

## The Love of God

Unwrapping the Perfect Gifts – Part V

Romans 5:6-8

### Introduction

As we work through a wonderful passage on the love of God today, I want to refer, at times, to several hymn texts. It seems that sometimes the best way to verbalize such grand truth is to read the poems of Christians who, in past centuries, have revealed the nuances of God's love in a wonderful way.

I want to begin our study with one such hymn text. The lyrics were discovered written on the walls of an insane asylum that was being torn down more than a century ago. An unlikely place, you might think, to read words about God's love, and yet, what better place could there be to discover the helplessness of the human condition.

The words discovered were later added to a hymn by F. M. Lehman. Lehman had already written the first two stanzas and the chorus of the hymn, but had not finished it yet. When he learned of the words that were scratched on the asylum wall, he added them as his last verse. Lehman's hymn was eventually published in 1917. The lyrics of that anonymous writer are undoubtedly the most beloved of his hymn. They read,

*Could we with ink the ocean fill,  
And were the skies of parchment made;  
Were every stalk on earth a quill,  
And every man a scribe by trade;  
To write the love of God above,  
Would drain the ocean dry;  
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,*

*Tho stretched from sky to sky.<sup>i</sup>*

To speak today, on the subject of the gift of God's love, is both wonderful and impossible. Charles Haddon Spurgeon wrote in the late 1800's,

*Can you imagine it, that God who is greater than immensity, whose life is longer than time, that God the all-boundless One, should love you? That He should think of you, pity you, consider you; this could be expected – BUT that He should love you, that His heart should go out to you, that He should choose you, that He should have graven you on the palms of His hands, that He should not rest in heaven without you, that He should not think heaven complete until He brings you there, that you should be the bride and Christ the Bridegroom, that there should be eternal love between Him and you; oh, as you think of it, can you but lift up your hands with adoring wonder, and say, "Thy love to me was wonderful."*

How can you address such a subject so vast as God's love? I was reminded of the time when Augustine, the brilliant church father in the fourth century, was walking along the seashore and noticed a little boy. The boy had dug a small hole next to the waters edge and was running back and forth with his little bucket, from the sea to the hole, pouring water into it. Augustine asked him, "What are you doing?" To which the boy responded, "I am pouring the sea into this hole."

To fully understand or explain the love of God for the human race is to try to pour an ocean of

infinite truth into our small finite minds! So, after telling you as clearly as I can that it is impossible to grasp this subject, I will now attempt to do it.

## **The Love of God – A Perfect Gift From God Alone**

This gift, the treasure of God's love, is the next subject in our series of studies in Romans, chapter 5.

Where do we start with this gift of love? Where do we first dip our little buckets into the sea? Let us follow the example laid out for us in this chapter and ask the following questions:

- First, what kind of people does God love?
- Second, what kind of love does God give?
- Third, how do we respond to this kind of love?

### **What kind of people does God love?**

1. First, what kind of people does God love?

There are three categories given to us by Paul in chapter 5.

#### **God loves the helpless person**

- The first kind of person that God loves is the helpless person.

Paul tells us this in verse 6.

*For while we were still helpless, at the right time . . .*

(that is, at the proper historical time according to the redemptive plan of God),

*. . . Christ died for the ungodly.*

The Greek noun in this verse is "asthenes" (ἀσθενής), which refers to someone who is powerless. Obviously, in this context, a man or woman is considered powerless to please God; helpless to appease God. We use this word figuratively to refer to someone who is too weak to lift a finger.

In Acts, chapter 3, Peter and John are going to the temple during the hour of prayer and they see a man who has been lame his entire life. His friends would pick him up and carry him to the gate of the temple every day, where he would beg from those who were going in to worship God. Peter and John came up to him and he asked them for money. Peter responded, in verse 6,

*. . . I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene – walk!*

Then verses 7 and 8 tell us,

*. . . and immediately his feet and his ankles were strengthened. With a leap he stood upright and began to walk; and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.*

He becomes the first Pentecostal recorded in scripture!

By the way, this legitimate miracle by legitimate divine healers, which the apostles were, never asked this man how much faith he had. In fact, this man was an unbeliever. He did not know the gospel and had yet to hear of this name in Whom the apostles said to rise and walk. The apostles did not pray first; did not convert him first; did not get him to say first that he believed he could walk; did not first touch him on his forehead.

You need to understand, this healing had nothing to do with the lame man doing anything or believing anything or promising anything. He was "asthenes"; that is, helpless! This healing had everything to do with the power of God!

It is important to understand this because it then becomes a true picture of our own spiritual healing. God does not come to those who have a little faith; He does not save those who exhibit a little devout strength; He does not redeem those who show a little spiritual potential. No. He comes to those who are spiritually dead; who are unable to lift a finger to save themselves. He says to that spiritually helpless one, "Arise and walk!"

God loves helpless people.

#### **God loves the sinful person**

- The second kind of person that Paul tells us God loves is the sinful person.

Skip to verse 8 of Romans, chapter 5.

*But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*

First Paul writes that God loves us while we are helpless and now he writes, while we were yet sinners.

Since the whole of humanity is sinful, does this mean that God loves the whole world? Yes. In some measure, all the world benefits from the love of God.

It is the love of God for His creation that keeps it from being destroyed. It is the love of God, manifested in and through common grace, that allows an unbeliever to take a breath of air, or feel the rain upon their face, or enjoy the beauty of the sunset.

Without a doubt, the only person who will enjoy the fullest measure of God's love is the one who loves God's Son. But God loves the world.

Jesus Christ died for the sins of the whole world; His atonement was unlimited. He died not only for our sins, but for the sins of the world, as I John, chapter 2, verse 2, tells us.

It is that unlimited sense of the atonement that allows the unbeliever to curse God and still enjoy his supper and the sunset and a soft pillow with sweet dreams. That will eventually end, however. Why?

Because the atonement of Jesus Christ is limited. That is, it is only beneficial in its fullest and eternal measure to those who have been redeemed.

For now, the invitation is universal. God loves the world . . . and the world is full of sinners. And God, if you can believe it, according to Romans, chapter 5, verse 8, loves sinners.

Now, what is a sinner?

"That's the guy in the dorm room next to me . . . man, is he ever a sinner." Or, "That's the woman who works in the cubicle next to mine . . . boy, is she ever a sinner!"

The word "sinner" comes from the Greek verb "hamartano". This word was originally used by the ancient Greeks to refer to a marksman who missed the target. It then began to be used of someone who had missed the right way. In the Greek Old Testament, this verb was chosen to refer to missing the divinely appointed goal; to displease God.

A sinner, then, is not necessarily someone who has gone far astray in wicked living. Rather, every person without Christ is a sinner because he has missed the goal of God's purpose for his life. The goal being that he should live in fellowship with God through Jesus Christ.<sup>ii</sup>

We tend to think of applying the word "sinner" to the really bad people. The truth is, when we understand that we have all sinned, that we have all missed the mark, then we are all considered by God's word to be sinners.

That is the bad news – you are a sinner. I am so glad you came to church so I could tell you that. People even say, "I don't want to go to a church that tells me I'm a sinner."

My friend, it is true. However, the good news is this – if you are a sinner, then you happen to be one of the people God happens to love. Because, if you can believe it, God loves sinners!

We love people who are easy to love. In fact, we tend to like people who are like us. So, we assume that is the kind of love God has toward us. And, we further assume that we must not be all that bad if God does indeed love us.

D. A. Carson, a wonderful theologian who, so to speak, puts the cookies on the bottom shelf where we can get to them, illustrated the difference between our vision of love and God's. He wrote:

Picture Charles and Susan walking down a beach, hand in hand. They have kicked off their shoes and the wet sand squishes between their toes. Charles turns to Susan, gazes deeply into her large, hazel eyes, and says, "Susan, I love you, I really do." What does he mean? If we assume he has decency and Christian virtue, the least he means is something like this, "Susan, you mean everything to me. I can't live without you. Your smile paralyzes me from fifty yards; your sparkling good humor, your beautiful eyes, the scent of your hair – everything about you transfixes me . . . I love you."

What he most certainly does not mean is, "Susan, in spite of the fact that your nose is so large it belongs in the cartoons; your hair is so greasy it could lubricate an eighteen-wheeler; your knees are so bony a camel looks elegant; your personality makes Attila the Hun look sweet . . . but, Susan, I love you."

So now God comes through His word and says, "I love you." What does He mean?

Does he mean something like, "You mean everything to me. I can't live without you. Your personality, your witty conversation, your beauty, your smile – everything about you transfixes me . . . I love you!"?

When He says He loves us, does not God rather mean something like this, "Listen, morally speaking, your huge nose and greasy hair; your disjointed knees and terribly selfish personality; your sinfulness makes you disgustingly ugly to Me, but I love you, not because you are attractive, but because I have chosen to love you."<sup>iii</sup>

My friend, if you think that you deserve God's love, even in some small way, you will never feel totally secure in Him. That is because you will always be afraid that you might do something undeserving of His love . . . and you will!

The person who knows that God loves them today, even though they are undeserving, is the person who can rest in the fact that God's love lasts forever and they will not deserve that either.<sup>iv</sup>

God loves undeserving people who happen to be helpless and sinful!

### God loves the hostile person

There is one more kind of person that Paul refers to in this passage. This person is, perhaps, the most surprising of all people that God would ever love. Look at verse 10a.

*... while we were enemies ...*

- So, the third kind of person that Paul is telling us that God loves is the person who is His enemy.

These are the three phrases you ought to underline in your Bible:

- while we were still helpless (verse 6);
- while we were yet sinners (verse 8);
- while we were enemies (verse 10).

While we were enemies of God. This is the seriousness of sin, for sin is ultimately rebellion against God.

It is not just failure . . . it is refusal to follow after God.<sup>v</sup>

This is Paul's point – after you understand what kind of people we all are, you discover that we do not stand a chance. We are helpless . . . we are sinful . . . and we are hostile toward God.

Then, you discover that Paul is giving the answer to the first question, "What kind of people does God love?". And, the answer is – helpless, sinful, hostile, hateful people.

### What kind of love does God give?

2. The second question is, what kind of love does God give?

Look back at verse 7.

***For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die.***

Paul says, it happens, but it is rare that someone would die for another good person.

When we hear stories of it happening, we stand in awe. We are hushed by the heroism of firefighters

who risked their lives running up the stairs of a burning building, while everyone else was running down them.

I had lunch a few days ago with Dr. John Millheim, the Dean of our Shepherd's Theological Seminary. He told me a story about his brother William. William was John's older brother and was a father figure and spiritual leader for him. He was a needed guide, since their father left the family when John was a young boy. William loved the Lord and shared his faith in Christ with others around him. He was stationed in the Great Lakes region while in the navy. One particular acquaintance was another seaman with whom John had shared the gospel. On a couple of occasions he had taken him to Moody Church for worship services, but his friend had not accepted the Lord.

One day, William was asked by this friend if he would stand in for him so that he could have a couple of extra days for his upcoming wedding and honeymoon. William agreed. That weekend, a navy pilot crashed into the lake and a barge was deployed to pull the plane up and retrieve the body of the fallen pilot. William was one of the sailors who was assigned to duty on that barge. While out on the lake, a sudden storm sprang up and the barge was ultimately overwhelmed by the water and sank. All of the men died that day, except for one older man . . . the man to whom William had given his life preserver! It was a gift, given to this older man, that allowed him to survive the storm, while William drowned.

That kind of sacrifice defies logic. That kind of heroism leaves us hushed with wonder. It is indeed rare, as Paul said in Romans, chapter 5, verse 7.

God went much further than any act performed by any man, however. Look at verse 8 again.

***But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.***

Helpless . . . sinful . . . hostile . . . hopeless . . . condemned . . . we would have drowned in His wrath! But God demonstrated His love by sending His Son with the life preserver of infinite grace to those who are lost and condemned.

We are told in Ephesians, chapter 2, verses 1 through 5,

***And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, 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. 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. **But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)***

*But God – what a rescue!*

*But God – what a relief!*

He knows the worst about you and me and loves us still!

Another great hymn writer tried to summarize when he wrote,

*He left His Father's throne above,  
So free, so infinite His grace!  
Emptied Himself of all but love,  
And bled for Adam's helpless race.*

*'Tis mercy all, immense and free,*

*For O my God, it found out me!*

*Amazing love! How can it be,*

*That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?*

Unlovely me! Undeserving me! How can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?!

But that is what kind of love He has . . . love that was willing to die.

“Agape” is the Greek word used for love in Romans, chapter 5, verse 8, to describe the demonstration of God. “Agape” is the love of the will. It represents the decision of infinite intellect. However, it is more than a decision, it is action!

According to John, chapter 3, verse 16, “For God so loved the world that He *gave*,” not, “For God so loved the world that He . . . said . . . planned . . . thought . . . wished . . .”. No! “For God so loved the world that He *gave*”!

An anonymous author categorized John, chapter 3, verse 16, into twelve phrases in an attempt to express the greatness of God’s gift of salvation. He wrote:

- God – the greatest Lover,
- so loved – the greatest degree,
- the world – the greatest company,
- that He gave – the greatest act,
- His only begotten Son – the greatest gift,

- that whosoever – the greatest invitation,
- believes – the greatest simplicity,
- in Him – the greatest attraction,
- should not perish – the greatest promise,
- but – the greatest difference,
- have – the greatest certainty,
- everlasting life – the greatest possession.<sup>vi</sup>

How is this gift of love ours?!

***But God demonstrated His love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.***

Spurgeon wrote, “Jesus Christ seized the cup of our condemnation and with one long draught, He drank damnation dry!”

Paul has answered the questions, “What kind of people does God love?” and “What kind of love does God give?”

### **How do we respond to this kind of love?**

3. The final question is, how do we respond to this kind of love?

Let me give you two ways.

### **Receive it!**

- First, receive it!

It is a gift! Paul would write, in Romans, chapter 6, verse 23,

***For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.***

I am convinced that there are many people hearing this right now who do not have the gift of God’s love through Christ. Why? Because you think you deserve it! You think you have earned it! You think that surely God loves you because you are worth His love.

Have you been listening? God demonstrates and delivers His love to the sinners, the enemies, the helpless!

I find it fascinating that Romans, chapter 5, verse 8, was the verse that sparked the great Welsh revival of 1904. Young Evan Roberts was a young believer who was listening to an evangelist, named Seth Joshua, preach on this text, “But God commended His love toward us . . .”. He was so moved by that verse that he began to weep and literally fall before

the Lord. He wrote, "What bent me over was that God would commend His love for humanity when there was nothing to deserve that love."

For the next thirteen months, Evan Roberts prayed that revival would come to Wales. Finally, he sensed that God wanted him to speak to the teenagers of his church and he called a meeting. The meeting lasted until midnight and marked the beginning of a continuous revival. The chapel doors were not closed, night or day, for many months, and from that chapel, revival spread like wildfire. When it was over, more than 100,000 people had come to faith in Christ, professed Him publicly in baptism, and joined the churches of Wales.

What brought such a movement of God's Spirit? The truth of this very text, that,

*. . . God demonstrated His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*

Receive it . . . it is a gift from God.

### **Rely on it!**

- Secondly, for those who have received it . . . rely on it!

It is a guarantee from God!

Why is it that the first thing you wonder when difficulty strikes, is whether or not God loves you? It is His gift and His guarantee. Paul would write, in Romans, chapter 8, "What can separate us from the love of Christ?" And, his answer, paraphrased, is, "Nothing!"

## **Conclusion**

In our study today, I have read the lyrics of several hymns. I want to close by reading one more, written by an author who clung to the guarantee of God's love, no matter what happened in life.

George Matheson pastored over a hundred years ago. The thing that made this pastor unique was that he was blind and lived with his sisters. His sisters learned Latin, Greek, and Hebrew and would study for him. They were indispensable to his ministry in that they would help him study the text and prepare his messages. He was leading a church of several thousand people, which was unusual for his area. Over time, one by one, his sisters eventually married, though later in life. With their marriages came great loss to George, because when they married, they moved away. Finally, the last sister married and George Matheson was alone, completely alone. He was able to care for himself, but yet struggling with all that he had learned. He was older, in fact, his sisters married at an older age. And there in the struggle of trusting in God, just after his sisters moved away, George Matheson wrote these words;

*Oh love that will not let me go.*

*I rest my weary soul in Thee.*

*I give Thee back the life I owe,*

*That in Thine ocean depths its flow may richer, fuller be.*

*Oh joy that seekest me through pain,*

*I cannot close my heart to Thee.*

*I trace the rainbow through the rain,*

*And feel the promise is not vain; that morn shall tearless be.*

This hymn was named, *O Love That Will Not Let Me Go*.

How do you respond to this kind of love?

- You receive it. Have you?
- You rely upon it. Will you?

It is a precious gift . . . a priceless guarantee . . . a perfect gift from God.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/9/2003 by Stephen Davey.

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<sup>i</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Romans: Volume Two* (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Book House, 1991), p. 540.

<sup>ii</sup> Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Book House, 1974), p. 160.

<sup>iii</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Crossway Books), p. 61.

<sup>iv</sup> Boice, p. 536.

<sup>v</sup> Earle, p. 161.

<sup>vi</sup> Boice, p. 540.