

Sunday 20th October 2024 - This Little Light Of Mine: Love, Not Control

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] we're continuing this series that we've been doing called This Little Light of Mine, in which we're thinking about what it means to shine with the light of God's love in our lives so that others may come to know God's love for themselves. And so last week, if you were here or you've managed to catch up online, I shared some of the pros and mainly perhaps the cons of what we might call nostalgia. And in particular, we looked at Jesus's teaching on how vital it seems it is in our faith to keep looking forward, you know, to be open to the new things that God might be wanting us to consider or experience. And indeed, as part of that last week, briefly suggested that that openness to what God might have for us will probably include being open to new ways of thinking, new ideas, new approaches to faith, and perhaps new ways of understanding God and who God is.

And so in light of that, what I'd like to do this morning is put that principle into practice today by taking some time to share with you what, for me at least, is a newer way of thinking about God, but which has in recent years become quite a game changer for me in terms of how I see God and for the ways in which I share my faith with others. Now, in offering what I'm going to share this morning, it's not to say that you have to agree with me. I would never, ever say that. And there's a possibility that what I share might leave you with more questions than answers, which I never think is a bad thing, really. But it perhaps feels the right time to open this subject up a bit, at the very least, for your consideration today. So if that sounds okay, we'll crack on. So to begin, whilst in light of what I shared last week, I don't want to get all nostalgic on us too much. One of the key ways for me in which my beliefs were first formed was through what I was taught in Sunday school back in the day, and in particular, my beliefs were formed by some of the songs that we used to sing as kids.

One such song that we used to do was called, My God is So Big. I don't know if you know that one if you were back in church in the day. I won't inflict me singing it for you this morning, but some of the words to it say this. They say, My God is So Big, and you do the muscle pose, So Strong and So Mighty, There's Nothing My God Cannot Do. We used to sing that a lot as a kid. And growing up, and perhaps even now, we might think, yep, good words, those good words, reassuring words, perhaps, which might describe the might and the power of God, because there's nothing my God cannot do.

And yet, over the last few years, I've thought a fair bit about these words, and in particular, this idea that there's nothing my God cannot do. Because although that's what the song says, and although that's what I was taught as a kid, I don't think that's actually true. Now, in fact, there's loads that God cannot do. Because to do so, I would say, would go against God's nature, God's very essence. So, for example, the Bible tells us that God is love. Love is who God is, and in God, there is nothing that is not love. As we see in the Bible, and as we see most obviously in the life and person of Jesus, love is the greatest. Love is the deepest. Love is the highest, most defining virtue of all. Love drives and shapes everything that God does. Love defines everything that God is. Which means that because God is love, God is unable. Indeed, God cannot behave in any way which is unloving. So, that means that God cannot lie, for example. God can't steal. God can't be tempted by evil. God can't be impatient. God can't be unkind. God can't boast. God can't keep a record of wrongs.

In fact, there are all sorts of things that God can't do because God is love. And if God were to do those things, they would go against love, they would go against love, and God would cease to be God.

[5 : 10] It's not that God won't do them. It's that God can't do them. God's nature means that it's simply impossible for God to do or be certain things because, as we're told in 2 Timothy, God cannot deny himself. So, what else does love mean that God can't be? Well, I suggest it also means that God cannot be controlling. Since to control, to manipulate, to dominate someone else in ways which allow no response, that's not acting in love. Indeed, it's counter to love. Again, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, it says, love does not force itself on others. Now, yes, love might mean that we intervene when someone's about to hurt themselves, you know, perhaps pulling a toddler away from a hot stove or something. But even then, even as parents or guardians, you know, we're not truly controlling them. You know, they're still free to resist. They're still thinking for themselves. And part of the aim of that intervention is so that these toddlers will learn what it means to control themselves.

By definition, therefore, love is not and cannot be controlling. And because God is love, that means, I would say, that God cannot act in a controlling manner. God cannot control.

And yet, that's not often what we're told, is it? I've lost count of the number of times I hear people say, well, God is in control. God is in control. We even sang those very words in a song a couple of weeks ago. God is in control. But let's think for a minute about the implications of believing that God is in control. That God is able to overpower or manipulate things in order to achieve whatever purposes God wants. You see, on the one hand, we might think, well, yeah, that is what I believe.

That God is sovereign. That God is all-powerful. And therefore, everything that happens is in some way according to God's plan. And yet, for me, the consequences of this belief raise some deeply uncomfortable questions about God's role in the world, and in particular, in relation to suffering. You see, a God who is in control of everything would, in theory, be able to step in at any particular moment to prevent something bad from happening. An accident, an illness, an attack, a virus. And if this God who controls things is a God of love, then love would compel, love would demand that God does intervene, that God does stop a child from being abused, a pensioner from being scammed, a woman from being killed by a drunk driver, a president from instigating the genocide of a whole people group. And yet, seeing as these bad things do continue to happen the world over, I think the only conclusion we could draw about this controlling

God, not intervening, is that it must be a deliberate choice on God's part not to protect, not to rescue, not to prevent harm. And unfortunately, in my eyes, that would make God an accessory to every crime, complicit in every act of abuse, you know, responsible ultimately for every type of disease.

[9 : 28] Because although it was in God's power and ability to stop these bad things from happening, to control them, God has chosen not to act. That's if God is in control, but chooses not to intervene, to prevent suffering. Alternatively, some would argue, again, well, God is in control, but instead of not acting in the face of tragedy. The suggestion is that God instead, in some way, allows or even engineers these tragedies, this suffering, all in the cause of some grand plan.

You know, for example, we've talked about this before, but the idea that everything happens for a reason is a pretty widely held belief. It's a pretty widely held belief. Theory that says either fate or God is behind everything that happens. Where there's an incredibly intricate and involved higher purpose behind everything that takes place in the world. And yet the idea that everything happens happens for a reason, I think for me, that's a pretty sick theory of how God works. Because it suggests that God has somehow ordained or inflicted often horrific pain and suffering in order to somehow bring about his plans.

Or along similar lines, I've heard people try with the best of intentions to console grieving parents who've just lost a baby by saying, well, God obviously wanted another angel. Again, implying that God has in some way planned or caused their child's death. Either way, these two ideas, whether of a controlling God who fails to prevent harm when capable of doing so or of a controlling God who engineers harm in order to fulfill a bigger purpose.

I personally can't see how either understanding of the way God works is at all consistent with what it means for God to be loving. And that, for me, is why saying God is in control, it just doesn't stack up.

Either with what we see going on in the world around us, or more crucially, with our belief in a God as a God who is love. Now, what are some of the implications of suggesting that God is not in control?

[12 : 21] Well, there are many. But I just want to touch on three areas that I think this belief affects. The problem of evil, we've got the nature of prayer, and our understanding of time.

So firstly then, and there's only time to cover these briefly, but we're going to scratch the surface on each of them. So I want to scratch the surface initially on this, the problem of evil.

So here's a quote from one of the best-selling Christian authors in the world today, a guy called John Mark Comer, who you may have heard of or listened to. He says this.

He says, Why?

Because it gives you a crisis of faith. Now, why does he say this? Well, I think it's because if everything happens for a reason, if God is in control of everything, if everything is part of God's plan, then everything that people experience, the good, the bad, the neutral, has at some level been determined or allowed or controlled by God.

[13 : 43] But as we think that through, some of the implications of that are pretty horrific. So if someone is raped, are we really saying God is in control of that?

A child dies at birth. God is in control of that? Someone commits suicide because they can't see a way through their troubled life.

God is in control of that? If we believe God is in control, then you can see perhaps how quickly the logic falls apart and how quickly it leads, as John Mark Comer says, to a crisis of faith.

Indeed, the most common reason that people tell me as to why they don't believe in God is to do with this idea of God being in control. In that, if God exists, why is there so much suffering in the world?

And if we believe in a God who controls everything, then that's a question which I'd suggest becomes so impossible to answer that it's little wonder if people walk away from the whole idea of faith and God.

[14 : 58] Instead, given that God is love, and love is inherently uncontrolling, I'd say actually the opposite is true.

In that far from being a God of control, God is instead a God of freedom. God is lovingly made us with free will, freedom to live as we choose, as people independent from God.

Freedom should we choose to love, but also freedom should we choose to go wrong. On balance, and because of love, God chooses to give life knowing its risks.

But the risks of life are nevertheless there. And it's this risk, that creation, that we might choose to live in evil, not loving ways, that I would say helps to explain why there's so much suffering in the world.

It's not that God allows evil to happen, because God, I'm suggesting, is not in control. Rather, it's that God knows that evil is always a possible heart-breaking consequence of giving creation, of giving us free will.

[16 : 29] A free will that God cannot control, even when it's used to do the most despicable things. Now that reality, I would say, leads us to consider another area of life and faith that is belief in the uncontrolling love of God affects.

And that's the nature of prayer. You see, in suggesting that God is uncontrolling, I'm not for a moment saying that God is inactive. You know, in fact, just the opposite.

I'd say God's uncontrolling love is expressed through a constant effort on God's part to influence, empower, encourage, inspire, challenge, call, guide us, and so on.

There's an ongoing, all-inclusive, if you like, stream of communication from God that is aimed at shaping our decisions and choices in life always towards love.

And we know that in all things, even through death, God works for good. And yet, whereas praying to a God who is in control can feel pretty futile, in that God's going to do what God's going to do anyway, praying to a God who is not in control but working for good, well, suddenly then prayer becomes so much more dynamic and interesting, I think.

[17 : 57] You know, since God, I'm saying, can't intervene in a controlling manner, God has to, God needs to partner and work in collaboration with us in trying to shape the world.

You know, we may not always understand how prayer works, but throughout the Bible and in the life of Jesus, we see that prayer affects God, which makes sense because in prayer, we invite and we give permission for God to move in our lives in a way which a loving God may otherwise feel unable to do so without imposing on us.

Equally, though, prayer affects us and the world around us, you know, shifting our attention, our priorities, our focus. And prayer somehow opens us up to new avenues for God to work, either because the evils of the spiritual realm can be better resisted through prayer, or because we and creation as a whole become, through prayer, more receptive to hearing the voice of God and become more cooperative in being channels for God's love.

Which brings us to a third area in which I'd suggest a belief in an uncontrolling God affects. And that would be our understanding of time and how we and God relate in it.

You see, if God is in control, then it follows that God knows exactly what will happen and when, since God always gets what God wants if God's in control.

[19 : 47] You know, as such, if we believe in a controlling God, we probably believe that God already knows what our future will be and has it all mapped out for us.

And that means our job is simply to discover that path and live in to that already known future. However, if, as I'm suggesting, God is not in control, then the future becomes much more open.

You know, a world, in fact, of possibilities, because in giving us genuine free will, God won't know for sure in advance how we will think or act.

Yes, an all-knowing God knows every possible permutation that the future might bring and can therefore make an incredibly educated prediction about the ways things will turn out or what we're likely to do or say in any circumstance.

But our free will means there's always room for possibilities. And I think these open possibilities, they help explain why God is said to be able to experience joy or grief, surprise or wonder.

[21 : 10] Because sometimes our choices, the free will choices we make, sometimes they'll amuse God, sometimes our choices will please God, and sometimes our choices will grieve God.

If you think about it, why else would there be such joyful celebration in heaven at one sinner who repents unless that outcome wasn't guaranteed or known about in advance?

Indeed, belief in an uncontrolling God suggests that God is not so much outside of time, but experiences time with us and relates to us in the present.

not certain of what the future might bring for us, but loving the fact that we get to do this journey through life together. Yes, God may know the plans he has for us, the possible paths through life which may serve us best, but I'd suggest that doesn't necessarily mean those plans will always come to pass because there are a myriad of other actors and factors involved in shaping the direction which our lives and this world takes.

And yet for me, thinking about this, this open world of possibilities, where it makes the reality of following Jesus day by day far more exciting, far more exciting because far from life being an exam to pass or a predestined path to discern, instead becomes all about a live relationship, a dynamic living faith with a God who promises to take us on this risky, beautiful, forward-looking adventure through this life and beyond.

[23 : 16] And indeed that, to me, makes sharing our faith and the good news of God with whom we journey a far simpler and much more exciting prospect.

We're inviting people on this adventure with God. And that's something which we'll spend next week thinking about a lot more. Now, it won't be much longer, but the good news is that there is a wealth of scholarship and teaching on all this kind of thinking to explore.

It's not just me plucking ideas out of the air on this. No, this has been well thought through by people far, far more intelligent and spiritual than I am. And if you want somewhere to start, I'd recommend the work of this guy, Thomas J. Ord, who's written a number of books, including one called God Can't.

And then because that, as you probably imagine, raised a huge amount of questions for people, there's a follow-up book, God Can't Q&A;, which is responding to all the sort of feedback that he got as an author from people writing in saying, yes, but what about this?

Those two books, I've really enjoyed tucking into those. And he's also got various interviews and podcasts. If you want to search for him, he's got interviews on a podcast called The Bible for Normal People, which is great, and an interview on Nomad podcast as well, and his various others, and his website, thomasjord.com.

[24 : 42] It's full of reflections on the inevitable questions that this idea of an uncontrolling God might prompt in us. Equally, though, if you want to explore more about the future being open and full of as yet undetermined possibilities, then that's, the posh word for it is open theism.

And again, there are lots of websites and writers to absorb on that. Greg Boyd is probably one of the most prominent. He's an American scholar and pastor who's a leading figure in all that kind of thinking.

And the website there, the Center for Open and Relational Theology, that's worth a visit too. But for now, and coming to a close for today with this one, as I said at the top, I simply wanted to share these ideas with you today for your consideration, really.

Ideas which, for me, champion the merits of believing in the uncontrolling love of God. And for me, sitting with her and praying through and trying to live in light of this approach has been pretty transformational for my faith in recent years and my appreciation of God.

And whilst I said I would never tell you what to believe, I think I humbly encourage you to work out for yourself with God and with each other, whether that's in a house group or in conversations, or come and have all sorts of chats with me if you want.

[26 : 17] You know, your own response to this. And let's see where God leads both our conversation and our consideration of this in the weeks and months to come.

Amen. Amen. Amen.