

Counting on the love of God

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[0:00] So, this is our subject for this morning, the love of God. It's a good subject at the beginning of a new year as we look into the future.

It's actually a good subject for any time of year at all. The Apostle Paul, one of the first Christian preachers, made this statement.

He said that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. And I'd like us to come to some sort of agreement as we go through that that is a remarkable thing.

And wonderful statement to be able to make. To be able to say that I am so in the personal grip of the person who made the universe, that he grips me in love and nothing can separate me from that love.

I can't think of a better statement to be able to make about anybody or any situation than to say that I am gripped by the love of God and nothing can separate me from that.

[1:23] So, that's where we're going to. That sort of sets the theme. And if you've enjoyed that thought, you might think I can go to sleep now. And you can. I mean, that's all I'm going to say.

What could be better than to be gripped by the love of God? I do want to say that this subject is commonly referred to, but I don't think it's easy to do justice to this subject.

And I do think that the treatment of this subject is often mangled up. Sometimes the love of God is spoken of in a way to make it trivial and easy and unremarkable.

And it's none of those things. Sometimes the love of God is made sort of sentimental and linked up with baby chickens and, I don't know, bunny rabbits.

And I've got nothing against baby chickens and I have a reasonable relationship with rabbits. You know, we're not. But there's more to God's love than that.

[2:32] And, of course, you've got the whole issue of the sort of psychobabble of, you know, God, of self-esteem and all these sorts of things. So, I think this subject can get reduced in such a way as to actually mislead people.

But we need to grasp this subject. We need to grasp the subject of God's love for his people. It is a fundamental thing for the Christian.

It is absolutely basic. It is vital for Christian growth. It's the sort of compost, if you like, in which Christian growth takes place. It is certainly essential for Christian survival because under pressure, and this world does contain pressure because we have a nasty, tyrant enemy who will use all sorts of nasty tricks on us and push us to the very limits of what we can cope with, we need to grasp the love of God for Christian survival.

And also, an understanding of the love of God is the very thing that determines the quality of Christian community and Christian service.

So, let's not have unformed views of God's love. Let's have well-informed views of God's love.

[3:58] And let us grasp that and let the love of God grasp us. And I say not to mention evangelism because God's love is one of the constraining factors in the whole matter of conveying faith to other people.

Christianity is a religion which believes it is so absolutely right that it's not right to let other people just go their own way.

You want to make every effort to say to people, this is the true way. This is the true blessing. Come and experience it yourself. And that's evangelism.

So, here are some texts. So, I've got two pages of texts. And you might or might not like to look them up. I'm in two minds as to whether I'm going to be fast enough. But I'm going to start off with where we were at the beginning. Which was Psalm 106. Well, it wasn't where we started, actually. We were in Psalm 136.

[5:02] Psalm 106. So, this is Old Testament. Give thanks to the Lord for he is good. His love endures forever. And that's almost like the heartbeat of Israelite faith.

We read it right at the beginning. Give thanks to the Lord for he is good. His love endures forever. Give thanks to the God of gods. His love endures forever. Give thanks to the Lord of lords. His love endures forever. This is about the steadfast love. The sticking, staying, not fading away love of the God of Israel.

And it crops up all the way through the Old Testament. So, I'm just sort of giving you one sentence there that represents many, many other quotations.

And there's a particularly poignant use of that in a book written when everything seemed to have gone terribly, terribly wrong. When Jerusalem, the headquarters of God on earth in the Old Testament times was in ruins.

[6:09] And you have this statement in Lamentations 3.22. Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed.

For his compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. We sang it. But it's a very poignant thing to say.

Because they were looking around on the smoking ruins of Jerusalem and could still say, Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed.

His compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. So, there's an Old Testament text about God's love.

Here's some New Testament texts. This is John in his Gospel. John 13. Where it says, It was just before the Passover feast, Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father.

[7:16] Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love. The evening meal was being served. If the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray him.

Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power. That he had come from God and was returning to God. So, he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, wrapped a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin, and began to wash his disciples' feet.

Remarkable statement. But here's this man who, at a dinner party, nobody else had done washing feet. You'd think he was the guest of honor, but he gets himself ready to wash the feet of the other people.

And it says, Why did he do this? Because he knew that he had come from God. And he loved his own, and he showed them the full extent of his love. Jesus showed the full extent of his love.

Here's another text representing a whole string of texts. This is John's letter. 1 John 4.10 says, This is love.

[8:32] Not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Amen.

Here in his love. Not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. He says, the same writer says, How great.

I think there's a C, behold, in there. Behold, how great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God.

Children is right. It isn't, so it's not gender specific. How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God.

Romans 5. Paul says, Rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, although for a good man someone might possibly dare to die.

[9:50] But God demonstrates his own love for us in this. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

And he invites us to imagine, to picture the cross where Jesus was crucified, when the sky went dark, and he had a crown of thorns squashed onto his head.

He'd been beaten and bruised. And he shouted out, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And Paul says, That scene shows us how much God loves us.

God demonstrates his love for us in this. While we were still sinners, while we were still obnoxious, Christ died for us.

And then the text that I mentioned at the beginning, Paul works his way through his argument and comes up with this sort of statement. I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[11:21] Fantastically realistic text. He says there's all sorts of powers against us, height, depth, angels, demons, but this love is so strong that none of these things, none of them, can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.

Here's a text from Ephesians which says, praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ for he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will to the praise of his glorious grace.

In love he predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ. This is a dimension of his love which goes before we even existed.

And the prayer that was read to us, I pray that you may have power to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

[12:50] So a prayer there, I want you Christians to grasp the dimensions, the height and depth and length and breadth of the love of Christ and to know it, to be definite, to be convinced, to know the love that surpasses knowledge.

There's something deeply mysterious about it. You need help. You need help to grasp this. But there it is. And this text comes as a real bolt from the blue, a real surprise.

John 3, 16. All these other texts have talked about God's love for his people. This text says that the Son of Man must be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

That's a very surprising text. It's not God's love focused on his people. It's a love that spreads out across the world.

[14:09] He so loved the world that Christ died on the cross. So those are some texts and I've just sort of plucked them out and usually we try quite carefully to put things in a context and follow an argument through but this time I've just pulled them out like sweeties really and just scattered them but I would like to ask some questions about those texts and this subject.

So here's some questions to help us sort of digest it. So question number one does God love us all? Does God love every single person? Okay, it's a good question.

So here's one answer which I think is a wrong answer. The answer says well of course he does because we're all so lovable. So he'd say here I am I'm a very lovable person I've got you know my tick list I was trying to say tick list and checklist in the same word but it can't be done.

Here's a tick here's a tick list okay I've got a bubbly personality how could God fail to love me? I've got good looks how could God not love me? I've got very high qualifications a very clever person perhaps or I've achieved things in my life or whatever I know we've all got a little list of things that would say well God must love me because I'm a rather nice person or you could say there's a spark of good in everybody and the Bible doesn't say that the Bible says everybody is made in the image of God that's the nobility of humanity but in every single person that image is spoiled you know like a ruined castle as some of the nobility of the original but it's not what it should be none of those reasons is a reason for God to love us they're all wrong I think the word self-esteem is a bit of a slippery idea can mean all sorts of things but if we think that we're so good that God is bound to love us because look at us then we're totally totally wrong it shows an ignorance and a blindness on these two subjects ourselves and God a great theologian Calvin said

to get things right we need to know these two things ourselves and God and they fit together and unless we realise who how great God is we'll have a wrong view of ourself etc and the Bible says if you think that in the eyes of God you are a lovable cuddly person that God's going to pat you on the head you do not realise what you're really like spiritually you do not realise whose eyes are looking at you and the quotation from the book of Revelation would be appropriate you do not realise that you are wretched pitiful poor blind and naked none of us is lovable in that sense two people went up to pray says Jesus one of them said look at me how good I am look at all I do look at all I achieve and the other one went up to God and said

God be merciful to me a sinner and Jesus says which of those had the right view of himself which of those were saying the right things of God which of those went home right with God and it wasn't the person who thought I'm so lovable it was the person who thought I'm just so rubbish God be merciful to me a sinner that's the person who had it right so does God love us all because we're lovable no he doesn't does God love us all because that's his job you know people think that it's God's job isn't it he's a sort of celestial Father Christmas with a sort of a beard probably a bit of a smile sitting on a cloud a little bit of a harmless old duffer who just loves people and that is a profound presumption how dare we assume that about God how dare we attribute to God oh well that's all he is he's just he owes us love

[18:49] I mean look at us what's not to like and we get the thing completely backwards who owes who what we owe God God has given us everything life and breath and everything else and our position is that we owe him our total allegiance our love we should love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and strength and mind it isn't that he just ought to love us goodness that's his job but we owe God our life and breath and everything else our unquestioning obedience but the human condition is that's what it is that we don't do that we don't respond to God as we should we take him for granted it's a huge insult huge insult it's very quietly done but it's an insult and here's a text which would be appropriate from Isaiah I reared children and brought them up but they have rebelled against me the ungrateful child syndrome that God has given us so much but by nature we rebel against him that's not a lovable thing to do so

I ask the question again does God love us all because we're lovable no because it's his job to love us no does God love us all well actually there is a sense as we read in that text and we should say it with wonder and shock and a sort of intake of breath God could love this world with all its rebellion and oppression and tyranny and selfishness and pornography and people treating people the way they treat one another that God could in any sense at all say I love this world that's a breathtaking statement this is the text the son of man must be lifted up for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life and the measure of that love and the demonstration of that love is not that God goes around and pats everybody on the head and says I love you

I love you the measure of it is I've sent Jesus Christ to die on the cross for you for people like you so that you could not perish but believe on him and have an eternal life it's love in a particular sense it's a love of good will that God says to the whole world look I'm seeking you I'm asking you I'm not just imagining you don't exist I'm seeking you I've got my eye on you I'm saying look at Jesus Christ look at what he did I'm seeking you I'm inviting you don't perish but have eternal life come to what Jesus did come to him and have eternal life and it's a love which goes to extraordinary lengths extraordinary lengths God says I send my own dear son to die that awful death so that you could be forgiven that's a remarkable love that's a remarkable love that's the width and breadth of the love of God which seeks and invites and goes to such extraordinary lengths but it is saying you must move it's saying you can't stay where you are under the light of this love because if you do you'll perish and this sort of love is saying come to me come to Christ believe on him so that you will have eternal life and not perish that's what this love is saying it's a sort of merciful love a willingness love an inviting love and maybe that's for you this morning maybe that's the word for you that God's love is saying to you come to Jesus Christ don't delay get that straight get that right that's what you need to do okay let's ask the question again so question two so that was does God love everybody and there's a qualified answer to that second question does God love his people so these are the

people who've come to Jesus Christ and my answer is yes he does and this is fundamental to understanding what it is to be a Christian and it's also something Christians have problems with because they have this objection and you can understand this God cannot possibly love me because I have begun to realise like the tax collector I was referring to that I am a sinner I am a failure I must be a disappointment to God I'm certainly a disappointment to myself I feel like I'm rubbish I know I'm ungrateful I know I'm fickle I know I'm weak I know I'm sinful God can't possibly love me you might have thought that yourself you might have been tempted to think that yourself and this is why we need to grasp about God's love because his love is not to do with our deserving but about his determined and extravagant generosity so that's the bit we've got to try and teach ourselves it's not to do with my deserving but his determination and his extravagance you see both of those are the things that go against the grain of us because we think can God be so determined that he could even love me answer yes and in order to love me it must be a really big project because to overcome my sin and everything you know and it's extravagant see we if we were you know if the government were doing a cost benefit analysis sort of thing they'd say that's over the top we can't afford that but God says

I can you know extravagant no problem for me that's the sort of love I have so how does God love his people so I don't know whether this is helpful but I wanted to focus on these words in this text the in Christ Jesus our Lord I am convinced that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord so this is just a little bit of a thought here where is this love to be found answer in Christ Jesus our Lord where do we look for it in Christ Jesus our Lord the trouble is that we tend by our very nature to centre not in Christ Jesus our Lord but centre in ourselves he loves his people not according to themselves so here's a little world with a circle that's the world here's the centre of it and as we as human beings consider our world we put ourselves in the centre that's the way we think isn't it and we say that's the centre of it me myself is that where God's love is centred so should I look inside myself and try and find out what's going on in there and if I do it do I do it that way and I'm trying to say that that's going to be very misleading because the love of God is not in centred in me but in Christ

[27:08] Jesus our Lord so I think our diagram ought to look like this so there's the world we're part of it but the centre of it is Jesus the centre is Jesus and so we're called I'll just display my ignorance now I think in Buddhism there's a thing about centering where you centre on yourself and if you can get to that place of centrality where the wheel is turning almost I think of a big wheel turning and the centre of it hardly turns at all and you look for stillness by centering on yourself but the Christian centre is not in themselves the centre of a Christian is here the centre of a Christian is in Jesus Christ and we've got to learn not to centre on ourselves but to remember remind ourselves focus on another place which is

Jesus Christ I don't know whether that's helpful or not so don't think me think Christ we could put it this way for every one look I take at myself take ten looks at Jesus is that the right statistic somebody said that once didn't they was it Robert Murray McShane he said good things so we might as well attribute it to him it's good advice let's say that again I might have got the number wrong for every look I look at myself take ten looks at Jesus Christ so that was how does God love his people he loves his people in Jesus Christ let's ask another question to sort of turn this subject over in our minds how can I know that God loves me what do I do if I'm doubting that God loves me if I'm saying oh God can't love me and on a grim January day if you're stuck at home by yourself you might well find your thoughts going in that direction how can

I know that God loves me so here's some answers to that the answer lies by looking at Jesus Christ the answer lies in Jesus Christ and I'm going to go to Romans 5 you might like to turn to that text we read it already but I might like to turn to it because there's two aspects that are worth pointing out Romans 5 now I've put the wrong numbering there Romans 5 verse 5 says hope does not disappoint because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom he has given us so you might say well that proves that your previous diagram was incorrect because it talks about the spirit the love being poured!

to us into our hearts and I'd have to say that is exactly what it says that love of God is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit but I'd like to say that he's telling us that we need divine help to reach

this conclusion we need the work of the Holy Spirit inside us so that we can confidently say God loves me and I want to say that we should not uncouple that we should keep that coupled with what happens in the next verses where he says God demonstrates his own love for us in this while we were still sinners Christ died for us so how does God demonstrate his love or pour out his love or whatever in this double way number one I think I'll take it in logical order number one Christ dies on the cross for us and logically number two as we look at the cross the spirit is poured into our hearts and the spirit sort of says to us do you see the cross there and we say yes and he says do you see what happening there and we say not quite sure and then we say does that mean

God loves me and the Holy Spirit says well look what do you see yes of course it does and the two things go together there's a testimony of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that we are loved by God the spirit confirms to us what is out there for all to see so that's answer number one how can I know God loves me by looking at Jesus Christ by looking again at Jesus Christ and by looking again at Jesus Christ and I want to just be very you knew all this before but but it's worth repeating we need to know God's love it's a fundamental thing there's all sorts of challenges to make us think about other things to lose our focus and perhaps even to lose our conviction about this what do we do answer we look at

[32:30] Jesus Christ again we think again about what he's done we pray the Holy Spirit to help us look in faith in real insight in real depth and grasping of what's going on there very I think that's straightforward but absolutely important for us here's another ask of that question and here's another answer how can I know God loves me and this time I'm going to answer it in saying that there's a depth and a mystery to this which lies deep in the will and mind of the Father and I'm now focusing on another of those texts which says praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ in love he predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ now again we haven't lost the focus on Jesus Christ he's the person to whom we look he's the window through whom we look to see all the truths that are in there but this one is very mysterious and it's when a

Christian begins to say I'm loved by God isn't that amazing how does that happen and you begin to think well let's just go into that a bit is that because I was clever enough to have faith or spiritually minded enough to have faith or compliant enough to become a Christian and then you look and you think well I wasn't compliant at all I was really difficult and obnoxious and rebellious and I wasn't clever enough to have faith God sort of worked that within me and opened my eyes and I'm just so grateful to him for what he's done it's not because of anything in me he did all that and then God says do you know something I want to tell you something I love you now I brought you to myself and here's something I've always loved you I've always loved you

I've always had you in my mind and heart even before you were even born I had you by name in my mind that's how much I love you that's the sort of love it is and I'm going to tell you seeing as I did that from before the world began I'm not going to let you go I'm not going to let you go you mistake the depth of my love if you think it's just a sort of flighty thing and I'm going to let you go no no in love he predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ God's saying I've got all the chairs in heaven with all the names on of all my family and your name is there you'll get there you'll be there because

I've loved you forever it's remarkable isn't it why does he love me so sometimes we agonize about this I can't tell anything lovely about myself at all why does he love me and the answer is the answer is a very mysterious answer because he chose to do so mind bogglingly long ago what was God doing before he made the world he was thinking about you why does he love me because he chose to do so and why did he choose to do so why did he choose to love me answer you don't know for reasons within God are not within you doesn't that just liberates us so marvelously from looking inside ourselves and trying to find something that God must love because forget it don't bother going down that route because the reasons the profound deep reasons why you're sitting in church today believing in me the profound deep reasons are not rooted in you they're rooted in me says

God and you know there's all sorts of things that spin off this you know we say God must be really taken by surprise by that horrible thought that I had the other day because it certainly took me by

surprise and God knew all that God must be really disappointed with me because I started so well and I've stumbled and fallen and picked myself up God knew all that he chose me for his own reasons who am I to argue with him how can you delight in me God I'm not very delightful making what's the word delightful person God says well don't worry about that I have my own reasons back in before you were made that's that's when I decided to love you he chose me with forever in mind and he won't give up it's a remarkable thing isn't it counting on the love of

[38:14] God which is shown to us in the cross and as we look through that window we see a line that goes back before the world was made how can I respond last question second question four but it is the last question how can I respond so I'll just touch on this there's loads of things we could say so first question if you have not come to put your faith in Jesus Christ or if your faith is the sort of faith which only keeps you at arm's length from Jesus Christ get your faith real get your relationship with Jesus Christ locked in come to him talk to him ask him to accept you ask him to bring you in ask him to do whatever is necessary to make you the sort of Christian who can have this conviction nothing will separate us from the love of

God don't settle for less than that please don't settle for less than that don't settle for being a Christian because it says that on your birth certificate don't settle for being a Christian because you go to church once or twice a year don't settle for anything less than being a Christian who really knows Jesus Christ who really belongs to him body and soul in life and death like we were singing earlier please don't settle for anything less how can I respond answer two this is sort of battlefield tactics by talking to yourself about believing God rather than listening to yourself about your unworthiness now Dr.

Lloyd Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones was a Welsh preacher in last century in Wales being Welsh and in London still Welsh and one of the things that he says in his sermons is how important it is to talk to ourselves okay perhaps not do this in public just in case but the importance of talking to ourselves so in the psalm the psalmist talks to himself he says why are you downcast oh my soul he gives himself a talking to why are you downcast oh and he says Dr.

Lloyd Jones I think this is just good advice we need to talk to ourselves about the love of God rather than listening to ourselves because when we listen to ourselves all the little thoughts come up oh he's so unworthy look how I failed and everything all of that stuff comes up and he says you shouldn't listen to yourself you should talk to yourself you take yourself in hand why are you downcast oh my soul why are you not believing the love of God why are you not believing in what Jesus Christ did for you why are you allowing other things to dominate your thinking and therefore your feeling he says talk to yourselves and I think that's a good piece of advice how can I respond by talking to ourselves here's a third response by interpreting experiences through the lens of the father's love so things happen to us we feel this up and down one day whatever it is and we're tempted to say well that's it see everything's gone wrong everything's gone wrong and he says don't think that because take that experience and look at it through a lens okay so some of you wear glasses!

I wear glasses if I don't look at things through a lens so this is me not looking through a lens it's all blurry doesn't make sense can't recognize people's faces might think that the big dark shape over there is some horrible monster come to get me find it's somebody's coat might accidentally tread on my mobile phone because I can't see it clearly and mistake something that's really important and get all sorts of models like that so looking through a lens is helpful and looking through the lens as it were of God's love make sure that we interpret our lives correctly because Hebrews 12:6 and round there says he disciplines those he loves let me find you the text bear with me a second this is quite at least a paragraph on this and it says endure hardship as discipline for God is treating you as sons for what son is not disciplined by his father if you are not disciplined everyone undergrows discipline then you are illegitimate children and not true sons we've all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it how much more should we submit to the father of our spirits and live the son the

[43:28] Lord disciplines those he loves he punish well I won't bring that word in because it will confuse us he disciplines those he loves if we don't look at things through the lens of God's love we will say oh this

has happened because he's forgotten about me this has happened because he hates me this has happened because he's getting even with me and all of those are wrong interpretations!

They're like taking your glasses off look through the lens of God's love why is this happening to me because he loves me why is it unpleasant well sometimes that's the way you learn things it's true isn't it is that right sometimes you learn things through unpleasant in fact we're such forgive me we're such stupid people we often learn more things through unpleasantness than we do through having it easy don't we interpret our experiences through the lens of God's love are powerful and so fourth answer a scratch on the surface of the subject here how can I respond by reflecting that transforming love into the life and behaviour and attitude that we take day by day especially in the Christian community because 1 John makes this intimate connection beloved since God so loved us we also ought to love one another book could be simpler I mean that's what he says that's what we've received from God wow and that ought to so transform our you know the temperature of our minds the way we think about things the way we perceive things the way we react to things since God so loved us we also ought to love one another Let's go God