

The Love of God

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Preacher: Philip Wells

[0 : 00] Our subject, the deep and rich but not simple topic of the love of God.! Last week, as I say, we drew a map or picked out some points along the map of this subject.

We looked at the way that God loves His creation. And we said, you know, there's different types of use of the word love, different degrees and perhaps different activities.

So love doesn't just mean one simple thing all the time. It has a range of meaning. And perhaps you might say the range of meaning in English is not the same range as in the Bible languages.

But anyway, there's a range of meanings. Let's look at Matthew chapter 5, verse 43, because this takes us into our subject.

So this is Jesus on the Sermon on the Mount. And he says, you have heard, this is Matthew 5, verse 43.

[1 : 23] So you need to look at these if you possibly can. It would be helpful if you can do that. You've heard that it was said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy.

Now it doesn't say in the Old Testament, hate your enemy. It does say, love your neighbor. So he's sort of taking a current Jewish caricature of what the Old Testament says.

But he says, but I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his son to rise on the evil and the good, and sends his reign on the righteous and the unrighteous.

If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even tax collectors doing that?

And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others?

Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. So he's saying, he's comparing, no, he's saying that the behavior and the attitude of the disciples of Jesus should be like the behavior and attitude of God, the Father in heaven.

[2 : 47] So in verse 45 he says, so that you may be sons of the Father in heaven. Verse 48, be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. So he's saying, be like God, in a sense, imitate the behavior and attitude of God.

And in this particular thing, he's saying there's something very wide and kind about the behavior of God and the attitude of God, and you ought to imitate that.

So he says in verse 45, God causes his Son to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

So God does these good things to all sorts of people, to the people who are evil and the good. And Jesus says, you need to copy that.

Some of these people you might say are your enemies. They're unpleasant people, and they're particularly unpleasant to you, but nevertheless you are to love them.

[3 : 59] Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. So that was one of the texts that we looked at last time. It uses the word love, put as a command to the reader or the disciples, and it draws on the way God is good to the evil and the good, the righteous and the unrighteous.

Okay, that was one of the texts that we looked at last time, and it sort of epitomizes quite a lot of Bible teaching.

So is that okay? I'm going to go on from there. That was sort of last time. What we're looking at this time is the love of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ. And I think there are two focal points for us to think about.

Number one, the gospel, if you think of the line of history in the Bible, as it goes on generation by generation, the gospel is promised in the Old Testament, but it only arrives in the New Testament.

Okay, so there is a line of history from Old Testament to New Testament, and my question is, is there a step change in this matter of the love of God when the gospel is revealed?

[5 : 38] Is there a sort of step change regarding the love of God? Not necessarily, well, not necessarily a change of God's love, but a change perhaps of the way it's expressed, or a change of the way it acts.

Is there a step change in the Old Testament and the New Testament? Okay, that's one thought. And the other thought is how the love of God for sinners, because we haven't got on to the love of God for his elect yet, we're talking about just in general, the love of God, as it goes out to all the world, the love of God in relation to the wrath of God.

So that's another aspect. It's a complication in a sense, isn't it? That if we were to say to people, God loves you, we would not have said everything that we need to say, because it is also true to say that God is angry with you, because God is angry with sinners every day.

So those two thoughts, okay? So let's look at some texts and see what we think, how they work with those thoughts.

Ephesians 2, verses 3 and 4. Now what we usually do is ask people in turn to read these out.

[7 : 22] If the prospect of doing that fills you with terror, you can just say pass or look terrified and I'll pass by anyway.

So Ephesians 2, verses 3 and 4. So I'm sure Rachel is up for reading this. Can we start with you, please? Ephesians 2, verses 3 and 4.

Yeah, that's fine. Thank you.

Yeah, it's right in the middle of a... No, that's fine. It's right in the middle of a thread of things that he's saying about his... about how it used to be and how things have changed.

Now then. Do you see what he says about how things used to be? So in verse 3, all of us lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts.

[8 : 40] That's how we used to live. It seems a bit negative, doesn't it? But he says that's the reality of it. Now, does it say anything about wrath?

And does it say anything about love? And how does it fit them together? If at all. It says we were objects of wrath.

Yeah. Okay. Let's hold on to that. Does it say anything else? Or is that all it says? We were objects of wrath. But God? For the great love with which he loved us.

It's interesting, isn't it? That he says we were under both these headings. We were loved with a great love. But we were objects of God's wrath.

So it seems as if God is able at the same time to look at people with wrath and to look at them with love. And I realize even saying that it's more complex than that.

[9 : 55] But it's certainly not less complex than that. So God's wrath, he acknowledges. That's what we were like.

And he speaks about God's love almost in the same breath. Let's look at Acts 17, 30 to 31.

So Acts 17. So this is Paul preaching in Athens to the very, very clever people and yet the very idolatrous people in Athens.

The Greeks, we are told, were a proud people who thought that they were God's special favorites. What have the Greeks ever done?

Invented democracy, geometry. Anyway, we don't go down that route. So Acts 17. Adam, could you read us from, perhaps can you read us from verse 29?

[11 : 10] Okay, thank you very much.

So let's ask the question, is there any step change there? I don't think it mentions wrath and love, but I wonder whether there's any step change there. It is, isn't it?

He says, in the past, God overlooked such ignorance. So the ignorance he's referring to is idolatry. The world is full of idolatry. In the past, God overlooked that.

So he's not overlooking it now. What's he doing now? He's calling everyone to repentance. Yes. What would be the verb? Is it call or... Command. That's interesting, isn't it?

[12 : 37] It doesn't sound like a very loving word, but nevertheless, there's a step change here that God commands. Does it say all men everywhere?

All people everywhere to repent, to turn back. And the reason being that Christ has been raised from the dead and is the judge on the final day.

So therefore, he's the one to whom people should repent. So I think there's a step change there, isn't there? So it used to be a certain way, but now it's... Conditions have changed since Christ was

risen from the dead.

Okay? Anybody want to add anything to that? Okay? Thank you for that.

Yes, that's right. It isn't a change that he didn't ask for repentance before. It's a change of who he's commanding to repent. It's gone much wider. Yeah, thank you very much.

[13:50] Which actually very neatly leads us on to Ezekiel chapter 18. So let's look at this. Ezekiel chapter 18 from verse 25.

Ezekiel 18, verse 25. You're allowed to look in the index to get the page number. Do you want to? 846 if you've got a Bible from the back of the church.

So while you're just finding that, let me give you a couple of pieces of vocabulary. So universalism is a word that crops up in Christian theology.

be the idea that everybody is going to be saved. The idea that hell, if it exists, is going to be empty. So the sense that God... The idea here being that God's love and salvation so extends across the nations that nobody will be lost.

[15:20] Okay, universalism. In case you're not quite sure, I'm sure that the Bible doesn't teach universalism. But there's that thought.

And here's another piece of vocabulary. The free offer. Or the free offer of the gospel. And this is a shorthand to say that the gospel is offered to anybody and everybody without asking any further questions.

It's often... It's often... People use the word promiscuous, meaning without checking anything further. The gospel is offered promiscuously to everybody.

Now some people object to that because they say it cheapens the gospel. You know, fancy offering the gospel to a drug addict. Or fancy offering the gospel to somebody like Jimmy Savile.

It would cheapen the gospel. Now again, I don't think that is correct. I think the Bible teaches the free offer of the gospel.

[16:28] But it doesn't teach universalism. And you see where I'm going with this. The gospel goes out very, very widely. But the fact that it goes out very, very widely doesn't mean that everybody's going to be saved.

So, just have those two ideas in the back of our minds. So, Ezekiel 18 from verse 25. This is Old Testament. So, Ray, please could you read this for us?

Right down to the end of the chapter. Yet you say, the way of the Lord is not just. Here, O house of Israel, is my way unjust?

Is it not yours? Now what a wonderful passage that is. It's addressed to the house of Israel. It isn't going out to everybody. But just look at the sort of things he's saying.

It starts off with these two possibilities of the righteous man turning from his righteousness. And the wicked man turning from his wickedness. Now, please don't be confused. Those two possibilities are not equal statistically.

[17:31] They don't. You know, one of them is a very unusual thing. And one of them is. Happens a lot. A lot. And they're not equally desirable. One of them is a very bizarre thing.

And the other is what God really wants to happen. He wants the righteous. Sorry. The sinner to turn from his wicked ways. But do notice the earnestness of it.

Why will you die, O house of Israel? There's a very strong call. I would say it's a call promiscuously. He doesn't ask any other questions. He said, all you lot, why will you die? Turn from your wicked ways and live. Turn to the Lord.

Get right with God. Get things right in your life. You know, pray for it. Seek it. Get a, this is what you're looking for, a new heart and a new spirit.

[18:35] And there's an earnestness about this as God, well, I think it's a display of his love, isn't it?

His love for people to say, come back. You're stuck. You're stuck in your sin. And I really don't like your sin.

But I really don't want you to stay stuck in your sin. Turn from your sin. Turn round. You know, there's a great earnestness about it, isn't it?

You could imagine the Lord saying that, sort of sitting in front of you and looking you in the face and saying, you're, you're spiritually stuck. You're spiritually dead in your sins.

I can see that now. And I'm saying to you, don't stay there. Turn. Change. Ask the Lord how to do it. Make it a really important thing in your life.

[19 : 33] Don't be content until you've done that. Turn from your wicked ways and live. What sense does it make for you to stay as you are? Why will you die, O house of Israel?

I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. It's not something I take pleasure in. Turn from your wicked ways and live. You see, it's very strong stuff.

And I think it's pretty much under this heading of the free offer. It's certainly a wide invitation. Does that make sense? Let's take this into the New Testament.

Let's look at 2 Peter chapter 3 verse 9. And incidentally, in that Ezekiel, if we were to think of how it relates God's love and God's wrath, he's not saying there's no such thing as wrath.

He's saying you will die if you carry on the way you're going now. But he is inviting them. I think love would not be an inappropriate way heading to put it under.

[20 : 43] He's saying, I'm inviting you back so that you can live. Now then, 2 Peter chapter 3 verse 9. 2 Peter 3.

Shall we take 8, 9 and 10? 2 Peter 3. 8, 9 and 10. Steve, could you please?

So here we are in New Testament.

Same sort of thing, isn't it? He's saying, he's referring to the day of judgment. Presumably this is the day that is delayed or apparently slow to come.

In verse 10 he says, the day of the Lord will come all of a sudden. It will be a dramatic and drastic day. But in the meantime, we have the Lord's patience.

[22 : 02] He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. So there's a very wide scope of this, isn't it?

He doesn't want anyone to perish, but all to come to repentance. It's a bit like the why will you die, isn't it?

Turn, turn. I don't take any pleasure in the death of the wicked. He doesn't say there's no such thing as wrath.

Actually, he says that there is, if you don't turn, you will perish in this day of the Lord. But he does say that now is the time to repent.

And in a sense, the fact that history goes on and on and on is an expression of God's patience.

Waiting for people to repent. Does that make sense? Does that do justice to the text?

[23 : 08] Yeah. Okay, let's look at Titus 2, 11 and 3, 4. So this is Titus. Chapter 2, verse 11 to 14.

And then chapter 3, verse 4. So Titus. After Timothy 1, Timothy 2, Timothy, Titus.

1, 9, 9. How many ones? 1, 1, 9, 9. Is that right? So Titus chapter 2.

Let's look at verse 11 to 14. Please, could you read that for us, Brenda? Titus 2, 11 to 14. A lot of things going on in there.

What I was asking, is there a step change there at all? Titus 2, from verse 11.

[24 : 35] Is there a step change or not? Is there anything that implies a change?

It says it has appeared. I think that's quite significant, actually. So presumably before that it hadn't appeared. So it's the message of Jesus Christ to do with the gospel, to do with his coming, the glorious appearing.

And he says that when this came into the world, the grace of God appeared. I think that is a step change, isn't it?

But previously, God was gracious, and he was at work, but he was at work largely within one quite small nation.

And now, says Paul, something's appeared. Something's come over the horizon. Something's there to be seen that wasn't there before.

[25 : 52] Something sort of shining out that didn't shine out before. And he says in this verse, he says, it's the grace of God. It's appeared. It's on display. In the gospel.

Let's look at chapter 3. So Titus 3. Verse 4.

I think we probably need verse 4. And to the first full stop that makes sense in verse 5. So it's Titus 3.

Are you up for this? Maria, please could you read Titus 3, verse 4, and then to the full stop in verse 5. So again, a lot going on there.

But is there a step change, do you think? Yeah, I think it's the same thing, isn't it?

[26 : 57] He's saying that before, this hadn't appeared. And in the gospel, something has appeared. Something's come over the horizon.

And what he says this time, before he said grace, but this time he says, the kindness and the love of God has appeared. And this is our thinking this evening, isn't it?
The love of God in the gospel. The gospel expresses God's love in a way which it wasn't expressed before.

You know, in terms of perhaps the extent of it, in terms of perhaps the intensity of it, and the reality of it. When the gospel came into the world, the kindness of God appeared.

And the love of God appeared in a way that it hadn't done before. Now, does that make sense? It's quite a thought, actually, if you think that's what it's saying.

[28 : 00] I don't know. I can't see whether anybody's agreeing or not. Okay, I think we've got a few yeses there. So let's finally look at the classic text in John chapter 3, thinking about the love of God as expressed in the gospel.

The love of God as it sits alongside, in some sense, the wrath of God, and as the love of God is expressed in a sort of a new bursting out through Jesus Christ and the gospel.

So we're in John chapter 3, and I'm thinking around verse 13, down to verse 21.

So, our seminar, could you read this for us, please? John 3, 13 to 21. No one has ever fallen into heaven, except for one who came from heaven.

3, 16. And a lot of things going on. Let's see if we can tease them out a little bit. So, what do you think about love versus wrath?

[29 : 19] Does this paragraph, or a couple of paragraphs, does it say anything about God's wrath?

What do you think? Nothing about God's wrath. It does talk about condemnation, doesn't it?

Yep. And what does it say about condemnation? Who is condemned, and for what reason?

You don't believe. Which is pretty stark, isn't it? He's saying that condemnation starts the moment you don't believe. Hmm.

Okay. Okay. What triggers the question of believing or not believing?

[30 : 18] Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Thank you. Yeah. There's...

Yes. There's something about the coming of Jesus which forces this whole issue into the foreground, isn't it?

You get the same thing in verse 19. This is the judgment, or this is the verdict. Perhaps this is the judgment is better. Light has come into the world, but men love darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

When he says light has come into the world, what do you think he's referring to? Jesus. Yeah, not talking about sunshine, he's talking about Jesus, isn't he? Light has come into the world.

[31 : 22] And that can't help but trigger responses.

So this is Jesus coming into the world, if you like, the gospel coming into the world, Jesus and all the promises and all the challenges that are bound up in him. And people respond either by believing or not believing.

And so he does talk about judgment. He does talk about condemnation, doesn't he? He says that the ones who don't believe stand condemned already.

Any other words there to do with judgment or condemnation or anything like that? Verdict.

Yeah, thank you. What about in John 3, 16 itself? Yeah, perish.

[32 : 22] Yeah. It does talk about perishing, doesn't it? It's not that perishing like an inner tube in a bicycle where the rubber perishes. It's not that that's a sort of gradual decay sort of perishing.

I think he's talking about something much more catastrophic. You know, heading for destruction.

Heading under the judgment of God. So you've got that there. It doesn't say there's no judgment.

It doesn't say that what you need to realize is that everybody's going to be saved. It's not saying that. He's saying that there is a reality about the wrath of God.

And there is a reality about perishing. And that's what you've got to try and avoid at all costs. So, let me try and get myself back on track here.

So, wrath, there is such a thing. Does it say anything about love? Yeah, what does it say?

[33 : 27] It does, doesn't it? God so loved the world. Sorry? It is intense. It's intense.

And it's actually a rather... The Bible is quite sparing with being so explicit about God's relation to the unbelieving world.

God doesn't want them to perish. He's patient, it says. He's kind, gracious. But I think this is sort of the high watermark of statements like that.

It says, well, actually, God loves this wicked, rebellious world. There is something within God that, even though this world stands under judgment, it's not saying God is patting people on the head, telling them how wonderful they are.

It's not that sort of love. But there is something in God which goes out to this world, even this world, even this wicked world, to say, I want people to be saved.

[34 : 39] So there is love. And that's what it says. God so loved the world. So let's... So there's that bit, and let's think of the step change bit.

So let's go back to that. So what did God do to express this love? His Son. He sent His Son. He sent His one and only Son.

So I think that's saying that this love is expressed in the sending of the Son. Is that right? That as we see Christ coming into the world to do the things He does, to die on the cross for sins, this in itself is an expression of love for all sorts of random, obnoxious, rebellious, wicked people.

Even people that you could say we were by nature objects of wrath. But God so loved that He sent His Son so that...

What's the response? What response is He looking for? Let's just be clear about that. Is He looking for a response of any sort? What response is He looking for? Believing.

[36 : 01] Believing, yeah. Believing, yeah. He sends His Son into the world and the response He's looking for is not to say, oh yes, I'm glad God loves me, but to believe in Jesus Christ who died on the cross, bearing sin, lifted up like the snake in the desert, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life.

So this love is drawing people towards faith. Okay. Those are the texts I wanted to look at. And I'm suggesting summarizing it in this way.

The gospel, the gospel of Jesus Christ, to all nations, expresses a step change in the expression and action of the love of God to sinners.

I think that's a fair statement. It's quite a thought, isn't it? We live in a world in which the love of God has gone into overdrive, if you like, from being in the first or second gear in the Old Testament.

It's gone up into overdrive, fifth gear or whatever it is, because now there's a step change in the expression and action of the love of God to sinners.

[37 : 24] And the second statement, the love of God to sinners does not condone or comfort or confirm people in their sin, but woos, invites, confronts and commands people to turn from sin to Christ.

I think that's a fair statement. The love of God does not condone sin. It doesn't say, I love you, pat you on the head, I know that you're living an immoral life.

That's fine. We don't worry about these things. He's not saying that. He's not comforting people in their sin. Sinners, when they hear the gospel, ought to be made uncomfortable.

He's not confirming people in their sin. I suppose there's just different ways of saying the same thing. But rather, the gospel actually speaks across a range of tones of voice, if you like.

Going from wooing, where wooing in the sense of, you know, romantically, the Lord saying to his people, come to me.

[38 : 37] Come with me in a sort of loving boy meets girl sort of way. I'm just trying to think of any texts that say that.

Come to me in a way. Come to me in a way. Yeah. Come to me, all you who labour in a heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Well, what about Hosea being told to marry an unfaithful wife and to love her because this is how the Lord loves Israel?

That sort of, they don't come to my mind, but that's one example at least of the wooing. The very gentle voice of the Lord Jesus calling people to himself.

So there's wooing and there's inviting. So the invitation, come to me, all you who labour in a heavy laden, is certainly an invitation. Confrontation. I'm trying to think of some texts in which God's love for sinners is expressed in confrontation.

Anybody help me on this? Commands. He commands all men everywhere to repent, yes. So there's that tone of voice which says, you must believe in Jesus Christ.

[39 : 54] You must turn from your sin. You must be born again. That's a command, isn't it? Yes. Yes. Martin Luther, I believe, said that we haven't met God until we have first met him in confrontation.

That God, part of what he does is tell us that you can't continue the way you are. What about with the woman at the well?

The woman at the well, there was very little in the way of confrontation. The confrontation was absolutely minimal. Go and call your husband. Sir, I have no husband. Well, I know you've got five husbands and the man that you have now is not your husband.

That's the nearest it gets to confrontation. But, you know, there's a wooing there, isn't there? So I've got confrontation and command. The love of God to sinners does not condone or comfort or confirm people in their sin, but woos, invites, confronts, and commands people to turn from sin to Jesus Christ.

Well, thank you very much for your attention. We've done quite a bit there, but it's a wonderful topic, isn't it, when you begin to think about it. The love of God in the gospel. Let's sing together.

[41 : 13] Thank you.