

What is God's love?

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Date: 01 May 2016

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[0 : 00] It would be really good to have that passage somewhere open in front of you, because we're going to get stuck into it. And it could be that it's a somewhat familiar passage.

It's a passage that we love to go to when we think about Jesus. And I have to confess that as I came to it this week, I've preached it before. And so there was a part of me that kind of came to Philippians 2 sort of in autopilot mode.

And so I kind of scanned the passage. I worked out a few illustrations that might fit with it. And then I thought, let's just sit down and try and write this. And verse 1 has always struck me as a biblical justification for sarcasm.

It seems to be a clear example of Paul using sarcasm, which by implication for me always meant that I guess that it's okay for me to as well. He opens with this sentence that just seems like he's being ridiculous.

He opens with these ifs. It says, if you have any encouragement, if you have any comfort, if you have any tenderness and compassion. And of course, he knows that they get those things from Jesus.

[1 : 06] So really what he's saying is because you have those things. But he kind of feels like he's reversing it just to make the questions sound ridiculous and to emphasize them. And so on one level, this passage is a bit of a no-brainer.

It says, if you've got benefits from Jesus, which of course you do, love like he does. Serve other people. Be humble. Sounds simple enough.

But like much of our relationship with God, what's really kind of simple as a concept is actually a little bit more difficult when it comes to following through. When it comes to living it out. When this passage says you should be humble, you should have the same love for others that God has for you, that's probably not a big surprise.

That's probably something that you half expect to hear when you walk into church. It's not a big moment of revelation. We know that we're supposed to be loving. But for most of us, the next step of actually doing that is a little more complicated.

And so we need to come back to verse 1. Maybe you're in autopilot as well. You need to switch that off. And we need to come back to verse 1 and read it not as sarcasm, but as an invitation.

[2 : 18] See, if we're lacking in our ability to do verse 2, if we're struggling to do the love that we know we're supposed to, if we're not quite hitting the mark when it comes to loving like God loves or being humble or putting others first, then the reason for that struggle is that we're not feeling the love and the benefits that he's talking about in verse 1.

And it's probably not that we've willfully kind of disengaged with God's love and so we're not feeling any benefits. It could just be that for whatever reason right now or at some point in your life, describing your relationship with God with words like encouragement and comfort and love and tenderness and compassion doesn't seem right.

It's more of a struggle, a battle, a burden, something you keep failing at. And the lack of those feelings of the encouragement and the comfort and those things, it has an impact on the way that we view the world.

It has an impact on the perspective, so much so that Paul needs to say what is almost a ridiculous thing in verse 3. He says, Have you ever noticed or thought that that's actually kind of a ridiculous statement?

Now that I'm a parent, I've discovered there's a lot of things that I previously thought were ridiculous statements that now are things that I have to say regularly. I have a four-year-old son and it never crossed my mind that I would have to use the phrase, please stop trying to use mummy's makeup.

[4 : 05] But repeatedly, more than once a day, I'm going there and having to shut the bathroom door and tell him to stay away from mummy's makeup. I find myself saying things that I just really didn't think I should have to say.

I thought would be extremely obvious. But in the same way, this verse is almost too obvious. See, no one thinks that selfish ambition or vain conceit is a virtue.

No one aspires to those things. No one's affirmed for valuing themselves above everyone else.

Even if it is actually the way that we function.

Even if deep down the desire of our heart is to look after number one first at the expense of other people, it's not the kind of thing we're going to say out loud. It's not something we're going to brag about or praise someone else for.

That there's a part of us that knows that that just doesn't sound good. It doesn't sound right to say, you know what, I'm living for me. I don't really care about you. I'm just going to do my thing.

[5 : 13] For this church, it needs to be said, don't do that. Which means by implication, it is what they're doing. Even though it's clearly not something that they or we would aspire to, it's part of their lifestyle and it's part of ours as well.

So often we're driven by self-interest as the most important factor in the way we make decisions. So much of the way we approach questions in life is, how will this affect me over and above anyone else?

I mean, we might eventually think about the impact on other people, but the first and most important factor is, what does this do in my life? How costly will this be for me? We choose the job that will give us the money to enable us to afford the lifestyle that we want.

We choose based on our goals and our ambitions. We see those things as the most important factor. And that's a perspective problem.

Because subconsciously, when we live like that, we're valuing us individually, we're valuing ourselves above other people.

[6 : 25] We're treating our needs, our desires, our wants, our ambitions, as somehow more important or maybe even more valid than other people. And it's almost like you're saying, I matter more than you.

And what that means is, if there's ever a point of tension where what I want and what you want are coming into conflict, you can rest assured, I'm going to pick me. This is a problem because it's nowhere near what the Bible teaches us.

It's completely different to the image that we have in the Bible where we're told that all are created in the image of God. That every person ever created has an inherent value because God made them that way.

Not based on some performance or ability or their impact on you. They are just valuable because that's how God made them. That means you are valuable because God created you like that.

It also means the person next to you is valuable. The person who cut you off in traffic on the way here is valuable. The person who's annoying you at school or at work or making your life difficult is valuable to God.

[7 : 37] The person begging for money in the street. All are created in his image and all therefore are valuable and matter to God. Now this skewed perspective even starts to impact the way that we relate to God.

It obviously impacts on our relationships because whenever there's tension we seek our needs over the others. But it impacts the way we even obey Jesus. So if you come to a passage like this or a whole bunch of other ones where we're commanded to love God, we think, no worries, you're in charge God, I'm supposed to love.

But the issue comes when we start deciding whether or not some people are deserving of that love. Whether or not some people fit in with that command. It happens in the story of the Good Samaritan.

Someone comes to Jesus, says, what must I do to be saved? And he's told to love God with his heart, soul, mind and strength and to love his neighbour as himself. And his first question in response is, yeah, yeah, but who's my neighbour?

Who actually should I love? Who fits that category of deserving of my emphasis, my investment, my sacrifice? See, the reason this is an issue for us is because we've come with a perspective that starts here.

[8 : 53] Starts with us. And so we start taking credit for the things in our life. My position, my situation, my comfort, whatever it is that I've got, I got.

I earned, I put the effort in. And so we look at people who need and we blame them for their need. Have you ever looked at somebody begging? Or noticed a homeless person sleeping in the park and your first reaction was to think something like, I wonder what they did wrong in their life to end up there?

I wonder how they did that to themselves. As if somehow it's their fault.

And by implication, their responsibility. And therefore, not my responsibility. What about with less obvious needs? Like someone who's wrestling with depression or loneliness or isolation?

[9 : 56] Do you look at those people and think, it's your responsibility? It's your issue. Because we've taken credit for the good things that God has given us in our lives, because we've taken credit for God's grace to us, we approach others, both those in need and those not, from this position of superiority.

And the result is we give ourselves permission to not love them. It's their fault. It's their problem. We start to think things like, if I give them money, they'll probably waste it and spend it on alcohol. And it's my money. I worked hard for it. If I'm going to give it, I want to see it used my way. Or if I invest in that person relationally, who's lonely and isolated, they'll just take it for granted and I'll get burned.

And, you know, I've only got so much energy to give. Because we've let ourselves become the center of our own universe, the only question we ask when it comes to loving people in need, is how will this benefit me?

Or maybe less crudely, how much will this cost me? Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.

[11 : 22] In humility, consider others better than yourselves. It needs to be said because it's not how we live. And it is how we're called to live in response to how God has loved us in Jesus.

And so Paul takes us to Jesus now to show us not just the gap, but how we might close that gap. In verse 5, he says, in your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus. Have the same perspective. Have the same agenda. Have the same goal. In your relationships, that's the sphere that this passage is supposed to be applied to. It's not some abstract idea of love. It's in your friendships, in your marriages, with visitors, with strangers, with your neighbours, with nice people, with unpleasant people, in any relationships, have the same mindset as Jesus. Who? Being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage. Rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant being made in human likeness.

[12 : 38] And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Jesus is more than just a model of the kind of love we're supposed to show, although he's at least that. But what he does here is he gives us perspective.

He reshapes the way that we view the world so that we can imitate the love that he has. And so we really need to focus in on these few verses for a second. Jesus is in very nature God.

It's really tempting to domesticate those few words, to make it, you know what, Jesus is very similar to God. God-like, God-light, God-diet, whatever it is, we just, he's close, but that's not what the passage says.

It's easy for us to respond if we pull him down a few pegs, because it just kind of limits the cost that he paid to love us. But what these verses say is that Jesus is God.

[14 : 00] He's equal to him in every way. He's eternal. He was there before the creation of the world. By his will, everything is sustained. He is all-knowing, all-powerful, holy, righteous, and overwhelmingly magnificent.

He is the actual centre of all that exists, the most important. And right perspective is only possible when we recognise where he belongs, as the starting point, as the centre point, as the goal to which everything points.

And yet, even though all that is his, he didn't see that as existing just for his benefit. Even though he sits rightfully in authority over all creation, as the one assigned to judge all creation, he didn't see that as something that was just there for him.

I have two boys. I've told you about Bailey already. Bailey's four and Hudson is one. And one of the challenges that we're trying to work out with the boys is that there's already competition for toys. My older son, Bailey, has sonic hearing. So if he's at one end of the house and Hudson taps one of his toys along the floor, even if he hasn't touched it in months, all of a sudden he appears.

[15:27] Face palms his little brother, grabs the toy and runs back to his room. It's really quite impressive, as well as deeply disappointing. And so when that happens, I have these, you know, loving, stern conversations with my son about being generous, about sharing, about the importance of looking after his little brother and how even though they're his toys, he needs to share because he's the big one and he can be generous and all that sort of thing.

And he's so drilled on this now. He's far from well behaved, but he's so drilled on this now that when he picks something up to play with it, his first reaction is to glance and wait for me to tell him to share it.

He knows it's coming. He's almost expecting it. And so there's just the waiting for it. And usually it comes. But just recently I was challenged that actually there are some things that are his and he doesn't have to share.

They're rightfully his and he should be allowed to enjoy them. They were given to him. Some of them are gifts from other people and so they are for his benefit and he should be able to have them to himself. And one of those things was some books that he was given for his birthday.

And he picked them up. He glanced at me waiting for the instruction and I said, no, no, actually, they're your birthday presents. You can play with those. You don't have to share them with Hudson.

[16:44] And so I dragged Hudson the foot or so away. He crawled closer. I kept dragging him away. But it just gave Bailey a moment where he actually went, okay, these are mine. And it was interesting that given the power for a change, given the ability to choose, given the responsibility to say, these are mine, I can do with them what I want, he actually chose to give one of the books to his little brother.

I'm significantly more proud of that moment than the moment of sharing that's preceded by me yelling, you must give that to your little brother. Can you see the difference that in this moment he actually chooses?

Those books are his. There is nothing about them that means he is required to give them. They are there for his enjoyment and his benefit. And he makes a choice to sacrifice some of that joy and share it with someone else.

In the smallest possible micro version, that is a little glimpse of what Jesus is doing here. He is equal with God. He has no obligation to us.

He could sit back and enjoy his power and authority and all the goodness of being God. But he chooses to use that position, to use his power and authority to love us.

[18:06] I mean, that's the craziness of the gospel, is that Jesus doesn't have to. He would be good and right and fair and just and everything if he didn't love us in this way.

But that's not his heart. God's heart is to love us. And so he chooses to forego the rights out of love. He chooses to sacrifice out of love.

He makes himself nothing. He takes on human limitations. He denies the power and authority that is his and he steps into the limitations of being human by choice.

He chooses to experience what it is to be hungry and thirsty and lonely and isolated and opposed. All out of love for people like you and me.

It's almost like Jesus was walking through Chatswood Mall and spotted the person begging for money. Or he was here during supper and he noticed the lonely person wandering around the fringe and not quite engaging.

[19:15] And instead of asking the question whether or not that person deserved the investment of his resources, he put himself in their shoes.

He drew near and understood what it was to go through those feelings and those struggles and those needs. He bridged the gap. He looked at our world and our lives and saw people that were hopelessly trying to earn God's favour.

He looked and saw you and me floundering in life trying to find some sense of significance. Trying to satisfy ourselves. And he put himself in our shoes.

There's a passage in Hebrews chapter 2 which says, Since the children have flesh and blood, that's us, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death, that is the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

For surely it's not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he's able to help those who are being tempted.

[20 : 47] Jesus came and felt your pain. He experienced your struggle. He shared your trial and ultimately he took your punishment.

So that you could experience the love of God. It wasn't a deliberation for him, what will this cost me? What Jesus does and what the cross gives us is perspective.

It rescues us from putting ourselves in the middle and thinking that we're better than anyone else. We're never superior. We are always in God's eyes, the beggar, the lonely, the homeless, the person in need.

What the gospel does, what Jesus does, is show us that we are always and will always be sinners who need grace. There is nothing we have that was not given to us by God in Jesus.

So there is nothing in us that could possibly for a moment make us stand over and look down on someone else. Jesus rescues us from thinking that we have to fight for our rights and claim what's ours because this passage shows us that the better path is to entrust yourself to a loving heavenly father.

[22 : 14] We are called to have the same love, the same love that God has shown us and Jesus is the model of what it is to entrust yourself to the father.

Give all that you have for the sake of others knowing that the father will never fail you, that the father would exalt him. All that we have is a gift received.

2 Corinthians 8 says, You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor so that you through his poverty might become rich.

All that we have is a gracious gift from a loving heavenly father who sent his son, his son who humbled himself so that we might experience what it is to be loved by God unconditionally.

Jesus uses everything, everything at his disposal, not for his own advantage, not just to satisfy himself but so that God might be glorified as you and I, unworthy sinners, get loved and forgiven and adopted and washed and made secure.

[23 : 30] And so verse 1, Therefore, if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, it's not sarcasm, it's an invitation.

Be encouraged. Be comforted. Rest in God's tenderness and compassion. Marvel again that Jesus would come so far to love people as unworthy as us.

Find peace and confidence in his unconditional love and compassion even when we fail. Run to him knowing that he is compassionate, knowing that he's good, knowing that he always provides.

In your loneliness, grab hold of the presence of God living in you by his spirit and be comforted and strengthened and empowered. Come back to Jesus' death and resurrection and know that you are loved.

It's an invitation. Know that God loves you in the most costly and concrete way.

[24 : 51] By stepping in, by placing himself in your shoes, by doing what you could not do, by paying what you could not pay and because of that you are loved, forgiven, adopted and heaven awaits you and nothing can change that.

Come back to that. Then, then verse 2, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind, then having enjoyed Christ and in anticipation of enjoying him every day of your life and for all eternity in heaven, then make my joy complete.

Let that love of God produce in you a love for others. That same self-denying, step into their shoes, wholehearted, sacrificial, whatever I have is not for my benefit but for the benefit of those that God places in my path kind of love.

First, be encouraged, be comforted, be loved and let that love produce in you the same love.

Share the benefit is a program that we're doing for four weeks. It's a step in a journey of God shifting our hearts to love like he does. It's not the solution.

[26 : 17] It's not the destination. The goal of this program, the goal of God for us as his people is not that we run another program as a result of being challenged about how we care for the poor.

God's goal is that our hearts would move, that we would love, that it would be driven by a desire to care for those who have needs, that we would desire to be God's hands and feet, to be the love that we have experienced.

But it's a journey. It's a journey that begins from the place where we all started tonight. We know that we should do this.

That's not news. We know that we're supposed to do this. We know that that's what God wants us to do. But as our hearts shift, we can move from that place of it being an obligation and a responsibility to it being a want, a desire.

As our hearts experience more of the benefit and wonder of being loved by God in Jesus, our hearts can be moved, be released to not fight for our own rights, to not look after ourselves, but to want to love other people.

[27 : 32] And even further as God works, we can get to the point of impulse love, the I-can't-help-it love, the real Jesus-like love. One of the words that comes up in this passage, it comes up over and over in Jesus' ministry, it's compassion.

And really what that word means is it's almost like an involuntary response. As Jesus would go around and encounter people in need, it was like he almost couldn't help but help. He needed to respond in that circumstance and the desire of God's heart, our desire as a church is that our hearts would move in that direction.

It might mean new programs, it might mean new events or new actions, but really the goal is a heart shift from I should to I want to I just can't help it.

I can't help but love because God has loved me so incredibly. That's why this passage starts and ends with Jesus. No question it calls us to have the same love.

It's a huge command, love like Jesus did, but it starts and ends with Jesus because wherever you are on this kind of journey and it's not a straight line, you're going to go back and forward sometimes, but wherever you are, whether you feel like you should love people, you want to love people, you just can't help loving people, the next step for all of us is the same step.

[28 : 53] In fact, every step on this journey is the same step. We need to keep coming back to Jesus.

We need to keep coming back to the cross, to the incredible love of God who stepped into our shoes, who gave up what was rightfully his so that we too might know and feel and experience what it is to be loved by a heavenly father.

God's heart is that we would share his heart and God's grace to us is that he changes our hearts by loving us.

Wherever you are on that journey, the next step is come back to verse 1, to the invitation to be encouraged, to be comforted, to experience tenderness and compassion.

The next step is always come back to Jesus and let's together pray that he would do the work of shifting our hearts so that the world around us might look and see Jesus in the way that we can't help but love those in need around us.

[30 : 09] Let me pray for us. Father God, we want to ask you to do what we can't. We can put a bunch of effort in for a few weeks, we can launch new programs but only you can change our hearts.

Only you can lift our eyes off ourselves. Only you can give us the perspective of the world that you see where Jesus sits on the throne, where the only value that is in us is the one that you have placed there.

Help us to look and not see people who are undeserving of our love but help us to look and see what we were until Jesus loved us. God, shape our hearts so that we would need to help people. We would be so secure and so overwhelmed by your love that we are released, we are empowered, we are excited to sacrificially and costily and in costly ways love people who need it. God, I want to thank you that there was no price too great when it came to loving us and I want to ask that you would empower us to love like that so that more people may come to know that you are the God of incredible love, God of grace.

[31 : 36] God, we want to thank you for Jesus and we want to ask that we would keep coming back to him. Protect us from trying to do this in our own strength. Protect us from just putting only effort in and forgetting that we have nothing without you.

Grow our heart of gratitude that we might be encouraged and comforted, that we might have eyes firmly fixed on Jesus and that we might see every situation, every individual, everything that we face in our lives through the lens of your unconditional love in your son.

It's in his name we pray. Amen.