

Nature and Character of God

What Is God Like?

September 15, 2019

I. The nature and character of God as seen in His love

A. Over the past seven weeks, we have been talking about the nature and character of God. Today, we are going to look at His nature and character as seen in His love.

1. One of the well known verses in the Bible is **John 3:16**, “For **God so loved** the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”
2. Along with **John 3:16**, there is a three word phrase in the Bible that is equally well known, and that phrase is “**God is love.**”
3. Interestingly, these three words in this order appear only twice in the Bible, and they are both found in **1 John 4**.
 - a. **1 John 4:8** . . . The one who does not love does not know God, for **God is love.**
 - b. **1 John 4:16** . . . We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. **God is love**, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.
4. Now the fact that this phrase appears only twice in the Bible makes it no less true. And it is this phrase that we are going to use today to look at God’s nature and character.

B. Pray

II. What does God’s Word mean when it says “God is love”?

A. What does God’s Word mean when it says “God is love”? Before looking at that, I want to point out three common hurdles that we face when thinking about and applying to our lives the fact that “God is love.”

1. **First**, we are prone to think, speak, and act as if love, including God’s love, is something to be received far more than given.
 - a. In other words, when we are looking for love, we are primarily looking for the love flowing toward us.
 - b. When we are measuring love, we are primarily measuring the amount and quality of the love we are receiving.
 - c. For too many of us, the amount and quality of love we are giving is secondary, at best, to the love we want to receive. We are more concerned with being loved, cared for, pleased, and satisfied in a relationship than loving those around us.

- d. We care more about being listened to, sympathized with, encouraged, praised, accepted in spite of our flaws, forgiven even when we won't apologize or admit that we have done something wrong, and being shown mercy than we are with giving all these things to others as a show of our love for them.
 - e. And because this is our mindset, it not only effects the way we see and treat those around us, it effects the way we see and treat God – which is why it is so common for Christians to think that God is love only some of the time.
2. The **second** common hurdle to more accurately understanding what the Bible means when it says God is love is seeing God's love as we would like it to be or seeing it in a lopsided way so that we exaggerate one part of His love while ignoring or minimizing other parts. The problem with this is that when other parts of God's love show up which we are not so fond of, we conclude that God is something other than love during those times.
3. And **third**, we face the tendency of seeing God's love as superior to all the other parts of His nature and character, and in so doing, we expect it to override or insulate us from the other, more threatening parts of His being. However, God as a unified whole. Therefore, beyond saying **God is love**, the Bible also says –
 - a. **God is** a righteous judge, and a God who has indignation every day (**Psalm 7:11**).
 - b. **God is** the Judge; He puts down one and exalts another (**Psalm 75:7**).
 - c. And the Bible says that **God is** a consuming fire (**Hebrews 12:29**).
4. My point is that we do not treat any of these aspects of God's nature and character as superior to His love or compassion or mercy or grace. In fact, Christians commonly speak and act as if God, the righteous judge, and God, the consuming fire are subordinate to God's love, compassion, mercy, and grace.
5. However, God is not one or the other, or one more than the other, but rather a perfectly integrated combination of all the aspects of His nature and character. Therefore, the fact that God is love is no more important and no more influential in His dealings with us than His holiness and His justice and His judgment on sin and sinners.
6. And so with these things in mind, let's begin looking at what the Bible means when it says God is love.

- B. When the Bible says God is love, it means that all His thoughts, words, and deeds are motivated by love, and influenced by love, and controlled by love.
1. In other words, there is nothing that God does that is outside the boundaries of love or against love or contrary to love.
 2. This means that unlike you and me, God does nothing from pride, selfishness, ill-will, bitterness, malice, ingratitude, discontentment, or any other evil motive.
 3. In **Matthew 7:12**, Jesus laid out a principle by which we are to live, a principle that gives boundaries to what love is and what love isn't. Now I believe this principle came from God, not as a burden for us, but as a principle by which He lives. And so we read, "In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets."
 4. Paul captures this same principle, but in different words when he says, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" (**Romans 13:10**).
 5. Therefore, when the Bible says God is love, it means that all His thoughts, words, and deeds are motivated by love, and influenced by love, and controlled by love.
- C. When the Bible says God is love, it means that He seeks the good of everyone affected in any way by His choices and behavior. This includes God's enemies.
1. Jesus made this clear in **Matthew 5:44-45**, "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, [45] so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.
 2. In other words, God does not require you to be loveable before He will seek your good. The love He gives is not dependent on your worth or behavior, but on His desire and commitment to love. Therefore, God seeks the good of those who love Him and those who hate Him, those who submit to Him, trust Him, and serve Him, and those who rebel against His authority, distrust Him, and refuse to serve Him.
 3. And because God seeks the good of everyone affected in any way by His choices and behavior, He does show love to one person or group at the expense of another. In other words, He will not take the food meant for you and give it to me so that you starve while I eat.

4. Now if there are sacrifices to be made, He makes them, though we can join Him in sacrificing for the good of others – and if we love, we will.
 5. Now you may be wondering why God, and those who love like God loves, so willingly make personal sacrifices for the ones loved. Think of it as a loving mother caring for her newborn child. She is more concerned about her child's welfare than her own well-being.
 6. Therefore, God willingly and intentionally loves at His own expense and to His own hurt in order to love us according to our need.
- D. When the Bible says God is love, it does not mean that His love is merely an act of His will, or an intelligent choice detached from any feelings or emotions. The reality is, God's love comes from both His head and His heart.
1. We saw the truth of this last week when we looked at the nature and character of God through the lens of His being our loving Father.
 - a. And in looking at God that way, I reminded you of the parable of the Prodigal Son, where Jesus presents God as a loving Father who, because of His love, has compassion on His son when the son returns – humble and repentant. And in His compassion, the Father is moved by His love to forgive His son, and to bring healing to the broken relationship between them, and to restore the boy to full family privileges.
 - b. Love such as this – toward a son who has lived for a time in open rebellion, in foolish waste, and in self-chosen self-destruction – comes not only from the head, but also from the heart. It is not only acted upon because it is the right thing to do, it is also acted on because it is felt deep within.
 2. Jesus points to the love that comes from both God's head and His heart when He says in **John 14:23**, that "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode (*live together*) with him."
 - a. Living together in a committed, love based relationship, such as marriage, is founded on or in time grows into a relationship where the love is mutual, intelligent, and heart-felt.
 - b. Therefore, when you love Jesus, it leads to obeying Him, which in turn leads to being loved by God and results in God and Jesus moving in and engage in a committed, mutual, intelligent, and heart-felt relationship with you.

- E. When the Bible says God is love, it means that He will continue to love whether He is loved in return or not – for love never fails to be love.
1. However, love is not intended to be one-sided or one-directional. Love is intended for relationships, and therefore it is intended to be reciprocal, shared, and mutual.
 - a. One-sided love has become a necessity because of sinners and selfishness.
 - b. You see, it is sin and selfishness that motivates one or more members in a relationship to be so self-centered that they love themselves at the expense or to the hurt of the other members. In other words, it is sin and selfishness, not love, that brings about unhealthy, damaged, and even broken relationships.
 - c. And though we too often push God into one-sided love, that is, into loving us while we are loving ourselves at His expense and in so doing, damaging the relationship between us, this is not the way love is intended to be.
 2. Once again, love is intended to be experienced within a relationship where each loves the other. In other words, by its nature love is bi-directional, reciprocal, and mutual.
 3. One way to better understand this aspect of love is to think of love as being outward focused, that is, focused on giving rather than receiving.
 - a. When all parties in a committed relationship focus on giving love, and this includes the relationship between God and us, and between a husband and wife, then each party is guaranteed to receive the love they need or ought to receive. In other words, when all the parties in a relationship are focused on giving love, no one goes unloved.
 - b. Sadly, we are too often inward focused, that is, more focused on getting love than on making sure we give good love to the people around us.
- F. When the Bible says God is love, it means that His love works best in a godly environment. In other words, love brings about the greatest good and fully satisfies where godliness rules supreme.
1. This should be obvious, but in case it isn't, think about it this way. For love to reach its intended, healthy state of being shared, mutual love, the community must be free of selfishness or anything else that works against love. Where the least bit of selfishness exists, love will be degraded from its pure state.

2. Therefore, God's love is always and only pure love because God is holy. When we see God's love as less than loving, it is not God's failure, but our blindness due to selfish desires, self-centered thinking, and ungodly living.
 3. We face the same dilemma God faces, for in spite of the quality of love we give, our relationships are with humans who are prone to selfish desires, self-centered thinking, and ungodly living.
 - a. In other words, like God, we are faced with the challenge of giving pure love in the face of receiving something other than pure love in return. In fact, we may even be facing unkindness, ill-will, anger, or even hatred in return.
 - b. And though we may occasionally or even frequently fail under such difficult circumstances, God never fails to love with pure love.
 4. Now the important truth here is that we will progressively discern, experience, and be satisfied with the purity of God's love as we make progress in putting selfishness and sin out of our lives and replacing them with godliness.
- G. When the Bible says God is love, it includes the fact that God's love is jealous love.
1. To help you understand God's jealousy, I want to point out that jealousy is used in three different ways in scripture:
 - a. Jealousy is used to speak of an intolerance of rivalry or unfaithfulness.
 - b. Jealousy is used to speak of a disposition or mindset that is constantly suspicious of rivalry or unfaithfulness even when proof is lacking.
 - c. And jealousy is used to speak of anger and hostility toward a rival or an excessive form of envy toward someone believed to enjoy an advantage you don't enjoy.
 2. God's jealousy is intolerance of rivalry or unfaithfulness. This kind of jealous love is rightly understood when seen in the light of a husband or wife's expectation of having the exclusive right to the marital kind of love they ought to have for each other.
 - a. Disloyalty in this regard is spoken of as unfaithfulness and adultery, and why shouldn't God or a husband or a wife have an appropriate jealousy against such unfaithfulness and adultery, or be angry when there is unfaithfulness and adultery?

- b. After all, there has not only been a prior commitment to faithfulness (*stated before God and these witness in the marriage ceremony*), there has already been the giving and taking of the benefits of such a committed relationship.
 3. In contrast to God's jealousy, most human jealousy is driven by insecurity. God's jealousy is driven by His love and holiness – knowing that where impurity, unfaithfulness, and adultery are allowed to creep in, love will be debased and ultimately grow cold.
 4. Therefore, when the Bible says God is love, it includes the fact that God's love is jealous love.
- H. Last Sunday we talked about God's love in relation to discipline, so we will not cover that today. I do, however, want to address one more aspect of God's love.
1. When the Bible says God is love, it means He is intentional, realistic, and practical in redeeming, saving, healing, and restoring sinners to Himself.
 2. And to affirm this truth, I will conclude by reading several scripture portions which I have edited and woven together for this purpose.
 3. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life, (**John 3:16**) because He desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (**I Timothy 2:4**). Therefore, while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly (**Romans 5:6**), and He continues being patient instead of bringing this world to an end because He does not wish for any to perish but for all to come to repentance (**II Peter 3:9**).

III. Conclusion

- A. **1 John 4:16** . . . We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. **God is love**, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.