

# THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

## The Love of God Lesson #8

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Love is one of those words that is often used, but ill defined. If you listen to how the world uses the word “love” you will discover they have many definitions. People love money, love food, love their car, or love their favorite hobby. Love is defined by an emotion or a worldly pursuit. Love, according to the world, almost always has stipulations, conditions, and can be revoked at any time. Lust and “good feelings” are also often described as love. Because of the many ways people use the word love, it is necessary to make sure we have a biblical definition as we consider the attribute of God’s love.

Theologians often categorize love as a sub-topic under the more general and overarching attribute of God’s goodness. For instance, Millard Erickson has the broad category of the goodness of God and under the goodness of God he places the moral attributes of God, and under the moral attributes of God he places the love of God and under the love of God he puts the attributes of God’s benevolence, grace, mercy, and persistence. Theologians differ in how they categorize love among the other attributes, but most place love under the goodness of God. It should also be noted that in the New Testament words used for love are easier to define than their Old Testament counterparts, which have broader meanings. In this lesson we will consider the attribute of God’s love and consider how the love of God applies to our lives.

### I. DEFINITION OF THE LOVE OF GOD

A. Louis Berkhof says that God’s love is,

“. . . that perfection of God which He is eternally moved to self-communication. Since God is absolutely good in Himself, His love cannot find complete satisfaction in any object that falls short of absolute perfection. He loves His rational creatures for His own sake, or, to express it otherwise, He loves in them Himself, His virtues, His work, and His gifts.”<sup>1</sup>

B. W. E. Vine speaking of the Greek word for love says,

“*Agape* and *agapao* are used in the N.T. (*a*) to describe the attitude of God toward His Son, John 17:26; the human race, generally, John 3:16; Rom 5:8; and to such as believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, particularly, John 14:21; . . . “Love can be known only from the actions it prompts. God’s love is seen in the gift of His Son, 1 John 4:9, 10. But obviously this is not the love of complacency, or affection, that is, it was not drawn out by any excellency in its objects, Rom. 5:8. It was an exercise of the Divine will in deliberate choice made without assignable cause save that which lies in the nature of God Himself cp. Deut. 7:7, 8. “Love had its perfect expression among men in the Lord Jesus Christ, . . . In respect of *agapao* as used of God, it expresses the deep and constant love and interest of

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<sup>1</sup>Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pg. 71.

a perfect Being towards entirely unworthy objects, producing and fostering a reverential love in them towards the Giver, and a practical love towards those who are partakers of the same, and a desire to help others to seek the Giver.”<sup>2</sup>

C. J. I. Packer has written,

“God's love is an exercise of His goodness towards individual sinners whereby, having identified Himself with their welfare, He has given His Son to be their Savior, and now brings them to know and enjoy Him in a covenant relation.”<sup>3</sup>

## II. THOUGHTS TO PONDER ABOUT GOD'S LOVE

A. Stephen Charnock, speaking of God, says,

“When He finds us conscientious in paying the duty we owe to Him; He rules as a Father, by love as well as by authority; He enters into a peculiar communion with poor earthly worms, plants His Word, invites us by His benefits, admits us into His presence, is more desirous to bestow His smiles than we to receive them, and acts in such a manner as if He were willing to resign His scepter into the hands of any that were possessed with more love and kindness to us than himself: this is the comfort of believers.”<sup>4</sup>

“St. John's twice-repeated statement, 'God is love' (I John 4:8, 16) is one of the most tremendous utterances in the Bible -- and also one of the most misunderstood. False ideas have grown up round it like a hedge of thorns, hiding its real meaning from view, and it is no small task cutting through this tangle of mental undergrowth.” J. I. Packer, *The Attributes of God*, pg. 106.

B. A. W. Tozer has some good things to say about God's love when he writes,

“The apostle John, by the Spirit, wrote, "God is love," and some have taken his words to be a definitive statement concerning the essential nature of God. This is a great error. John was by those words stating a fact, but he was not offering a definition. Equating Love with God is a major mistake which has produced much unsound religious philosophy. . . Had the apostle declared that love is what God is we could be forced to infer that God is what love is. If literally God is love, then literally love is God, and we are in all duty bound to worship love as the only God there is. If love is equal to God then God is only equal to love, and God and love

“We do God more honor by believing what He has said about Himself and having the courage to come bodily to the throne of grace than by hiding in self-conscious humility among the trees of the garden.” A. W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 100.

<sup>2</sup> W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Logos Bible Software.

<sup>3</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, pg. 111.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, vol. 2, pg. 450.

are identical. Thus we destroy the concept of a personality in God and deny outright all His attributes save one, and that one we substitute for God. The God we have left is not the God of Israel; He is not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; He is not the God of the prophets and the apostles; He is not the God of the saints and reformers and martyrs nor yet the God of the theologians and hymnists of the church. . .

The words "God is love" mean that love is an essential attribute of God. Love is something true of God but it is not God. It expresses the way God is in His unitary being, as do the words holiness, justice, faithfulness, and truth. Because God is immutable He always acts like himself, and because He is a unity He never suspends one of His attributes in order to exercise another."<sup>5</sup>

### III. SCRIPTURAL SUPPORT FOR GOD'S LOVE

- A. Deut. 7:7-8 – “The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, 8 but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the Lord brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”
- B. Psa. 36:7-10 – “How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God! And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of Your wings. 8 They drink their fill of the abundance of Your house; And You give them to drink of the river of Your delights. 9 For with You is the fountain of life; In Your light we see light. 10 O continue Your lovingkindness to those who know You, And Your righteousness to the upright in heart.”
- C. Matt. 5:43-48 – “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 “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. 46 “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 “If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”
- D. John 16:26-27 – “In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I will request of the Father on your behalf; 27 for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me and have believed that I came forth from the Father.”
- E. Rom. 5:8 – “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

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5 A. W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, pgs. 97-98.

- F. Eph. 2:1-7 – “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, 2 in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. 3 Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”
- G. Tit. 3:3-5 – “For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. 4 But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, 5 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.”
- H. I John 3:1 – “See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason, the world does not know us, because it did not know Him.”
- I. I John 4:9-10, 16 – “By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. . . 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.”

#### IV. **ERRORS CONCERNING GOD'S LOVE**

- A. Error -- God is only love.
- B. Error -- God is love according to the world's definition of love.
- C. Error -- God isn't loving because I am hurting or because someone I know is hurting.
- D. Error -- God isn't loving because of the evil in the world.
- E. Error -- God isn't loving because if He was, He would put an end to evil, hurt, sickness, dying and all the things I don't like.
- F. Error -- God isn't loving because I am not getting what I want.

V. **APPLICATION OF THE LOVE OF GOD**

- A. Because God is eternal, His love for those who trust in Christ will last forever.
- B. Because God is infinite, His love for those in Christ has no limit.
- C. Because God is holy, His love for us is pure.
- D. Because God is good, His love towards us will always do us good. (Rom. 8:28)
- E. Because the love of God is expressed through Christ, only those who are in Christ can know this love to the greatest extent. (Eph. 3:18-19)
- F. Because we are to be like Christ, we must seek to love others as Christ loved us.

God is love and God is sovereign. His love disposes Him to desire our everlasting welfare and His sovereignty enables Him to secure it. Nothing can hurt a good man.  
A. W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, pg. 99.

“God was happy without man  
before man was made; He would  
have continued happy had He simply  
destroyed man after man had sinned; but as  
it is He has set His love upon particular sinners,  
and this means that, by His own free voluntary choice,  
He will not know perfect and unmixed happiness again till  
He has brought every one of them to heaven. He has in effect resolved  
that henceforth for all eternity His happiness shall be conditional upon ours.  
Thus, God saves, not only for His glory, but also for His gladness. This goes  
far to explain why it is that there is joy (God's own joy) in the presence  
of the angels when a sinner repents (Luke 15:10), and why there  
will be 'exceeding joy' when God sets us faultless at the last day  
in His own holy presence (Jude 24). The thought passes  
understanding and almost beggars belief, but there is  
no doubt that, according to Scripture,  
such is the love of God.”

~J. I. Packer<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, pg. 113.