

What Difference Does the Trinity Make?

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[0 : 00] All right. So this is our second, our final week with the Trinity.

If I've not met you over the course of the summer, I'm Alex Sherman. And now let's begin in prayer. Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, ruled without end.

Amen. So John writes in 1 John 4, Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.

Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. Now what do we mean when we say that God is love?

[1 : 09] Now note well here, God does not, or John does not say that God is loving, or that God loves some of the time, but he says that God is love.

Now what does that mean? So this week, our second week with the Trinity, we'll first look at what it means when we say that God is love, and then we will look at what this implies about how God creates, how God saves, and then how we are to commune with God, and how we are to commune with one another.

But at this point, one might wonder, I thought we were talking about the Trinity. What is this love talk? God is love. That sounds like something different.

But the two are connected. Only the triune God is love. St. Augustine wrote, when I love anything, there are three things concerned.

Myself, and that which I love, and love itself. For I do not love except I love a lover. For there is no love where nothing is loved.

[2 : 29] Therefore there are three things. He who loves, and that which is loved, and love. Love. What Augustine is saying here is that love requires an object.

A beloved. You cannot love in the abstract. You know, I can't just say, I love. If you hear me say the sentence, I love, you're going to look at me, like, waiting for me to finish my sentence.

You know, you love what? Right? One needs to love someone. Not just abstractly, no one. Now, let's think back to the very beginning of everything.

In the beginning, before God created, when all that there was, was God. You know, before the universe existed, could God have been love?

Could we have said that God is love? Now, if God were utterly singular, if God were not Trinity, but just utterly singular, utterly one, then it's not obvious to me how God could be love before there was anything else.

[3 : 35] You know, who could God have loved? Who could have been the object of God's love when all that there was, was God? God. When there was no, nothing else other than this utterly singular, utterly one God.

But if God is Trinity, if God is triune, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as we were talking about last week, then even before anything else existed, there was love in the very being of the Trinity.

You know, the Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father, the Spirit loves the Father, the Spirit loves us. You know, each of the persons of the Trinity are loving one another. In the very beginning, we find that the triune God is love.

You know, this is the love that Jesus talks about at the end of John 17 in his prayer to the Father when he says, you loved me, you, Father, loved me before the foundation of the world. You know, before there was anything else, God is love.

This means that love is more fundamental to reality than anything else. You know, everything else has a starting point. It began when God created it.

[4 : 53] But love has no beginning. You know, before there was anything else, there was love. Love is God's most fundamental identity. As the author of this Reeves book puts it, love is not something that God has, merely one of his many moods.

Rather, he is love. He could not not love. If he did not love, he would not be God. Isn't that incredible?

I mean, the Trinity teaches us that to love is the most meaningful human activity. Because love, for us to love, is for us to live along the grain of ultimate reality.

Of the most ancient, eternal thing that there is. Before anything else, God is love. Any questions about that before we move on?

And look at some of the implications of this? Yes? I'm trying to remember. Do you think the Bible statements about God is love say more than the descriptions of him, like, he is truth, or he is holy? [6 : 21] Yeah. So now we're getting into the weeds of it. I think more, yeah, I think maybe more than some statements, but not others.

I was thinking about this this morning. So take that for what it's worth. This is a shower thought, so this isn't worth very much. But, you know, I often hear it said about this bit in 1 John 4, you know, God is love, yes, but God is also just.

I hear that a lot. Has anyone else heard that, too? Yeah. And that is true. But I'm not convinced that God is just in the same way that God is love.

When we say, you know, God is love, but God is also just, what we're saying there is God will repay evildoers to their face. God will, you know, punish sin.

What we're talking about there is retributive justice, some people sometimes call it, you know. God will punish sin. But before, you know, that kind of justice, that kind of justice had to come into existence because sin didn't exist when all that there was was God.

[7 : 32] Right? Love is eternal. Love existed before anything else. That kind of justice, the punishment of sin, has a clear starting point with the fall and has a clear ending point when Jesus comes back to raise the dead and restore all things.

Before that and after that, there's no sin. And so justice of that kind isn't needed. So, maybe I'm just being pedantic.

But I think it at least draws my heart to worship this God whose most fundamental identity is love. But then God is also truth before all time and now and forever.

And God is holy before all time and now and forever. So, yeah. I would put the love ahead of the truth or the light or anything else because everybody can understand it.

You know? You have to explain what truth is to a child. You have to explain what justice is, you know, even as some adults. But everybody who's felt love knows what it is. You know? It's instinctively, even though most people can't even describe it.

[8 : 44] You know? So, I think that the love would be the primary thing because it's just that much more elemental, you know, to everybody. Yeah. It's universally understood. Yeah.

Certainly in our culture. I think if you were to do a poll of, you know, everyone in at least the Western world and say, you know, if there's a God, what sort of God would it be?

I think love would be something everyone would agree about. Yeah. Okay. So, God is love and only the triune God is love.

You know, to say that God is love is to say that God is Trinity. But then, what does that mean for the things that God does? First, what does it mean for the way that God creates?

So, at the beginning of Genesis, we read, In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. [9 : 53] The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light. And there was light.

Now, do you see what's going on here? All three persons of the Trinity are involved in this first scene of the Bible. You know, the Spirit is hovering over the face of the waters, the Holy Spirit. And then you have God, the Father, speaking His word, His Son, to create. This is a pattern for everything that God does.

Everything that God does, God does as Trinity. All three persons of the Trinity are involved in everything that God does. Everything that God does, God does as a union of perfect love.

I think there's something really beautiful about that. Everything that God does, God does as a union of perfect love. Everything that God has done in your life, God has done as a union of three persons of perfect love.

[11 : 06] Even if you can't articulate, you know, the sort of abstract theology of, oh, the Spirit's doing, you know, Spirit's hovering over the waters, the Father's speaking.

Whether you can articulate it or not, whether you recognize it or not, everything that God does towards you is this unity of perfect love. And then what does that mean for why the Trinity creates? If God is this union of perfect love, then it's not as though God created the universe because God is lonely. I've heard this taught sometimes before.

But before all time, it's not as though God was lonely because God was this, we can almost say, community of perfect love. You know, perhaps an utterly singular God, completely one, not Trinity. Perhaps that kind of God might create out of loneliness. You know, if I were alone for all eternity, I'm utterly one. Well, I might create because I'm lonely. But the triune God, the Trinity, isn't dependent on anything else.

[12:24] You know, God doesn't need us to love him. He doesn't need us to be love. And if God is perfect love, then it's not as though God begrudges anything else.

It's existence. You know, perhaps an utterly singular God, an utterly one God, might be so self-centered, you know, having been alone for all eternity, as to be annoyed at someone else intruding on his solitary existence.

You know, if I spend a whole day in the library studying back at the seminary, and I'm, you know, alone in my books, and someone comes up to me and says hi, I'm going to be a little annoyed. But God's not like that. Because God is never completely alone. Never. You know, the perfect community, so to speak, of the Trinity, is the kind of God that delights in the existence of another. You know, God delights in your existence because God has, the Trinity is the kind of God that would make space for another to exist.

[13:47] You know, if God is perfect love, then creation is an overflow of this love that's always existed between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

You know, creation is part of God's outgoing, overflowing love. This love between the persons of the Trinity that's so perfect, so wonderful, it cannot help but overflow, and say, well, we want to expand it and make it even bigger, more love.

If I were a poet, there's a lot here to write about. This is, you know, the way that God creates and the reason that God creates as Trinity is shaped by God being this perfect community union of love. Any thoughts or questions about that? Before we move on? All right.

Yes. Maybe this would be the place to be talking about creation. Yeah. As you say, love is prior to even creation.

[15:14] So that actually means that love is more fundamental than an act of power. Ha ha. With creation being this act of power to create.

And as you begin to play that out in all of the social, economic, and political arenas in this world, this fundamental conviction that we have that's embedded in our Christian metaphysics, reality, that love is more fundamental than power.

To take that principle and begin to work out its implications in the political, social, and economic spheres, ends up being extremely significant. So this is not just an abstract, theoretical thing, but it's something that is pregnant with great implication across spheres.

Yeah. Yeah. That's gold. That's great. Yeah. You know, so often today, you know, people describe every human relationship in terms of power dynamics.

But as Christians, we can say, love is more fundamental than power. Because love existed for all time, but power wasn't exercised until creation.

[16:28] That's gold. Yeah. Thanks, John. All right.

The love that saves. There's a typo. If God is triune, what does that mean about how God saves? In his prayer to the Father, in John 17, the so-called high priestly prayer, Jesus puts it this way. This is eternal life. That they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. Eternal life, to be saved by the Trinity, is to know God. It's to know this loving community, so to speak.

J.I. Packer wrote this great book called Knowing God. And at the beginning of it, he distinguishes between knowing about God and knowing God.

[17:40] You know, if you read your Bible and you come to church on Sunday and hear sermons, you can learn a fair bit about God. You can know a fair bit about God. But what Jesus is talking about here is knowing God, like knowing a person.

That is what God saves us for. That is itself salvation in the Christian sense. There is this 15th century icon of Genesis 18.

That is the three visitors visiting Abraham. For those who have scruples about the second commandment and the making of images depicting God, forgive me. But I find this to be a beautiful depiction of the Trinity and what salvation with the triune God means. So you can see it on the handout. Hopefully it's large enough. So you see three figures seated at a table. And the three figures at the table represent the three persons of the Trinity.

[19 : 00] Now, if you don't read the text that I put there, and I were to ask you which figure represents which person of the Trinity, I don't suppose you would be able to answer me. And I think that's sort of intentional.

They're on the same plane with one another. No one's higher or lower than the other, representing their perfect equality and unity. You can only really tell the difference based on the color of their clothing and what those colors represent.

The figure on the left is sort of translucent, almost. That's the Father, because the Father is invisible. The figure in the middle represents the Son, because of the red, representing the blood of the cross.

The figure on the right, you see the green, representing sort of life. We call the Holy Spirit the Lord, the giver of life. And you see the Son in the middle, pointing to the cup.

The cup representing... Well, it's original context. This is a picture of Genesis 18. It's the actual meal that was prepared for the visitors.

[20 : 09] But here in this artistic depiction, the cup represents communion, the Lord's Supper. And the Son is pointing to it. And there's a space left at the front for the viewer.

It's as if the Son is pointing to the cup and saying, Here, come and eat. Come and sit down at the table and eat with me, the triune God.

Salvation is not merely being delivered from the wrath to come, like Paul says in 1 Thessalonians. Though it is that.

You know, it's salvation from judgment. Because of our disobedience. And it's not merely being raised from the dead. When Jesus comes back and raises our dead bodies on the last day to live forever, incorruptible.

Though it is also that. But at its core, if we take Christ's word for it in John 17, to be saved by God, to have this eternal life that God brings, is to be brought into this loving relationship with the Trinity.

[21 : 29] It's to come and sit down at that table and eat with the triune God. If that picture does nothing for you, then forget it.

And if you have, like, scruples about it because of the second commandment, then you're probably holier than I am. But I found it really, really helpful when my theology professor showed us this picture last year.

So, any questions about that? Or if you want to rebuke me for sharing an artistic depiction of the Father. Alright, so, communion with the Trinity.

Right? If salvation is to know God, is to be brought into this loving relationship with the Trinity, then is there anything, you know, how do we commune with the Trinity?

Is there anything unique about communing with the triune God? You know, how ought our prayer and worship and communion with God be shaped by the fact that God is triune?

[22 : 53] If it needs to be shaped by that at all? So, first, a word of caution. You know, in our prayer and worship and communion with God, it's possible to make too much of the fact that God is Trinity.

You know, we do worship one God and not three. And if someone were just walking into the room and just hearing what I'm saying this morning, they might not actually get that impression. Because I'm emphasizing the threeness of God so much.

We do worship one God and not three. Nevertheless, the Bible does particularly emphasize different things concerning the different persons of the Trinity.

even though each person of the Trinity is involved in anything that God does. But these particular emphases can shape our Trinitarian communion with God.

You know, we worship one God, but the Bible emphasizes particular things about the Father, particular things about the Son, particular things about the Holy Spirit. So, I'm going to try to bring out what are some of those particular emphases that can shape our communion with the Triune God.

[24 : 16] And I'm not totally alone here. There's this, you know, great Puritan theologian, John Owen, who wrote a book all about this. So, I'm not just all on my own here.

Um, so, our Father, our loving Father. Um, when, when Jesus' disciples ask him how to pray in Luke 11, they just come up to him and say, Lord, teach us how to pray, just like John the Baptist taught his disciples how to pray.

And Jesus replies by teaching what we now call the Lord's Prayer. You know, our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. So, Jesus teaches us to pray in particular to the Father.

And we be, we can be confident praying to our Father in heaven because the Bible, uh, uh, particularly emphasizes how, how the Father is incomparably loving and giving.

Uh, we, we see the Father's love, uh, come out in that oft-quoted, um, verse, John 3, 16, God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.

[25 : 28] You know, God here is referring specifically to the Father because he's, he's giving his only Son. And God so loved the world. Right? It emphasizes the Father's love.

Um, um, Paul writes in, in Ephesians, in, in, in love, the Father, uh, predestined us for, for adoption. Um, and you, one could go on and on.

Uh, the, the Father's love is emphasized, uh, consistently in, in the New Testament. Um, and then, the, the Father's generosity is emphasized.

Uh, Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, uh, which one of you, if a son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?

If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father, who is in heaven, give good things to those who ask him? Um, so by calling God Father, Jesus is saying that the Father is incredibly, incomparably generous.

[26 : 38] Um, you know, exorbitantly generous. Um, but then, in our, in our worship of the Father, in our prayer to the Father, um, one could think, what about our human fathers?

Um, you know, I, I don't know my, my biological father, so this, this was, uh, an enlightening conversation I had recently with someone who was telling me that when, when he prays to the Father, uh, he, he thinks of his human father.

You know, the face he just, without even thinking of it, without even trying, he just thinks of the face of his, of his human father, um, when he prays to his heavenly Father. And, as I thought about this, I thought this is probably a pretty common experience.

Um, you know, when, when you say the word Father, thinking God, uh, if, if you know your, your earthly father, then, that's probably the first thing you, you think of.

And then, for those who have had painful experiences with their human fathers, praying to their Father in Heaven can be especially difficult. because if you think of the face of, of someone who has been abusive or negligent or angry, then it can be hard to, to draw your thoughts upward to your heavenly Father who is none of those things.

[28 : 05] But your Father in Heaven is far more loving and far more generous than any human father. Uh, I don't care who he is. Right? Uh, you know, God is Father of the Fatherless. And if you have had painful experiences with your own Father, your Father in Heaven calls you his son or daughter.

And then, a word for human fathers, you know, in, in the room. Uh, you know, who, who, I'm, I'm a 26-year-old boy. I'm, I don't have kids. Um, so, who am I to say anything?

Uh, but, for, for human fathers, human fathers, be the kind of father to your children such that they can pray to their heavenly Father, you know, without thinking of pain or anger or abuse or negligence.

You know, by, by disclosing himself as Father God, uh, that, that's a rallying cry in a model for human parents. Uh, to, to, to model our own human parenthood after the fatherhood of God.

Um, yeah, as, as a brief, hopefully, extra note, um, I, I took a class at the seminary, um, this past year that was mostly about the Trinity, and it was really striking to me how most of the books and papers that I've read about the Trinity written in the past 50 years devote considerable time to justifying our continued use of father language with God because so many people have been saying, we can't continue to call God father because, you know, the fathers that we've known have been horrible to us.

[29 : 52] You know, let us not be those kinds of parents that, you know, how, how incredible, how beautiful would it be, uh, if in this generation generation of, of Christian fathers, we could change that trend such that in the next generation of theologians, you don't have people saying, well, we can't call God father anymore because of our human fathers.

You know, how incredible would that be, uh, to be able to call God father in the next generation without, without hesitation. Um, our father in heaven is incomparably loving and generous and we can come to him confidently without fear and also that's a, that's a model for, for our own, our own parenthood.

Then again, I'm not a parent. So, uh, the, the son, our brother, um, in the book of Hebrews we read, since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the son of God, let us hold fast our confession.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Now, I think at Trinity Baptist we talk about the son, Jesus, quite a bit, so I'll keep this brief.

[31 : 39] What do we see in this passage in Hebrews 4? For one thing, we see it emphasizes our fellowship with the son. You know, God the son became like us in every way, except for sin.

he's been tempted in every way as we have, in every respect as we have. Whatever difficulty or hardship we find ourselves in, we can go to the son knowing that he knows what we're going through.

He doesn't just know about it, he's been through it. In fact, he's been through worse. He's been through the cross. Whatever temptation we find ourselves in, we can go to the son saying, I know you've been tempted in every way as I have, and you came out without sin.

So, Lord, help me do the same. Help me follow in your footsteps. We can come to him confidently. We can find grace from the son. Here, we see that this passage emphasizes that because of our fellowship with the son, the son is gracious towards us.

He knows our human condition. Having himself become human, so we can come to him confidently, knowing that he will be gracious and kind to us. I think we talk about what the Bible particularly emphasizes about the son quite a bit upstairs in the sermons, so I'll leave it there.

[33 : 07] But any thoughts or questions before we move on to the more neglected person of the Trinity? Yeah? I remember Dr. Carson the sermon once in Revelation where the throne room of God and there's all these angelic beings and all these barriers to us getting through to him.

And the only way to get through those barriers was basically already be in the throne room which Christ does for us.

So it's the thing when you're talking about communion with the Trinity. if God wasn't Trinity there would be no communion with God because Christ is how we're able to bring that gap.

Because he's God he can already be in there and get us the way. Preach. Yeah. There is a friend of mine likes to say there is a five foot Jewish man at the right hand of the father.

Five foot is actually the average height in Palestine at that time. So he's not particularly short. At any rate. That's just to say there is a real human being.

[34 : 24] Human just like one of us. Except he's also God. But human just like one of us at the right hand of the father. And if we're united with him we are with God in the throne room.

Yeah. Preach it. All right. The Holy Spirit. Because we you know some church communities think about the Holy Spirit quite a bit.

I don't think Trinity Baptist is one of them. So I will quote at length from this book called On the Holy Spirit by this great old dead theologian because he as we will see he really loves the Holy Spirit.

So I'll read from the handout here. Everything that needs holiness turns to him that is turns to the Holy Spirit. He perfects others but himself lacks nothing.

He lives but not because he has been restored to life rather he is the source of life. he is established in himself and present everywhere.

[35 : 40] He is the source of holiness and intellectual light for every rational power's discovery of truth supplying clarity so to say through himself.

He is present as a whole to each and holy present everywhere. He's like a sunbeam whose grace is present to the one who enjoys him as if he were present to such a one alone.

And still he illuminates land and sea and is mixed with the air. Just so indeed the spirit is present to each one who is fit to receive him as if he were present to him alone.

And still he sends out grace that is complete and sufficient for all. From the spirit comes distribution of graces, heavenly citizenship, the chorus with angels, unending joy, remaining in God, kinship

with God.

Do we overflow with joy and love toward the Holy Spirit like this man does? The spirit is the often neglected, often forgotten person of the Trinity.

[36 : 46] Not just today, but actually throughout church history. I mentioned the Nicene Creed last week. In the first revision of the Nicene Creed, all it says about the Holy Spirit is we believe in the Holy Spirit.

That's it. Right? So we've often neglected this third person of the Trinity and yet he is constantly active towards us. To just pull out a few things from that passage I read, he perfects others.

Paul talks about putting sin to death by the spirit. The spirit empowers us to live in love toward God and toward neighbor. Living in love being the opposite of sin.

He is the source of life. The same spirit that brought again from the dead Jesus lives in us. As Paul puts it, life the spirit of the dead now lives in us and gives us life.

We'll give life to our mortal bodies just as he gave life to Jesus body. He supplies clarity through himself. Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as the spirit of truth in John 16.

[38 : 06] All knowledge of God comes to us through the Holy Spirit. without the Holy Spirit there would be no Christians. As Paul puts it, no one can say Jesus is Lord except in the Holy Spirit.

And then St. Basil says from the Spirit comes unending joy. I love this bit in Luke 10 where it says it describes Jesus rejoicing in the Holy Spirit.

If Christ's own joy is in the Holy Spirit then surely the Holy Spirit will also bring joy will be a source of joy for those who belong to Christ.

Will bring us into joyful communion with the Trinity. All right. Communion with one another.

We are getting close. The model of the relationship between the persons of the Trinity is according to Jesus the model for our relationships with one another.

[39 : 23] In John 17 Jesus prays for us specifically in this room to the Father. He says I do not ask for these only that is his apostles with him on earth but also for those who will believe in me through their word that is us that they may all be one just as you Father are in me and I and you that they also may be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me the glory that you have given me I have given to them that they may be one I in them and you in me that they may become perfectly one so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me you know

Jesus says um praise Jesus prays that we may all be one just as you Father are in me and I in you just as the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father just as the persons of the Trinity are all in one another mutually interior to one another so also we as the church as the people who belong to Jesus are to be one this this is a I mean the Father and the Son are so one that Jesus can say to his disciples if you've seen me you've seen the Father that's an incredible degree of oneness right can you honestly say to others in the church I am deeply involved in your life and you are deeply involved in mine we sometimes speak of marriage being one a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh we talk about marriage as this two people becoming one but in this prayer

Jesus is praying that not just be something in marriage but that be something among everyone in the whole church that the whole church might be one even as the persons of the trinity are one now there is in human relationships an importance of it's important to have barriers people talk about sometimes you'll hear you need to have barriers in relationships so that you're not completely drained of everything and yet I I suspect in the 21st century western world that is not so much our danger typically but I think typically our danger is much more to have too many barriers such that we're not able to say to someone else

I am really deeply involved in your life and you are really deeply involved in mine other than just spouses saying that to one another and see that this unity exists not just for its own sake but for the sake of pointing others to this God who grounds our unity in love that he prays that they we may all be one just as you father are in me and I in you that they also may be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me God is love his love overflows in the creation of the world his love overflows in the salvation of the world it's as if he's blown open the trinity to invite the whole world in and our unity with God and with one another in this perfect love relationship this loving community is meant to overflow all the more to bring in more and more into this perfect love

I can hardly think of a more stirring reason to share about what God has done for us than God is bringing the whole world into this perfect love I can hardly think of a more compelling reason to

want to know this God the God who is love before all time and now and forever he has called us to live in love toward one another that this love might overflow to the whole world all right any last questions before I close in prayer yeah not a question but just a good reminder that also helps me be very grateful and loving towards the

[44 : 56] Holy Spirit is that passage that talks about how even when we don't know how to pray the Holy Spirit intercedes with unspeakable groans yeah so just a good reminder of this active role in our personal lives as Christians or in our daily lives just to have that reminder that he's there praying for us even when we don't even know what to say to the Lord yeah yeah yeah the Holy Spirit is praying on our behalf to the Father yeah all right it is 10 till so let us pray Father Son and Holy Spirit you are love and we praise you and we worship you for being the love that grounds all of our love the love that comes first before anything else the love that inspires us to live in love toward one another

Lord fill us more and more with that love that we might joyfully obey that great summary of the law and the prophets to love you with all our heart soul mind and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves we pray through Christ our Lord amen all right all right fade absolutely men you we you and again sorry God you