

October 20, 2013

I John 4:7-18 / I Corinthians 13:1-13 / Romans 5:1-11

The Attributes of God (#4) - God is Love

Today we're going to look at an attribute of God that people often misunderstand. Because most often they tend to see it as an action of God rather than an attribute that defines His nature or essence.

Thus people will say: "God is loving," "He shows us love," or "He loves us" -- all of which are, of course, true statements. They may even add, "He is the most loving of all Beings."

Yet what we're going to be looking at today is the fact that God isn't just loving, "**He IS love.**" It's one thing to say of a person, "he or she is loving," or even "very loving." But it would be a different thing altogether to say, "he or she IS love." Right?

Yet that's exactly what Scripture declares about God -- He IS love. Not in the "God = love" sense, where we could then reverse it and say, "Love is God." For that would be to create an idol out of love -- as many have -- especially when their understanding of love is so different from what the Bible calls love.

God isn't just love in a generic sense, but a very specific sense. When John says "God is love" he uses the word "agape" -- the same word Paul uses in I Cor. 13 where even a casual glance at the passage assures us we're NOT talking about romantic, sentimental or erotic love. Agape has nothing to do with warm gushy feelings, or fickle, constantly fluctuating or changing degrees of emotion.

Not at all! The love the Bible equates with God is holy and godly love. It's firm, unending, unchanging, committed love. It's love that is willing to discipline and chastise and do whatever is necessary to bring about

the greatest growth and the greatest good of the one loved -- even if the method used involves pain, and struggle, and hardships, and trials or very difficult situations.

It's love that can never be manipulated by whining or tears, is gentle when necessary, but also stern when needed. It's never give up, never give into sin, never leave or forsake us love. It's love that loves the ungodly and the unloving; love that's willing to sacrifice, suffer, and even die - for its enemies and not just its friends!

It's love so deep and high and wide and long that we can never fully plumb its limitless depths or comprehend how it can be so. It's love that lives and speaks and heals and warns and sacrifices like Jesus -- for it was manifested most fully in Jesus.

That gives us an idea of the "love" that God IS and God EXHIBITS. A love so far above and beyond anything the human soul is capable of producing, either in or by itself, that it can only be received as a gift from Him who is its only Source.

Thus I reiterate: An "attribute" speaks of SOMETHING GOD REVEALS HIMSELF IN SOME WAY TO BE and not just something HE IS SAID TO DO -- even if we acknowledge He does it to a far greater and more perfect degree than anyone else ever could.

In fact, the attributes of God can be seen in this way: God is not simply just, He is Justice. He's not only righteous, He is Righteousness. He's not simply loving, He is love -- and so on.

That's why Paul can say in Rom. 5:5: "**God pours His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which He has given to us.**" He doesn't pour love into us as if it were somehow a commodity separate from who He is. But rather, He pours His love into us by simply filling us with

Himself, or giving us His Holy Spirit, who IS GOD poured into us and thus LOVE poured into us!

David Wilkerson was right. ***"To be baptized with the Holy Spirit is to experience a baptism in divine love."*** Of course, they're NOT equivalent -- God IS love but love is NOT God! Yet the two -- God and His agape -- can never be separated. They are so closely linked that where you find the one you will always find the other.

And that's the **FIRST** thing what I need to speak on today -- How God IS love. And in doing so, what I need to point out is that all God's attributes (including His love) are entirely interdependent and inseparably woven together to the point that you can't single out any particular one or deal with it in total isolation from all the others -- because each attribute has within it all the other attributes!

And that is true of God's love. His love is qualified by all His other attributes. Which means His "love" is righteous, holy, everlasting, just, omnipotent, wise, everywhere present, and so forth, just as His power is loving, just, wise, eternal, all-knowing, everywhere present and so forth. Each one is inseparably connected to, and entirely dependent upon, all the others!

Which tells us what? Which tells us that the love of God is NOT (as some would suggest) a quality of God that can be isolated or made to stand on its own. Or worse yet, made to seem superior to (and thus trump), or contrary to (and thus negate), say, His justice, righteousness, holiness or wrath.

So often, when I've mentioned God's justice, holiness or wrath, people have said: *"But my God is a God of love."* As if His love negates, or makes void of justice, holiness or wrath against sin.

What they're doing (in that case) is simply trying to peer God down to the attributes they prefer, and thus creating another idol.

LISTEN: The Bible makes it clear that God's love saturates His righteousness, is not in any way contrary to His justice, and far from negating His holiness, anger or wrath against sin is actually an expression of it (as we will see)!

Yet as sinners (who will never in this life be perfectly integrated in our being, as God is) it is tremendously difficult for us to understand how all those things can be blended in a perfect, consistent and non-contradictory way within God -- because they are NEVER blended perfectly in us!

Yet that's where God so differs from us! For He can be love without that love contradicting, conflicting with, or negating any of His other attributes. Love informs those other attributes, and they inform it, so that each one is in perfect equilibrium, complete harmony and total uniformity with all the others.

That's why God can be merciful yet stern, righteous yet gracious, a God of love and at the very same time a God of wrath. He alone can be all those things at once and be all of them without the slightest degree of inconsistency, conflict or contradiction. Got it?!

Then **SECONDLY**, how can the Bible say "God IS love?" Listen well: It can only say God IS love if God has ALWAYS BEEN love and He cannot always have been love (from all eternity past), unless He has existed eternally as a Trinity -- showing you once again how all the attributes are entirely interdependent!

Last week I used the visual illustration of that long rope with a one inch piece of white tape wrapped around the middle. And I told you that

small piece of tape represented history as we know it -- from the time God created until now.

I even asked you to imagine that that 200 foot rope went on infinitely in both directions -- for as Moses says in Ps. 90, God is, **"from everlasting to everlasting."**

And I also pointed out that before He created matter and life and all other things, the limitless reaches of infinite space were empty, black and void of everything -- except the Everlasting Being of the Three-personed God -- Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And if you correctly understood or followed that illustration, and gave it more thought, it should have driven you to ask yourself: **"What did God do in all those billions of trillions of endless eons of time before He created anything?"**

It may even have made you wonder: **Was He bored or frustrated or lonely existing by Himself in a universe devoid of anything but Himself?!**

And what's the answer? NO! Not in the least! Not if God is love! And here again I'm going to ask you to put your thinking caps back on, as I read a portion from Daniel Fuller's book, "The Unity of the Bible." And please listen closely. Quoting Heb. 1:3 he says: **"The Son is the radiance of God's glory, and the exact representation of His being." From this affirmation [Jonathan] Edwards reasoned that since the Son 'is the brightness of His glory and the very im-age of the Father, the express and perfect image of His person... therefore the Father's infinite happiness is in Him (the Son), and the way that the Father enjoys the glory of His Deity is in enjoying Him.'** Since God found 'infinite happiness in [Jesus, the Son]," then it becomes clear that from all eternity God has enjoyed His Son's love and companionship."

Fuller even goes on to point out that Christianity is the only monotheistic religion that can actually declare, and reasonably defend the premise, that "God is love."

"The problem that both Judaism & Islam face," he says, "by denying that God is more than one center of consciousness (or, by denying He is a Trinity or multiple in personhood) is that He could not be love without creating the world. As C. S. Lewis has argued: 'The words 'God is love' have no real meaning unless God contains at least two Persons. Love is something that one person has for another person. If God, then, was a single person before the world was made, He was not love.'"

He's right. In fact, that's why of all the monotheistic religions, only Christianity can say God is love, has always been love, and will never cease to be love -- even if all other beings ceased to exist!

And when we understand that, it keeps us from suggesting (as my very first Bible teacher did -- nice a person as he was: ***"The reason God created was because He was lonely and needed someone to love."***

Yet that's precisely what this attribute of God being love assures us is NOT the case! God has never been lonely for a single minute has never been bored for even one second, and has never needed anything, or anyone, other than His own Triune Self in order to be contented, full of joy, and infinitely happy.

God existed from all eternity past in a constant, unbroken, fullness of contentment, happiness, peace, and rest -- the Father delighting in the Son as the exact representation of His being and the Son delighting in the Father He loved -- for all those billions of trillions of eons before He created anything!

As Prov. 8:30 says in relation to wisdom (which can also be understood as referring to the Word who was with God and was God): ***"Then (and he's already said, "from the beginning, before the world began) I was the craftsman at His side. I was filled with delight day by day, rejoicing always in His presence."***

So, to answer our question, what was our Triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) doing for all eternity, before He created anything? He was rejoicing in the relationship of love that eternally existed between the three persons of the Trinity! He was eternally happy and filled with delight, finding in Himself a joy in His own perfections that can never be hindered, diminished or eradicated! (And in a future sermon I'll explain why that's not egotistical!)

It's a truth which assures us that God did not create out of some inner need He had that begged to be filled -- be it loneliness or boredom or needing someone to love! (He always had someone to love!) So please... don't ever utter such foolish statements! He created because he wanted to! It was a free and unnecessary act on His part! It did NOT fill a need in God, but flowed out of the inexhaustible abundance of all that He is!

God lacks nothing! He is so complete in Himself as to be beyond having needs (Acts 17:25)! Rather, He created in order to display the inexhaustible fullness of all that He is to all that He's made! He created because He IS love not to become love (as both Judaism and Islam must say since they deny His tri-personal being).

And **LAST**, why does all this matter? Because it makes all the difference in the world! If God created us to fill a need in Himself (for instance, to soothe His loneliness) then He created us to use us, and not love us! When a couple has a child because they need it to fulfill them, or save their marriage, or fill some inner need to be needed, they

are not having the child out of love. They are using the child to meet a need in them -- and it will have its negative effects on the child. The best reason for having a child is that there is so much love between the husband and wife that they want to have a child to share the abundance of their love with the child!

And not only that: If God created us to supply something that was lacking in Him, that would mean we can never really come to Him to receive, because we must always be working to supply that for which God created us. Sort of like farmers in days gone by who sometimes had children solely for the sake of having cheap labor. The children "earned their keep" by working the fields. They were there primarily to give, not receive.

And I do have to say that on the one hand it would make me feel really good to think that without me God would somehow be less complete! Wow! Talk about boosting my self-esteem! It would go through the roof!

But there would also be a terrible, hellish downside! For it would mean I could never relax, or rest, or come to Him to be filled from the super-abundance of all that He is. Because I would always have to be trying to fill some need in Him, and doing it from the meager and limited resources of my own inner being!

I'd always have to be trying to keep God from being lonely, or feeling frustrated, or bored or inadequate! That's what happens when our God is too small. We end up thinking we must meet some need in Him, when in reality He is calling us to come and receive from Him! (Isaiah 46:1-10).

We end up looking more like slaves earning our keep, than children adopted into His family by the abundance of His grace. We

look more like slaves thinking we must bring Him water when all the while the reality is that He's calling us to come and drink from the endless rivers of living water!

Tozer was right: "**God needs no one, but will use anyone who comes to Him in faith.**" And THAT, though it initially wounds our pride, is downright liberating! Because it means I'm not indispensable! I can be what I am -- human! And I can come to receive from Him, instead of thinking I always need to be giving to Him!

I can come (as the Psalmist says) and let Him be my "Shepherd" who makes me to lay down in green pastures and leads me beside peaceful waters where my soul can be refreshed! Because the Shepherd doesn't need the sheep, the sheep need the Shepherd! They don't serve Him, He serves them!

Jesus made this aspect of God's nature vividly clear when He said: "**The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to offer His life as a ransom for many.**"

Why to serve and not be served? Because that's the nature of love! Not to be served, but to serve! Not to take, but to give! Not to demand that our needs be met, but to minister to the needs of others!

After all, God doesn't need us to minister to Him! He wants us to come and be refreshed by Him, not attempt to refresh Him! We need to see that AS LOVE, or OUR DIVINE LOVER, He comes to us to give and not take, to serve and not be served.

And Last) I need to address the question: "**How does God's presence within us generate love within us?**" And the answer: If God was a solitary being (as in Judaism or Islam), and not Triune in nature, then His presence in us would not generate love in us, primarily

because He wouldn't be love, since to be love (as Lewis showed) God would have to be at least two persons. And if He is not love His presence in us could not produce love within us.

So, how does His presence in us produce in us a never ending source of love? It does it in the same way it did it in eternity, before He created and before the world began -- by the joy and the delight that the Father and Son have in each other as they dwell within us!

For what is the Holy Spirit except the presence of God sent to in-dwell the believer? Or as we read in Jn. 14:23, the presence of God the Father, and the presence of God the Son, mediated to and living within the heart and soul of the believer!

In John 14:23 Jesus says: ***"If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him and WE (that is, I (Jesus) and the Father) will come and make our home in him."***

And remember from our message on the Trinity -- the persons of the Godhead are indivisible. Where the Spirit is the Father & the Son are, and where the Father is the Son & the Spirit are, and where the Son is the Father & the Spirit are! Always! It has to be so if God is One and thus indivisible!

Which means that within us the Father and the Son (who have loved and delighted in and rejoiced in each other for all eternity) are loving each other and thereby producing in us an abundance of love and joy by the love they have for each other!

"The joy of the Lord is our strength," as the Bible tells us, and the joy of the Lord is the joy the Father and Son have in each other!

It's like having a non-stop "agape" generator running within us, habitually producing love within us!

And to add to it, they then take the love they have for each other (the love for each other that makes us able to call God love) and bring us into it and direct it toward us!

It's almost too wonderful for words! And once again, the cause of our sensing the need to kneel in gratitude and ever-adoring worship.