

Does God Love Sinners

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

What the Bible Says about God's Love

Gospel means "good news," but that which makes it "good news" for sinners is avoided in its modern form, becoming little more than sentimental Christian humanism. The message is now "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." That is not a Bible message, for the fact is, sinners are under the wrath of God (John 3:36). God's wrath is not a wonderful plan for anybody's life.

One may argue, "God hates the sin, but He loves the sinner." Yes, that thought sounds good, but it is not quite so simple. How does God love those with whom He is angry (Psalm 7:11)? Two things must be taken into consideration: (1) what love is, and (2) whom God loves.

The Bible clearly asserts that "*God is love*" (1 John 4:8). However, love is but one characteristic (attribute) of God's person. God is much more than love. For example, He is also justice and righteousness. Although God is love, sinners must face God's righteous displeasure for their God-despising sins.

God Is Holy

God is holy. Holiness is not, per se, an attribute of God, but the sum of His attributes. Two aspects of God's holiness are Goodness and severity (Romans 11:22a). When God expresses His love, we see His goodness. When God expresses His wrath (or hatred, Psalm 5:5), we see His severity.

This is where the real "good news" comes in. God has made provision for the satisfaction of His own righteous claims (severity) against some sinners by giving His Son as a sacrifice for their sins. This is the declaration of John 3:16. "*God loved* (demonstrated His goodness to) *the world in such a way that some sinners* (believers) *will not perish, but have eternal life.*" However, unbelievers remain under God's awful severity (John 3:36). So, in order to understand what God's loving the world means, we must understand what God's love is.

God is good (Matthew 19:17). The Psalmist declared, "*You are good, and do good*" (Psalm 119:68). This doing of good is the love of God.

The Love of God

The nineteenth-century Baptist theologian, James P. Boyce, described five ways that God expresses His love depending on the object of His love. The attribute is the same, but the object assumes different forms.

1. The love of approbation (what the Puritans called complacent love)

This love of approbation (or approval) can be expressed only on a worthy object—one having perfect characteristics in God's eyes. God loves the excellent with approval. This is how God loves Himself because He is infinitely excellent.

God also loves with approval the things He purposes because they are wise, just, and gracious—therefore, worthy objects. When God looked upon His creation at the beginning, He declare it to be very good (Genesis 1:31).

Since this love is expressed to worthy objects only, neither guilty nor repentant sinners can be loved in this way. However, because God included the elect in His divine purpose before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), they are the objects of this love. Even

though the elect became sinners, they are loved, not for what they became by Adam's fall, but by virtue of God's wise and gracious purpose in them (Jeremiah 29:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:9, 10).

2. The love of benevolence or kindness

Since kindness does not require a worthy object, both the guilty and the innocent can be objects of this kind of love. God wishes happiness to all His creatures. He showers His creation with an abundance of good gifts (James 1:17; Matthew 5:45) so that by these gifts His creatures may be happy. "*Blessed be the Lord, who daily loads us with benefits*" (Psalm 68:19). "*May people be blessed [happy] in him: all nations shall call him blessed*" (Psalm 72:17).

The response of all men to God's goodness ought to be thanksgiving and praise. But, sadly, it is not, for "*when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful*" (Romans 1:21). In Romans 2:4, Paul asks, "*Do you think nothing of the riches of his goodness and forbearance?*" This ingratitude—this neglected duty is so unforgivably sinful.

3. The love of compassion or pity

All God's creatures suffer and not necessarily as the result of sin. Sin certainly increases suffering. However, innocent people also suffer. Christ was sinless, yet He suffered (Hebrews 4:15). Pain and discomfort are beneficial gifts for our protection.

God has compassion on those who suffer. "*But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious*" (Psalm 86:15). "*But though he cause grief [in judgment], he has compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love*" (Lamentations 3:32). "[Jesus] *saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick*" (Matthew 14:14).

Compassion often takes the form of forbearance and delay of punishment. These delays are often due to His greater purposes. "*Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you*" (Isaiah 30:18). It is this compassionate forbearance that is the root of John 3:16; that is, God loved the world in putting off judgment for sin in order that believers should not perish through His giving of His Son for them.

4. The love of forgiveness or mercy

Mercy can be exercised only toward unworthy objects since no innocent creature needs to be forgiven or pardoned.

Mercy does not necessarily require the satisfaction of justice. For example, God, as the King of Israel, was merciful toward Israel's transgressions against the Covenant, forgiving them on the basis of animal sacrifices that could not permanently take away sins (Hebrews 10:4). This mercy did not secure eternal salvation.

The mercy shown in salvation, however, does require the work of Christ on the cross. God says, "*I will be merciful* [Greek: "to propitiate" (see Luke 18:13)] *to their unrighteousness.*" Propitiation is the act of Christ in satisfying God's just wrath against sins of the guilty by taking the penalty for those sins (1 Peter 3:18). This makes it possible for God to show mercy to sinners and bring them to Himself.

Mercy is also a sovereign prerogative. God says, "*I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion*" (Romans 9:15). God is not obligated to be merciful to anyone under any condition. In fact, mercy itself provides the only conditions of its expression. Thus, mercy "*depends not on him who wills or runs, but on God, who has mercy*" (Romans 9:16).

5. The love of affection

Affection differs from the love of approbation in that it does not require a worthy recipient. The story of the Prodigal Son is an illustration of affection (Luke 15:11-24). The son was certainly not worthy of his father's affection.

Affection also differs from the love of benevolence in that it discriminate, focusing only on an object of special interest and not everyone. It differs from compassion and mercy because it is not a response to suffering or sin. Affection arises from relationship; e.g. father and son or Christ and His church (Ephesians 5:25). There is also an affection that arises from dependence (John 14:21-26).

Conclusion

God's love is not mere sentimentality. God is good, but He is also severe. While guilty sinners may experience God benevolence and compassion, they are also subject to His wrath, which may come at any moment. They cannot assume His mercy, but they can and should cry out for it. The Gospel, however, is not based upon God's love. It is a message that God has provided the mercy of salvation through Christ for those who hear and believe that message (John 5:24).

Only those who can claim that God has a special interest in them can also say that God loves them (1 John 3:1). God has a people, His elect chosen by Him in eternity past in whom He has a special interest and for whom He has a special purpose. If you are one of those, you certainly can say that God loves you.

(1) You are loved in Christ, with complacency because of His purpose to save His elect—elective love. *"In love, having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will"* (Ephesians 1:4b, 5).

(2) You are loved of the Father in benevolence because the Father greatly desires to seek our happiness. *"Happy is that people, that is in such a case: yea, happy is that people, whose God is the LORD"* (Psalm 144:15).

(3) You are loved of the Father in compassion because *"he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust"* (Psalm 103:14).

(4) You are loved of the Father in mercy, because He propitiated your sin in Christ. *"But God commends his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us"* (Romans 5:8).

(5) You are loved of the Father because of His special relationship to you. *"Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God"* (1 John 3:1).

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