

## *“The Love of God as an Attribute”*

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Read 1 John 4:7-13

The idea of God’s attributes appears very foreign to our everyday thoughts and vernacular. To speak of attributes is to address the area of essence or being. It describes what something is at its core. It creates for the subject identity. It is what makes something unique or distinct. Dogs or cats or birds all have characteristics that are unique to their identity and essence. Just as humans have characteristics that create an identity that is uniquely human. Attributes, however, are not always inherently unique. But when speaking of God as He exists in His attributes, there does come a point where the attributes that create His identity become uniquely His. Such attributes are not shared by anything created.

For example, the attributes of God such as self-existence or immutability or omnipresence are unshared by anything created. These kinds of attributes (i.e. the incommunicable attributes) set God apart from what He has created. Yet, there are other attributes characterizing God that He has chosen to place inside of those who bear His image (i.e. man). For example, the attributes of God such as holiness, mercy, goodness, and love are those that exist finitely in those who bear His image.

We want to understand the attribute of love as it exists in God. John, in his first letter, states plainly, “God is love.” This thought is unique in that all love is not divine, but all expressions of love are possible because God is love and because God loves first. Thus, “love is not God,” but “God is love.”

When considering this quality of God, it is important to remember that God is more than the sum total of His attributes and that His attributes do not exist in isolation. The attributes of God are means whereby finite man begins to understand the infinite. What is known of God is a whisper of what can be known of God. The significance of these three thoughts becomes foundational when the question is posed, “What is the fundamental attribute of God?” There is no attribute that is fundamental. To speak of this would isolate the attributes and categorize them to our detriment. The only reason we categorize the attributes is so that finite man might understand their infinite God. But for us to conclude that our understanding of God is exhaustive or completely correct would be theologically negligent.

The love of God is a gracious love, an omnipotent love, a holy love, and a wrathful love, etc. We cannot separate the love of God from the very essence of God without doing an injustice to our picture of God from biblical revelation.

God is love. What does this mean for us?

**First**, nothing God does is ever absent from who God is (1 John 4:8). Everything God does has as a driving motive the very love of God. Romans 8:28 tells us that everything works together for good to those who love God and are the called ones according to His purpose. Biblical history is an ongoing story. It is the outworking of His eternal

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purpose. There is nothing arbitrary or accidental in life. All of life is a continuum that has each piece connected to the whole. Thus, every apparent act of evil or circumstance that would appear to be overwhelming has behind it the love of God. God's love does not absent evil from happening and God's love does not negate His omnipotence. What happens is an expression of an omnipotent love.

**Second**, the idea of love exists because God is love (1 John 4:7, 12). The command to love and the demand for love is only possible because there is a God of love. Love is what sets those born of God apart from those whose father is the devil (John 8). John continues by noting how love is what identifies the people of God to those who do not know God (John 13:34, 35). **It is because of who He is that we become what we are.** I have always marveled at the idea that love is our primary identifier. It is not doctrinal precision (although this is immensely important to biblical faith) and it is not stringent or abundant obedience (although this is likewise impossible to separate from biblical faith) that mark us as the children of God. It is God-like love.

**Third**, the redemptive activity of God is a manifestation of His love (1 John 4:9, 10). When the Father chose to send His Son into the world to become its Savior, His motive for acting was love. The love of God is unconditional and selfless. **He did what was done because we could never do what was needed.** His love made possible a propitiatory sacrifice. It was His love that appeased His wrath against sin and sinners. This action on His part leaves us speechless. Its breadth, width, depth, and length (the sheer magnitude and enormity of it) cause it to be incomprehensible. God loves us.

**Finally**, if God loves the lesser without condition, how can we love less our equals (1 John 4:11)? Because God loves us, we ought to love one another. We have no reason or excuse not to love the body of Christ. **The redemptive activity of God is always driving the redeemed members toward unity.** The greatest travesty against the redemptive activity of the cross is disunity. Those who would divide the body of Christ are treasonous. They are evil people who blaspheme God and His singular work of a vicarious sacrifice.

If this is true, then how should we now live?

First, always love. Love is always a proper response to any situation no matter how confusing it might appear to be. Never respond in a way that is less than loving.

Second, expressions of love are an ongoing testimony to a pure and unadulterated source of love. See God in the acts of love unfolding around you every day.

Third, the cross is a constant call to the enormity of God's love. Keep it as a centerpiece of your theology.

Finally, loving the body of Christ is never optional. Loving the body of Christ is to be the most natural activity for anyone within the body of Christ. It is as we love one another that the love of God is seen by the casual observer and the intentional pursuer.