do the best for him (or her) we can.” So, if you apply that truth to God, it means God always does the best He can for those He loves. If God is all powerful – omnipotent – and He is, this is very good and important news indeed. It means that out of His absolute power, God does the very best He can for you and for me every day and forever.

God’s love is given to me as a gift. The Bible makes it abundantly clear no one can earn or deserve God’s love. God doesn’t start loving us as a kind of reward for our good behavior. God’s doesn’t love us because we’ve become attractive to Him somehow or achieved something notable in life. In Scripture, God says this about people He loves, “I have loved you, my people, with an everlasting love. With unfailing love I have drawn you to myself.” (Jer. 31:3 NLT) God loves you on the basis of who He is not on the basis of who you are. The Bible also says, “See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are!” (1 Jo. 3:1 NLT) A good dad doesn’t love his daughter because she’s earned it anymore than a good mom loves her son because he deserves it. Good parents love their kids just because they’re their kids. It’s a gift! When you put your trust in Jesus and the Holy Spirit indwelt you, God adopted you as His child and made you a part of His family. You now have the right to call Him Father not because you’ve somehow done something to merit it, but instead because God just gave you His love as an outright gift.

God’s love means my slavery to fear is abolished. 1 John 4:16 and 18 (NLT) says, “God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.... Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, ... [it] shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love.” You might ask what love has to do with not being afraid. We’re born into a world where many things are against us. We’re born with a sinful nature that wants to resist God. We have a powerful spiritual enemy the Bible identifies as Satan. We live in a world where terrible things happen to us – accidents, diseases, and death. Yes, even pandemics! It can all seem very random, unpredictable, and scary. If you believe all that negative stuff somehow controls your life ultimately, you have good reason to be and stay a slave to fear. But, if you know God loves you and He holds you and every part of your life in His hands ultimately, you don’t have to live a fear-dominated, fear-enslaved life.

Have you ever seen a little child somehow get separated from his parents? He’s lost. Once he realizes it, he starts to cry hysterically because he’s afraid. What’s he afraid of? He’s afraid he’s going to end up being hurt by someone or something. But when his mom turns up, he runs sobbing to her and climbs up into her arms. He’s never

afraid in his mother's arms, because experience has taught him she loves him and wills him only good at all times. Love expels fear. Perfect love expels any reason to fear. God's love abolishes any need for you and me to be afraid. When you become His child, you are now in the hands of an omnipotent, loving Father. You're not in other people's hands. You're not in the devil's hands. You're not even in your own hands! You're in God hands ultimately. And because God loves, it means God can only do good to you every moment of every day ultimately – even when it may look and feel bad to you at the present moment. When that truth gets a grip on you, you can't live fearfully anymore. Here's a second great truth about God's love to remember always.

GOD'S LOVE IS HOLY.

It's really important to hear and understand that truth, because we live in a culture that insists on equating God's love with a sort of mushy indulgence and tolerance toward His own moral standards. When we say God's love is holy, we point to the cross of Jesus as the ultimate demonstration. God doesn't indulge evil. God doesn't tolerate sin. He doesn't overlook injustice. Instead, He did something about sin. Evil, and injustice. The Bible consistently points to the cross as the prime example of God's love. Let me read 1 John 4:7-10 as one example. Do you see it there in v. 10? The very best example of love can't be found among human beings. Sorry, all you Moms out there! Your kind of love is way up high on the list, but it's not as great as God's love! No, the very best example of love in the entire universe is something God did. He sent His Son to die for your sins and mine. In chapter 3 of 1 John, verse 16 (NLT) it says, "This is how we know what love is, Jesus Christ laid down his life for us."

In 1989, a terrible tragedy occurred at a soccer stadium in Sheffield, England. 96 fans died and another 760 were injured in a freakish human crush incident. At one of the hospitals where victims were taken, a surgeon spoke to parents who had come to find out if their kids had been injured or killed. The surgeon read the names of those who'd been killed and expressed his sympathy. He then went on to say to the parents that he believed God understood their grief and was with them in their time of loss and need. One father responded bitterly, "What does God know about losing a son?" Of course, the answer is God knows everything about it, doesn't He? In fact, because of who God is, God the Father's love for God the Son is far greater than our love for our own kids. There's really no comparison. Nevertheless, He gave us His Son.

Here's another example of the holiness of God's love – Romans 5:6-10. Verse 8 tells us God demonstrated His love for us at the cross. What does that really mean? Let's break it down. It means, first, God **gave His Son** for us. If God had sent a prophet or an angel instead of His Son, we would be grateful. But instead He sent Jesus which was in reality sending Himself. It also means, second, God gave His Son **to die** for us. That's what we focus on every year during Holy Week. As wonderful as Jesus' miracles and teachings happened to be, His primary mission was to pay the penalty of our sin by dying on the cross. There He took your place and mine becoming our substitute. This is the greatest demonstration of love – the holy love of God – whereby He paid the penalty for our sin by bearing it Himself in the person of His Son, Jesus. It means, third,

God gave His Son to die **for us** – undeserving sinners. Notice, we’re called “ungodly” in v. 6 and “God’s enemies” in v. 10. We’re also described as “powerless” in v. 6 which means we couldn’t save ourselves. So there you have it. The most profound demonstration of love this universe has ever witnessed is the fact that in Jesus, God died for sinful, godless, rebellious, and helpless people like you and me. That’s love. That’s holy love. That’s God’s love.

When we say God’s love is holy, it also means it’s actually conditional on a saving relationship with Jesus. Have you heard God’s love is unconditional? Well, yes and no. To say God’s love is unconditional can be a bit misleading. If – by unconditional – you mean God extends His love to all people without distinction to race, social status, or background, that’s very true. If – by unconditional – you mean God offers us an eternal relationship with Him without any consideration of our personal worth, that’s very true. If – by unconditional – you mean no number and no kinds of personal sin are greater than God’s forgiveness, that’s very true. But if – by unconditional – you mean people can have their sins forgiven, receive eternal life, and enjoy a restored relationship with God without going through Jesus, that’s false. That’s not true at all. It all comes down to what you do with Jesus. And, so, that makes God’s love conditional.

Is real love unconditional? An example. Jack and Jane have been married 20 years. Jane discovers Jack has been unfaithful to her. She also discovers – much to her dismay - that Jack wants her just to accept this other woman while still staying married to him. He wants to keep both women in his life – Jane, his wife, as well as his mistress. It could be argued, I suppose, that if Jane loves Jack unconditionally, she will put up with his absurd request. But that’s not real love, is it? Genuine love requires Jane to say to Jack, “No, it’s either me or her.” Authentic love is actually conditional. God forgives us, accepts us, and invites us into an eternal relationship with Himself on the basis of your relationship to Jesus. He is the condition. Have you received Him as your Savior? Have you surrendered to Him as your Lord? All that God is and all that God offers is available to us through Jesus and Jesus alone. I hope and pray you’ve met God’s condition for receiving Jesus - the full demonstration of His love.

When we say God’s love is holy, we recognize He disciplines us to become like Jesus. In Heb. 12:6 (NLT) we read, “For the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes each one he accepts as his child.” God wants us to resemble Jesus in our character, our values, our priorities, and in our relationships with others. Because God’s love is holy, it seeks – in fact, it demands – we change, grow, and develop Christlikeness. It’s similar to a loving, wise parent disciplining or training his or her kids. Sometimes God allows us to face the consequences of our sinful choices in life – even if they’re embarrassing and humiliating. Sometimes He trains us by allowing trials and difficulties to come into our lives which teach us all kinds of useful things. God’s intent is never to hurt or damage us, but instead to help and develop us. Not to harm, but to shape. Not to destroy, but to help us get rid of the spiritual junk we’ve accumulated in our lives. And, yes, sometimes God’s discipline can be unpleasant and painful, but it’s necessary to save us from something far worse.

I read a true story about a little girl and her neighbor friend who were playing in some woods behind their homes. One of them had wandered off the path and stepped into a nest of ground bees. As the bees began to swarm and sting, the girls began to scream for help. Suddenly, out of nowhere one of the girl's fathers came crashing through the woods, leaping over fallen logs, and hurdling vines and bushes. He swooped up a girl under each arm and tore through the woods at full speed to get away from the bees. As he ran, the father's grip bruised the children's arms, branches scratched their thighs, and thorns grabbed their clothes and skin. Being rescued hurt, but it was far better than the bees. God loves you and me like that. He sees all the dangers out there and, at times even before you call out to Him for help; He comes crashing into your life and world. His rescue can indeed be painful at the time, but the goal is always your eternal safety, and the motive is always His holy love. Let me mention a third, final great truth about God's love today.

GOD'S LOVE IS EMOTIONAL.

It's important to remember God's love is not something remote, cold, austere, or unfeeling. Nothing could be further from the truth. God gave us emotions because He has emotions and we're created in His image. True, God's emotions and human emotions are different. Obviously, our emotions have been damaged by our sin. But because God has emotions, it's important to realize God loves emotionally. There's a universe of warmth and tenderness in every thought God has about you. Perhaps that's exactly why the devil targeted human beings from the beginning. He knew how much God loves us; therefore, he knew how much it would hurt God to hurt us.

Let's remember God's love is personal. Yes, God loves the world. Only God can! But God also loves you as a person and as an individual. No parent loves you like God loves you. No spouse loves you like God loves you. No child or sibling loves you like God loves you. No friend loves you like God loves you. He knows you far better than you know yourself and He loves you far more than you love yourself. Four year old Jonathan was trying to learn the Lord's Prayer. He tried to join in by listening to it as it was recited each Sunday at church. One Sunday, as the congregation was praying the Lord's Prayer, Jonathan could be heard above all the others, praying confidently, "Our Father who art in Heaven, I know you know my name." Well, he might have gotten the prayer wrong, but Jonathan's theology was exactly right. God's love is personal.

Let's remember God's love takes pleasure in you. There's a wonderful verse in the Bible – Zeph. 3:17 (NLT) – which says, "For the Lord your God is living among you. He is a mighty savior. He will take delight in you with gladness. With his love, he will calm all your fears. He will rejoice over you with joyful songs." Just imagine Almighty God – the Lord of the Universe – delighting in you and singing a love song over you. I wouldn't dare to believe God takes pleasure in me if the Bible didn't say He did. But it does! We find pleasure and delight in those we love. Well, God takes pleasure in us.

Let's remember God's love is jealous. This underlines the fact God's love for us is deeply emotional like nothing else. The Bible clearly and explicitly says God's love for

us can become jealous. Exodus 34:14 (NLT) says, “You must worship no other gods, for the Lord, whose very name is Jealous, is a God who is jealous about his relationship with you.” We often think of jealousy as being a negative, sinful emotion, right? It’s a bit jarring to hear God described as being jealous. Of course, jealousy can be sinful. It can be a form of envy – wanting something or someone that belongs to someone else and hating that other person for having it.

But there’s a kind of jealousy that’s really more of a virtue than a vice. It’s all about a normal, healthy zeal to protect a love relationship from any and all rivals. If you knew of a couple where one person was unfaithful and the other person was completely OK with it, you’d have to wonder about the health of that relationship. That’s just not normal in a love relationship! In the Old Testament, God often compared His relationship with the people of Israel to a marriage. He was the husband and Israel was His wife. Yes, it was an analogy, but it helps us understand why God felt offended and jealous when the people began to worship other gods. He saw it as spiritual adultery – unfaithfulness – and it made Him rightfully jealous. God was deeply hurt emotionally. God loves you and me the same way. When we allow anything or anyone to become more important to us in this life or more central to us than God and God alone, He gets jealous.

Let me close with this thought. God’s jealousy for us invites us to be zealous for Him. You can be passionately emotional about God, because God is passionately emotional about you. A man by the name of J.C. Ryle has given us a great definition of spiritual zeal. “Zeal... is a burning desire to please God, to do His will, and to advance His glory in the world in every possible way. A zealous [person]... is pre-eminently a person of one thing. It is not enough to say he or she is earnest, hearty, uncompromising, whole-hearted, or fervent in spirit. He or she only sees one thing, cares for one thing, lives for one thing, is swallowed up in one thing, and that one thing is to please God.” That’s what zeal looks like when it comes to my relationship with God. We can love God passionately. And yet our passionate love for God is only a pale reflection of His deeply emotional, immense, all powerful, comprehensively passionate love for you and me.

There’s an archbishop who once heard a confession of sin from three hardened teenagers in his church. All three boys were trying to make a joke out of it. They met with the archbishop and confessed to a long list of ridiculous and serious sins that they hadn’t committed. It was all a joke. The archbishop played along with the first two boys who ran out of the church laughing. But then he listened carefully to the third teenager. Before he got away, he asked this young man to do something. “Okay, you have confessed these sins. Now I want you to do something to show your repentance. I want you to walk up to the far end of the church and I want you to look at the picture of Jesus hanging on the cross. Then, I want you to look at His face and say, ‘You did all that for me and I really don’t care that much.’ And I want you to do that three times.”

And so the boy went up to the front, looked at the picture of Jesus and said, “You did all that for me and I really don’t care that much.” And then he said it again. But when he tried a third time, he couldn’t say it. Instead, he broke down in tears. The archbishop who tells that story explains the reason he knows it to be true is because he himself was

that young man. He was transformed by the cross. There is something about the cross. Something about Jesus dying there for us grasps us. And when we get grasped by it, we have a sense that what is grasping us is the love of God.

God's love is His good will toward us. God's love is holy. And God's love is deeply emotional. It more than deserves your eternal and passionate love for Him.

: