

## “What Love is This?” - The Love of God

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 Title: “The Love of God as an Attribute”  
 Text: 1 John 4:7-13, 16  
 Theme: God is love.

Many would suggest that Jesus was born around September 29, 5BC. The idea that December 25 is the birth date of Jesus coincides more with the Roman Church adapting culturally to the pagan ideology of its day.

<http://www.new-life.net/chrtms10.htm>

Regardless as to the exact date, it is during the Christmas season that we celebrate the incarnation of God, when the second member of the Godhead took upon Himself the nature of humanity. The idea of Christmas, of God taking upon Himself the nature of man, is the outworking of who God is. He is love and the incarnation is a demonstration of this attribute. The four Sundays preceding December 25 make up what is called “The Advent Season.”

From the Latin word "adventus" or coming: A period of time before Christmas, beginning on the Sunday closest to Nov-30 when the birth of Jesus is recalled. Advent candles are often lit.

[www.religioustolerance.org/gl\\_a.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/gl_a.htm)

Advent is a time of joyous anticipation, but also of penance and preparation for the great Christmas feast.

<http://www.americancatholic.org/Features/Advent/faqs.asp#established>

Advent actually opens the liturgical year, appropriately as a time of waiting for the coming of the savior.

[www.holycross.edu/departments/visarts/projects/kempe/text/gloss1.html](http://www.holycross.edu/departments/visarts/projects/kempe/text/gloss1.html)

It is during this advent season that I desire to focus on the love of God.

### This is an eternal truth

If I was dying, I would want to know that God loves me. This is the idea that sustains us in our troublesome moments. God’s love for people comes through an incarnational ministry, where His people become His hands and feet to those who are dying around them. It is the love of God that moves us to show people the love of God through tangible means.

### Why am I teaching this?

If I try to love from myself, then my love becomes self serving. If God loves through me, then I am enabled to love others with a selfless love. You will never express a godlike love if you do not know that God is love.

What seduces our attention and distracts our appetites from loving biblically?

We are a self-centered people. We want to know “what’s in it for us?” We want to know that when we give something/anything that there is a return on our investment. We always give “with strings attached.” We are a selfish people. Our selfishness is a part of our fallen nature. It is not something to be celebrated, but overcome. The antidote to our selfishness is to give sacrificially and to source our giving in the God who is love.

What does the love of God look like?

- Ruth and Naomi

<sup>16</sup> “But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. <sup>17</sup> Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me.” <sup>18</sup> When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her” (Ruth 1:16-18).

- Paul and Philemon

<sup>17</sup> “If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me. <sup>18</sup> But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; <sup>19</sup> I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well)” (Philem. 17-19).

What does this look like?

When you and I help those who cannot return to us any favor or personal benefit, then we are looking like the love of God. When you and I serve others without any approval or reward, then we are looking like the love of God.

The hymn writer seeks to explain the incomprehensibility of God’s love when he penned the following stanzas.

“The Love of God”  
By Frederick M. Lehman

The love of God is greater far  
than tongue or pen can ever tell;  
it goes beyond the highest star,  
and reaches to the lowest hell . . .

3<sup>rd</sup> Stanza — Could we with ink the ocean fill,  
And were the skies of parchment made,  
Were every stalk on earth a quill,  
And every man a scribe by trade;  
To write the love of God above  
Would drain the ocean dry;  
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,  
Though stretched from sky to sky.

Frederick M. Lehman wrote this song in 1917 in Pasadena, California, and it was published in *Songs That Are Different*, Volume 2, 1919. The lyrics are based on the Jewish poem *Haddamut*, written in Aramaic in 1050 by Meir Ben Isaac Nehorai, a cantor in Worms, Germany; they have been translated into at least eighteen languages. The following story gives us the circumstances that form the basis for its writing.

“One day, during short intervals of inattention to our work, we picked up a scrap of paper and, seated upon an empty lemon box pushed against the wall, with a stub pencil, added the (first) two stanzas and chorus of the song... the lines (3rd stanza from the Jewish poem) had been found penciled on the wall of a patient’s room in an insane asylum after he had been carried to his grave, the general opinion was that this inmate had written the epic in moments of sanity.”

It is impossible for us to comprehend the enormity of God’s love, but while fighting for sanity, it was the love of God that brought comfort to the tormented mind of the mentally insane.

The word “love” (agape) “is not simply an emotion which rises unbidden in our hearts; it is a principle by which we deliberately live. Agape has supremely to do with the will . . . . (It) is a deliberate principle of the mind” (William Barclay, More New Testament Words, 15)

The love of God is as fundamental to who God is as is His holiness, that without either God would cease being God. Because God is love those who take upon themselves His nature (2 Pet. 1:4) are identified by this love (John 13:34, 35). God’s motivation for redeeming His people is sourced in the love He has first and foremost for Himself and then for that which He creates.

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.

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? I would like us to consider the idea of God being love by looking at 1 John 4:7-13.

“In this passage there occurs what is probably the greatest single statement about God in the whole bible, that *God is love.*” (William Barclay, The Letters of John, 98).

“Robert Law expresses the opinion that within these verses, 1 John ‘rises to its sublimest height.’ Its sentences, he says, are ‘sentences of gold pure and unadorned.’” (Curtis Vaughan, 1, 2, 3 John, 101)

“The word ‘love’ occurs approximately forty-six times in 1 John. No fewer than [18] of these occurrences are in the passage before us.” (Curtis Vaughan, 1, 2, 3 John, 102)

#### I. The love of God as an identifier (vv. 7, 12)

<sup>7</sup> “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and **everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.** <sup>12</sup> No one has seen God at any time; **if we love one another**, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.”

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 has as its origin and source in God. It is therefore a distinctive aspect of His being and flows forth from Him as light radiates from the sun. This being the case, the presence of love in one’s life is an evidence that he is a Christian.” (Curtis Vaughan, 1, 2, 3 John, 103)

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.**

“A person cannot come into a real relationship with a loving God without being transformed into a loving person.” (I. Howard Marshall, The Epistles of John, NICNT, 212)

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 Godlike love.

Does our community know us as lovers of God? Can they see from what we are that our God is a God of love? Do they feel the love of God when we are in their presence? This is what sets us apart as the people of God. We are selfless and sacrificial in our expressions of love.

This is seen in . . .

- Our financial giving
- Our parenting
- Our marriages
- Our places of employment
- Our recreational moments
- Our worship
- Our service

“In His divine nature and essence, God has never been seen by any living man. Yet in the experience of mutual love among believers, this invisible God actually lives in us and His love is made complete in us.” (Zane Hodges, “1 John,” BKC, 899).

The people of God are known by love because their God is love.

## II. The love of God as an attribute (v. 8 – “God is love”)

<sup>8</sup> “The one who does not love does not know God, for **God is love.**”

To say that God is love is not the same as saying love is God. His nature is to love. Wrath is a reaction against sin. God does not have an attribute of wrath. Love, however, is part of His nature. God spontaneously loves His creation.

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 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.

God gives of Himself and His gifts. God does not have to will to be these things; this is simply what God is! "The tri-unity of God means that there has been an eternal exercise of God's love, even before there were any created beings." (Millard Erickson, Christian Theology, 292).

What is love?

Love is that element in God which moves Him to give Himself and His gifts spontaneously, voluntarily, righteously, and eternally, for the good of personal beings, regardless of their merit or response.

Some would argue that a loving God would condemn no one. Yet, love is not the center of His attributes. A holy God demands the exacting of a penalty against crimes committed.

"John does not stay on the level of abstract theological assertion but proceeds directly to speak of how God has showed his love." (I. Howard Marshall, The Epistles of John, NICNT, 213)

### III. The love of God as a revealer (vv. 9, 10) — The incarnation and the cross

<sup>9</sup> "By this the love of God was manifested in us that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. <sup>10</sup> In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. <sup>12</sup> No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us. <sup>13</sup> By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit" (1 John 4:9, 10, 12, 13).

"The point of the entire statement, therefore, is that the sending of God's Son into the world was the means whereby God made His love visible to us." (Curtis Vaughan, 1, 2, 3 John, 105)

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.**

"This love was not a response to man's love, but an initiative on God's part." (Zane Hodges, "1 John," BKC, 899).

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.

“The greatness of the divine love is indicated in at least four ways.

- A. The greatness of God’s love is seen in the greatness of the gift which love prompted God to bestow on us (“His only begotten Son” [v. 9a]).
- B. The greatness of the divine love is seen in the purpose of the Son’s mission (“that we might live” [v. 9b]).
- C. The greatness of God’s love is brought out by a consideration of the recipient’s of His love (“He loved us” [v. 10a]).
- D. The greatness of God’s love is seen in the propitiatory character of Christ’s death (v. 10b).

God is eternally self-giving, although not always to the same objects. His love is not fickle (Jer. 31:3; 1 Cor. 13:8).

#### IV. The love of God as a motivator (v. 11)

<sup>11</sup> “Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

“Nothing less than God’s love in Christ is the model for the love Christians should have toward one another.” (Zane Hodges, “1 John,” BKC, 899).

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.

“The recipients of such love have no choice as to their response. Their sins have been taken away by this gracious act of God. They cannot do anything else but show love to one another.” (I. Howard Marshall, The Epistles of John, NICNT, 215)

APPLICATION: (Where do we go from here? What is the NEXT STEP?)

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. His love toward us should solicit our love toward Him (1 John 4:10). His love toward us provides for us an example of how we should love one another.

If God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. Just as His love toward us is unconditional, so should our love for others be unconditional (Eph. 4:32). Just as His love is for my benefit, so should our love be for the benefit of others (Eph. 5:1).

Who in your life do you find difficult to love? That is the person for whom you should be praying.

- **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.

What is God doing all around you as expressions of His unconditional love?

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

If you have made yourself the center of your universe, then today you need to replace yourself with Christ?

- **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.

Who in our fellowship are you loving unconditionally? Do not always look for the easy way out and pick the most loveable person. Find something or someone that you might not naturally gravitate toward and in the name of God do something unrewardable toward that individual.

Let us make this Christmas season a time of reflecting on and manifesting openly the love of God toward those who are the objects of His love. May this advent season be truly life altering.