

## **Christian Love**

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At a time when I am thinking carefully about issues in my own spirituality, today's theme is amazing timing? For these verses of John's Gospel are probably the best starting point for thinking of our relationship with God. How often do you ask yourself the question: 'How am I with God?' Today is an opportunity to do so.

The love of God is incredibly challenging for those who really want to take it up. Rather than seeking what religion is about, even the Christian religion or the church, we should be seeking out God and finding out where we are with him. Believing in God is good but is it enough? Being acquainted with God is good, but can't you be acquainted with someone without really loving them. When the little girl said, 'God is my best friend!' she was implying something at the very heart of true Christian spirituality.

Attacks on Christianity have obscured the truth about God. He is pictured as a God of anger who wants to harm His people, who watches their every move in order to catch them out doing wrong and then punish them – more interested in justice than in mercy. But listen to the third verse of F. M. Lehman's hymn, the Love of God: "Could we with ink the ocean fill, and were the skies of parchment made, Were ev'ry stalk on earth a quill, and ev'ry 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."

Much more than we do, we should spend time focusing on our God of love. Are we all clear why God watches us? He watches us closely not to judge us but because He loves us. It is reported that when Isaac Watts, the famous hymn writer was a child he was visiting an elderly Christian woman in her home and she asked him to read a framed Bible text hanging on her wall. The text was the King James Version of Genesis 16:13: "Thou God Seest Me." After Watts had read it, the woman said: "When you are older, people will say to you that God always watches you to see when you do wrong, to punish you. Don't think of it that way. Take the text home, Isaac, and remember that God loves you so much He can't take His eyes off you." I had not thought about it like this before.

What is this thing called love? It is used in so many ways and the word carries an incredible amount of baggage. It can be a love for God, or for the truth, but also for having your back scratched; love for your family or for fish and chips with vinegar, or a McDonalds Happy Meal, or in an illicit love affair. It is overused and devalued. We toss it around and end up trivializing it. From some real "gushing" love songs to marketing advertisements to the adulterer looking for an excuse, the word "love" is so misused and overused that we don't really know what to think when someone says, "I love you."

It doesn't help, for example, that the word love apparently appears 508 times in the NIV version of the Bible and 697 times if we count words with 'love' in them. I put the words: 'love in the Bible' in the search engine Google and it came up with 174m results. How

many searches would come up just for the word love? A big danger is that people will make a 'dislectic' mistake and conclude not that God is love, but that Love is God with Love spelt with a capital 'L'. All the meanings as to what many regard love is are made worse when, like a god, such love issues commands which they obey when selfishness, meanness, manipulation, treachery, for example, are all defended in the name of 'love'.

We do have a challenge here, because John says that God is love! John, in his New Testament writings, took an enormous risk. He gave the concept of love such a radical character that it shook all of the existing religious doctrine and institutions to the core. He taught that love is to give yourself away for the benefit of others regardless of whether or not they attract you or deserve your love. And John learned all this standing there at the foot of the cross where God's love, through his master, Jesus' death, was poured out for those who put him there. This love, according to Paul (Romans 5:5) 'God has poured out into our hearts by means of the Holy Spirit who is God's gift to us.' and Paul goes on to claim that what he has worked into us must now be worked out in daily living.

Very often people are loved on the basis of their performance. When someone pleases or excites us, or does something for us, we appreciate what they do and use the term "love" to describe our response. But God's love is not based on our performance! Paul continues, in Romans (Chapter 5:6-8) "From when we were still helpless Christ died for the wicked at the time that God chose. It is a difficult thing for someone to die for a righteous person. It may even be that someone might dare to die for a good person. But God has shown us how much he loves us – it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us!"

Christ died for us - when? Was he responding to something good in our performance? Was he saying, "Oh, that Peter Smith, he's a great man! Look at all he has achieved! Because he has been so good, I will pour my love on him." No, not at all. Paul uses words - "helpless," "wicked," and "sinners" to describe us. Christ died for people like this, not for people who look like they have got it all together and can do things perfectly!

So why did God love us? Read Paul's letter to the Ephesians (1:4): 'Even before the world was made God had already chosen us to be his through our union with Christ, so that we would be holy and without fault before him.' Nothing made us attractive to God! It was God's choice to adopt us, from the beginning. God's love is unconditional because it is the result of his sovereign choice and nothing else.

In my own look at where I am with God, I find this deeply reassuring. I feel somehow that I don't have to look over my shoulder all the time, wondering what God is going to do because I have blown it again! He is not going to abandon me. It is not all based on my regularly poor performance and God is not one to change his mind. It is somehow reassuring, too, that God already knows the worst about me and he still has chosen to love me! He knows the worst about you too, and he still chooses to love you!

In looking through an A – Z of different Christian 'bits and pieces', I came across, under 'L' and 'Love' a true story about a soldier who was about to come home from the

Vietnam War and he called his parents in America. “Mum and Dad, I have a favour to ask. Can I bring a friend home with me?” “Yes, son, we’d love to meet him,” says Mum and Dad. “There is something you need to know,” continues their son, “he is hurt badly, he has lost an arm and a leg in a land mine accident. He has nowhere to go, can he come and stay with us?” “Sorry to hear that, says Dad, “maybe we can find him somewhere to live.” “No, Dad, I want him to live with us,” replies the son. “Son,” says Mum and Dad, “that’s a big ask. Someone with such a handicap would be a terrible burden on us, we have our own lives to live and we can’t let that interfere with our own lives. I think you should just come home and forget about this guy. He’ll be OK, he’ll find somewhere.”

Then their son hung up and the parents heard nothing more for a while. Several days later, they received a call from the San Francisco Police. Their son had died, falling off a building and the Police believed it was suicide. The grief stricken parents flew to San Francisco; they were taken to the morgue and shown their son’s body. They recognised him and to their horror, they also discovered something they didn’t know; their son had only one arm and one leg.

William Barclay writes, in *Flesh and Spirit*: ‘if lovelessness activity repels people from the church and the gospel, it also evacuates the Christian of his significance before God. He becomes a nonentity, a cipher. God cannot use the loveless Christian for his glory, even if he is gifted with prophetic speaking; even if he is able to understand and explain the deep things about God, even if he is knowledgeable about the vast field of truth and experience and even if he has the bold measure of faith envisaged by Jesus himself – the faith that moves mountains.’

Jesus commanded us to love one another. But how can anyone command someone to love? You can, I am sure, brainwash people to hate or to do whatever you want them to do (as many have done successfully). You can make robots show love, but you cannot make people love. Yet here God is commanding us to love one another, in the same way that he has loved us. Tom Wright, in his commentary, writes that the ‘command’ to love is given by one who has himself done everything that love can do. When a mother loves a child she creates the context in which the child is free to love her in return.

Tom Wright states that Jesus came to make us more human, to give us freedom to love, changing that one life maybe because we love; making that one decision, doing that one task, maybe that shows God’s love and which makes our world a better place for someone, somewhere. The love that gives itself away, though, comes from God. The girl, who was buying her father a pair of slippers for his birthday was asked by her friend, “Where will you get the money?” Surprised, the little girl responded, “Why, Daddy will give me the money.” We receive everything from God. Nothing is truly ours. Our ‘giving and loving’ to God and others, is just ‘returning.’

God chose you Peter Smith and loves you despite your performance. God is watching you, Peter, because he can’t take his eyes off you. Get a handle on these points, Peter and go and respond. God can’t take his eyes off any of you either. He chose you and loves

you. See if you can get a handle on these and go and respond too.