

FOR JEFF

I John 4:7-19

On our vacation this summer we spent a few days with Jean's family near Chicago. So for a few days I moved in with my in-laws. (Do you know the difference between an in-law and an outlaw? An outlaw is wanted.) But Jean's relatives welcomed us warmly and we had a nice visit. One evening her brother Dwight and I got into a theological discussion that we have been having for years. Our wives had wanted to play a game but when the old debate got started they knew the evening was shot. The nice thing about that evening was that my nephew-in-law Jeff decided to join our discussion. He just graduated from high school, and he brought some fresh insights to the old debate. Once, when I referred to God's love, Jeff asked me, "What is love?" I felt stumped. Love is a word I use every day, but what does it mean? I gave Jeff a quick answer but said I would get back to him later. This sermon and next week's are my response to Jeff.

Obviously, the word "love" has a range of meanings. When I say that I love chocolate ice cream, that is very different than when I say I love my wife and kids. And when we say that God loves us, it is very different than that. I admit that my love for chocolate ice cream is pretty one-sided. It doesn't love me back. When I love family or friends, however, the love includes a mutual relationship. I love Jean and she loves me back. That is amazing, but so much more amazing than that is God's love for the world. God's love always challenges us to think and act far beyond our normal human loves.

So what is love? My initial response to Jeff's question was to give him a definition I learned years ago: Love means seeking the best for another person. I am going to stick by that definition. There are two things I like about it. First it states that love is more than emotions. So often we use the word love to mean a passing feeling, but love is more about how we treat people than how we feel about them. Love usually includes feelings: maybe an affection or devotion toward a person, but we recognize true love when the affection we feel expresses itself in actively seeking the best for the other person. The second reason I like this definition is because it gets past the selfish side of love. When I say that I love chocolate ice cream I mean that it gives me pleasure. What I really mean is I love *me*, not it! But true love is about serving others, not myself. Love ought to be other-ish, not selfish. Love means seeking the best for another person even if it means sacrificing the best for me.

However, we need to go beyond dictionary definitions. To really understand love we have to start with God because love started with God. He alone displays pure love. When God created us in His image I believe He put a desire for love within all of our hearts. At our best, human love is really a reflection of God's love, though we never achieve His unselfish love. So to better understand love, let's begin with God's love.

To do this I am going to divide God's love into five categories we find in the Bible¹: God's loving character, God's care for all creation, God's saving love, God's covenantal love and His conditional love. We will look at the first four this week and return to look at the fifth category next week.

The first category is God's loving-character. We see this in the verse: "God is love" (I John 4:8). For God, love is not a passing feeling but His character. I can hardly imagine this. What it would be like if love were my first response to everyone I met? Just think of all the people you know. I assume some of them are easier to love and some are harder to love, right? For God there are no people who are harder to love than anyone else. Think of the most lovable person you know, that wonderful person who is so easy to love. The good news is that God doesn't find you any harder to love than that person! Now go to the other extreme: think of the person you find absolutely the hardest to love. The amazing news is that God finds that person just as easy to love as you. Unlike humans, God's love is not based on degrees of lovability. He doesn't love because..., He just loves. Love is His character.

¹ Adapted from Donald Carson, "LOVE" in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, edited by Desmond Alexander and Brian Rosner. IVP, 2000, pages 646-650. I have categorized the five expressions of God's love in a slightly different way than Carson does.

We see God's loving character in two areas. First, the Bible tells us that the three persons of the Trinity love each other: God the Father loves the Son who loves the Spirit—and back again. God loves Himself, but in His case, self-love is not selfish love because God also loves everything He has made. Psalm 145 describes God's love for all His creation: "The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works" (Ps 145:9). Because God is love, His love is other-ish.

So what does this mean for us? If love is an essential part of God's character, then for us to become godly we must develop love within our character as well. For humans love is something we have to grow (2 Peter 1:5-7). Our love grows in response to God's love for us (1 John 4:10-11). I think the seeds of true love are present within all humans because we are made in the image of God, but those seeds are choked out by a garden of weeds. To grow love we have to pull out those weeds and nurture love. We need the Holy Spirit to produce the fruit of love in our lives (Galatians 5:22-23). Humans are never more like God than when we love.

So, the first category of God's love, His loving character, leads us to the second: His loving care for His creation. Genesis 1 tells us that He blesses all His creatures. We referred to Psalm 145 which tells how God provides for and protects all He made.

Let me observe four things about God's care for His creation. First God's care is universal. God cares for all creatures, human and animal. He even loves mosquitoes (they are in my harder to love category!) God loves us all.

Second, God's love is compassionate. He is not a distant God blessing the world in a disinterested way. God is not like a wealthy person who gives to charity without caring about the people being helped. The words of Psalm 145 describe God's care as compassionate and merciful for all. He even cares when a sparrow falls from a tree.

Third, God's care for humanity is personal. God wants a loving relationship with each of us—I think that is why He made us in His image, so we could love each other. This summer I read the book *The Shack* by William Young, a Christian book that made #1 on the NY Times bestseller list². There are parts of this story I like and some I dislike. The story is about a man who suffered a horrible tragedy and was invited by God to spend the weekend at a shack in the woods, a time for gaining understanding and healing. One part of *The Shack* that I really liked was a phrase used by the God-characters in the story. Whenever God would talk about a person He would say, "I am particularly fond of him or her". It seems that God is particularly fond of everyone. I like that image. It reminds us that God's universal love is personal. He knows us and loves us as individuals.

My fourth observation about God's care for His creatures is that it is unconditional. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus told us that God blesses everyone, whether they are righteous or unrighteous:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor' and 'hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be like your Father in heaven, since he causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Even the tax collectors do the same, don't they? And if you only greet your brothers, what more do you do? Even the Gentiles do the same, don't they? So then, be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."(Matthew 5:43-48).

God even loves those who don't love Him back. Notice how Jesus applied God's unconditional love to us. Our love should go beyond the normal love of friend to friend or family to family. To really be like God we must pray for those who persecute us and bless those who curse us. We are never more like God than when we love our enemies.

² William Young, *The Shack*. Windblown Media. 2007.

God's love for all creatures leads us to the third category of God's love: His saving love. In which He not only loves His enemies but He seeks to restore the broken relationship with them. Ever since Adam and Eve, the world has been in rebellion against God. I know. I was part of that rebellion. I may not look it, but I was an undercover insurgent in Satan's army. My assignment was to resist God's will and reject His love. If you had known me back then, you might have thought I was basically a kind and decent person, but that was the undercover part. I went to church, but I wanted religion to be on my terms, not God's. The truth is I didn't love God—I couldn't love God. And I was not alone. The bad news is that the whole world was in rebellion against God. If God had not reached out to us in love, we would all still be His enemies.

The good news is that God is love and that God loves all His creatures, even His enemies. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through Him might be saved." (John 3:16-17). And "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8) God acted on His love, sending His Son to make peace with the rebellious world. This is very good news indeed!

Some people ask, if God loves everyone, then why doesn't God just go ahead and save everyone? That's a good question. If love means to seek the best for everyone, wouldn't the best be for everyone to be saved and enjoy a relationship with Him? Wouldn't the best be that everyone gets to go to heaven? We might think so, but would heaven be heaven for people who don't love God? God doesn't love us like I love chocolate ice cream. God is not interested in one-sided relationships. He wants us to love Him back. So, in His love God has unilaterally done everything to make our salvation possible, freely—as a gift. In Christ He did everything but make us love Him back. If God forced us to love Him then the love would not really be our love. If God forced our love then we would be prevented from growing a loving character to become like Christ.

Since God does not force our love, the Bible says He woos us like a lover, He waits for us like a parent waits for a runaway child to come home, and like the host of a party He invites us to come to His feast. Jesus told a parable about a king who sent invitations to a feast, but many people made excuses that they were too busy to accept the invitation (Luke 14:15-24). Jesus' point is that the gospel includes an invitation. It calls all mankind to quit the rebellion and believe on the Lord Jesus. It calls us to love Him back. Those who refuse miss out on the bestest feast ever! We are never more like God than when we respond to His love by loving Him.

A fourth category of God's love is His covenantal love. While God loves and blesses the whole world, God chooses a select few with whom to make a covenant. In the Old Testament God selected the nation of Israel to be His chosen people. He made a covenant with them at Mount Sinai. He did this because He loved Israel in a special way. Most of the time when you read about God's love in the Old Testament, it refers to His special love for the Jewish people.

We should not confuse God's covenant love with His saving love. Every Israelite was a member of God's chosen people, but not every Israelite was saved. No gentile was in God's chosen people, but that doesn't mean that the gentiles were all unsaved. In Old and New Testaments, Jews and gentiles have always been saved the same way—by grace through faith. God's covenant was not primarily about personal salvation, rather Israel was chosen from among the nations to be God's people, to be holy as He is Holy, to declare His glory, and to serve as His priests among all the nations.

Why did God choose the Jews? The Bible is clear: Israel did not deserve to be chosen. God did not love Israel more than other nations because they were better or more important or more faithful—they weren't (Deut 7:6-8)! God chose Israel for His own reasons, not ours. God chose Israel because He is love. Over and over again He declares His love for Israel, even when Israel did not love Him back.

The good news is that God has a new covenant people. Christ is the bridegroom, the church is His bride. Through His death Christ has made a new covenant with a new “nation” composed of all of those who believe in Christ as their Lord and Savior. The church is God’s new chosen people. It is a great comfort to Christians to know that before we chose God, He chose us. As with Israel, God chose the church to represent Him to the world, loving and serving and sharing His truth with all.

The Bible often uses marriage as an example of God’s covenant love. I recently heard a story that helped me understand why Jean chose me as her covenant partner. A husband once asked his wife if she had ever loved anyone else. She thought for a moment and said, “No. I once admired a man for his amazing intellect. I once was in awe of a guy who was a star athlete. I once appreciated a man for his charm and wit. But in your case, it can only be love.”

I hate to admit it but this story is very close to the truth. I would like to think that Jean loves me because I am so lovable. I would like to think that I am the world’s best husband, but the truth is I am not. Marriage has had a way of forcing me to take a long hard look at myself—usually after I have been selfish, or done something stupid, or lost my temper. At those times when I least like myself, I am overwhelmed by Jean’s love. She loves me anyway. It is when I realize that I don’t deserve her love that it is most amazing. Husbands, can I hear an “amen”?

This kind of amazing love is not limited to marriage. Some of us have heard Vicki Hoffman tell the story of her difficult childhood. Her parents were poor and she recalls going to bed hungry and cold because they couldn’t afford food or fuel. Her parents didn’t really care for her. She took out her frustrations at school—acting out, getting in trouble. In ninth grade that anger became focused on her English teacher, Miss Fritts. One day she drew a picture of a witch on her desk with the name “Miss Fritts” written beneath it. Miss Fritts saw the picture and told Vicki to come in after school. She thought she was in trouble again. But instead of yelling at her or sending her to the principal’s office, Miss Fritts sat down beside her and cried. Vicki had never seen a teacher cry before. She asked Vicki why she hated her since she liked Vicki and saw in her the potential to become a great writer. She wanted to help Vicki develop that potential. Today Vicki works as a successful grant writer in the Cass Lake school district. She did make Vicki clean the witch off her desktop, but that day something changed for Vicki—the first of many turning points in her life. Her transformation started the day a teacher responded to her hate with love.

Why do these stories appeal to us? I think God made us to want to be loved like this. These stories appeal because they remind us of God’s love. Obviously human love is never as unselfish as God’s, but we are at our best when we love each other unconditionally as God does.

God doesn’t love us because we are better or smarter or more charming than anyone else. God loves us because He is love. His care and His mercy are not conditional. God’s love is amazing! Right now, God is particularly fond of you. He wouldn’t be God if He wasn’t.

Not only did God make us to want to be loved like this, He made us to love like this. This is what it means to be like God. We fulfill our purpose as those made in His image when we grow beyond our normal human loves: friend for friend, family for family, to reach out to those who are least lovely and to forgive and be reconciled with those who do not love us back. This takes some weeding and growing, but the seeds are there. When the Spirit produces His fruit in our lives, when we respond to His love with love, we grow to be more like Christ. We are never more like God than when we love.