

God is Love

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- [0 : 0 0] So before the baptism today, I'm going to speak on a rather large theme, which I'm going to narrow down, obviously, and I'll have to miss out a huge amount in this.
- But the theme is from verse 8, which says that God is love. And that will be our theme for this morning.
- Stand-alone theme. We're taking a little break from our study in Romans. We'll come back to Romans, I think, once in March, and then from April onwards we'll go back into Romans.
- But there'll be a few different standalone themes in the next few weeks. So today, obviously, is also a baptismal service.
- And whether it's the baptism of a child of Christian parents, or whether it's the baptism of an adult who hasn't been baptized and who comes to know Christ as their Savior, then that whole sacrament relates and speaks about God's loving commitment to rescue us.
- [1 : 0 5] And He's done that in great love. It's part of His purpose to realign anyone who calls out to Him and who believes that He is, and who believes that He's true, and who believes that He has lived and died and rose again to be a sacrifice, to be a substitute, to be a redeemer.
- Then baptism is a symbol and a sign of somebody coming to faith in Jesus Christ, or believing that the promises are not only for the believer but for their children also.
- And having done so, recognizing that that is actually the key to everything. It's the key to everything in life. It's the key to our being, our identity, our hope.
- It provides the answers, not all the answers to everything, of course, but it does provide the fundamental and basic answers to our humanity, who we are as people, and who we are in relation to a God who made us and the world in which we live in it.
- It provides answers to the most fundamental and basic issues that we have. Because of course, the core of who we are is love, isn't it? However we see that, and however we perceive of that, I think we would all agree, we would all recognize the centrality of love in the world in which we live.
- [2 : 2 5] I was toyed about whether to use this illustration. I'm just going to use it very briefly. But the annoying thing is that I've forgotten the name of the guy who I was watching this morning on BBC.
- He's a journalist. I can't remember his name, but he recently announced that he had second stage prostate cancer.
- He has put up a baseline interview, and it's very moving. If you have time to find it and watch it, I should have taken down his name. I can't remember who.
- Bill Turnbull, excellent. I knew someone would know that, someone intelligent, up-to-date person would have known that. Bill Turnbull. I was very moved by it.

At the core of what he said, and I don't know what he thinks of the gospel or anything like that, but the core of what he said was he's very fortunate at his age to be what he is because the greatest thing he'd done was be committed to his wife for 30 years, and the greatest thing he had was his family.

[3 : 31] Love was at the very core of what he saw as existence. That's true, isn't it? Whoever we are, and I found that very moving. So the theme today is God is love, and I think it's the greatest reality in the universe, absolutely the greatest reality, but also it's the one that we wrestle with most.

It is a truth that we, if we're honest, I think with ourselves, we wrestle with more than any other truth, and I think we wrestle with it on at least two levels. One is something that people may often speak to you about and ask you about and say, well, if God is all powerful, as you say, and He's also all loving, why is this world and my life in such a mess?

It's not much of a love He has if He says He's so powerful and He's so loving, but things are in such a mess. We often feel guilty and we feel alone and we don't feel the concept of God's love, and we look around us when we don't see the concept of God's love, and I think part of that is indeed part of what God reveals Himself as to the issue, because our concept of love and what it should look like is often from ourselves out, what we feel, what others feel for us, what they show us, what they do for us, and we think the same with God.

We think, well, you know, if God is love, then He should make me feel that I'm loved by Him. He should do more for me, and He should have a... I have a list of things that I want Him to do to show His love for me, and when that doesn't match up to our expectation, we deny Him, and we deny His reality.

Well, He can't really be a God of love, because that's not what I think love is like. We're uncomfortable with that. So I think at that level, and related to that, is that we can't really imagine a love that's different from our understanding of love.

[5 : 15] It's the thing, isn't it, that's spoken most of in the universe and the theme of every song in the universe, and so we have a great depth of understanding. We've got the final word on what love is and its definition.

And so we find ourselves judging love by our own... or judging God by our own understanding of love, rather than allowing Him and His revelation of Himself to speak.

We might not agree with that revelation, and we might struggle with it, but at least we need to let Him speak and put His love into its own context. Because something... it is a love.

It's a genuine love that does expose us, and it challenges us about our perspective on life and about the universe in which we love. I just want to say a couple of things.

The first thing is that love is God's gift to humanity, okay? He's the great gift giver. James 1.17 says, every good and perfect gift is from above.

[6 : 16] So it's a gift that very often we as human beings, I think, take for granted. Sometimes we abuse it, we twist it, we disfigure it, and sometimes it's disordered by us.

But nonetheless, our ability to love, the deep bonds of love that are evident today in family and friendship and in commitment and husband and wife and friends and relations, that's a reflection of the nature and of the character of God and the gift that He gives, the one in whose image we are made.

Even in our rejection of Him, even when we cast Him aside, even when we stick our fingers up and we have no time for Him, He pours out love onto the world that He has made.

And that means we matter. It means we matter in this big universe, this big impersonal universe. It means that we matter. God gifts love.

But also, God is love, and that's the theme of what John is saying here, as he expresses what God has given him to express about himself. So it's not a characteristic of God.

[7 : 21] It's like, Derrick's a minister, Derrick loves sometimes. I love or someone else loves. It's not a characteristic. He's not a being, even a divine being, who happens to love and happens to do other things.

But it says God is love. In other words, from His very core, from His very being, His very person as He reveals Himself, He is love. It's His nature.

But it's not all that He is in His totality in the Bible, there's three other descriptions similar to this that the Bible uses. It says that God is light, God is spirit, and also God is holy, or God is a consuming fire, these three descriptions of Him.

So He's all and all at the same time in His totality and the totality of His beings, He's perfectly loving and perfectly just and perfectly pure and perfectly truthful and a perfect spirit.

We are none of these things in perfection. We have elements of them because we're made in His image, but we are none of these things. And He acts therefore in accordance with His character.

[8 : 29] That's what He says, and that's what we struggle with so much because He is both perfectly loving but also perfectly just.

And we are created by Him and are accountable to Him. And that creates obviously an issue as we rebel against Him or as we ignore Him or turn away from Him.

But God is love not only in His being like that, but He is love in His being without us. You know, it's very hard to define love in isolation on your own unless, I guess, we talk about self-love.

And I think sometimes people have that impression of God that God just loves Himself as an isolated being. But I think that's where the huge significance of the revelation of God of Himself as a unique being, both one God but three persons, which is beyond our capability to understand.

But it speaks of Him therefore in His very core being as a relational person, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, these names we take when we baptise, recognizing who God in all His complexity reveals Himself to be.

[9 : 45] He's complete within Himself, within the Godhead, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That means there's this inter-trinitarian love that before the creation of the world, He wasn't an isolate.

He wasn't kicking about in a kind of isolated heaven, lonely looking to create someone to love because He had this perfect love within His own character.

And so I think very often our great struggle is with God as God, as He reveals Himself, the One who is both given life and given love and given creation, but who also reveals Himself or reveals His relationship with humanity as One that was broken from the beginning because humanity wanted to break from His Lordship and wanted all His gifts and wanted all the goodness of life and all the beauty of life but without Him.

Simply that we wanted to be gods in control ourselves. You know, thanks. That was tremendous. Wonderful. Thank you to God for that.

Bye. We don't want you now. Leave the room. We'll just go out on our own. We don't need you. We don't want you. We don't like you. We don't want to be accountable to you.

[11 : 08] So we got rid of... It's... Corey and I have talked about this last week about... And we'll keep using the example, I guess, of the prodigal son. The Bible, Jesus uses the idea of the prodigal son to speak about humanity and God and the rebellion and also the hope and the healing.

It's the prodigal son's syndrome. You know that you're a great dad and all that and I love what you've done for me but I really want you dead so I can get the inheritance that I would get from you normally when you die and I want to spend it all.

I don't want to be at home. I can't be bothered with the restrictions that you have when I'm at home but I want freedom and I want all the gifts that you can give me but I just want to live without reference to you.

And that's obviously it's only half the picture, isn't it? But that is a great picture that the Bible gives and the consequence, of course, is as His justice is equally fused into His being along with His love is that He justly condemns the humanity that He loves.

And justice is a huge concept. We're not going to look at it today but it's of course, it's part of our makeup, isn't it? We all know about right and wrong. We all care about right and wrong.

[12 : 23] We have different views of right and wrong, of course. And usually we love justice and we love wrongdoing. Well, we don't love wrongdoing, sorry.

We love when wrongdoing is dealt with, is what I meant to say. And especially if we've been wronged, we love that in the sense that we feel that justice has been done.

I think sometimes we're not so keen when our own wrongdoing is exposed. We recognize that there is an element of disorder in our understanding of justice.

But that's, God says it's why we often feel lonely and guilty and we thrash out, therefore, we thrash out at God because we think, how can He possibly love?

And we don't like the idea of His justice as our maker and as the one to whom we're accountable. We think of other reasons for why the world is broken, and yet He says it's because we've abandoned Him and we don't love Him and we are separated from Him in justice from the offer of life.

[13 : 27] Death is the great disaster that we just simply can't compute, that we don't have answers for in our lives. We just struggle within that to conceive of a God who could possibly love us in this world of brokenness and death and disease.

We don't understand Him or our culpability before Him, or even the fact that He's left us to our own choice. But very gratefully, that's not the end of the story, is it?

It's only part of His own diagnosis because we recognize in what John is speaking about and speaking about God, His love is that He has sent His Son. He has sent Himself.

In His goodness, the all-just and all-loving one provides the only solution in His being and His relationship and broken relationship with us that there could be.

He becomes one of us, except as the second Adam, He perfectly lives out life and He perfectly lives out love and a relationship with His Father, but yet pays the price on the cross for our failure.

[14 : 35] It becomes our substitute, in other words. We know that concept of substitution, don't we? He dies in our place. He takes God's justice and punishment against our rebellion in Himself.

So God's justice is satisfied, of course, perfect satisfaction, and His love is satisfied because He provides an answer and a hope and a forgiveness and a way forward because He takes what is due for us and offers life and hope and forgiveness.

It's the stupendous act of love. The Bible says greater love is no man in this and He lays down His life for His friends. We know that, don't we? We know that in life.

Someone who loved that much that would lay down His life for His friends is a great act of cost-committed love. And that is a cost to God that's beyond our understanding, simply mysteriously beyond our understanding.

God, who in Himself takes the cost, takes the pain and offers the solution to those who didn't love Him back. It's instigative.

[15 : 43] He loved first. We love Him because He first loved us. It's deep. It's passionate. Lots of different ways of describing God's love in the Bible, extravagant, fully committed, possessive, jealous in a perfect way, in a protective way, and fully voluntary within the Godhead that He would come and do this.

And for us, He adopts us in His family. We are forgiven. We have hope. We have His presence. And we have eternal life. So the cost is great.

And also very briefly, we see that when we're seeking to define love as we have it in the Bible, that Christ Himself in His person as God and the flesh absolutely defines it for us.

He shows us what it is to love the way God intended us to love. And it's love that's for God the Father first. You know, God was well pleased with Him. It was a relationship in the incarnation of great fellowship and love to the point where on the cross, or just before the cross, He said, not my will, but yours be done.

Because He loved the Father and He wanted to provide this salvation for us. And also love for others. And this is maybe what it, the rubber hits the road for us.

[17 : 01] The love of God was a love which loved the outsider, loved the helpless, that wept with those who wept, rejoiced with those who rejoiced, was honest, particularly with their religious, exposed their hypocrisy, those that were church scores.

He exposed them for just living an outward religion and not a religion of the heart. It was attractive to some, it was repellent to others, it was rejected by most. But it was a love that was utterly selfless and costly and committed.

So if you have time, look at His life. And so as we close, just before we move into the baptism, just a couple of applications of that.

If you're not a Christian today and you're with us in church, it's absolutely delightful to have you in church with us. We love to have lots of people with us in church.

Whatever their own thinking and persuasions are and what their thinking is spiritually, we, it's just a pleasure to have you.

[18 : 02] I would ask you just to do one thing, which is maybe put aside the failings and the sometimes hypocrisy of Christians you might know, or the church that you might be aware of as an institution or whatever it might be.

And I'm not by any way excusing any of that in us. But do take time to consider what God Himself reveals, I think, in the Bible clearly. Take time to consider His diagnosis about life, about death, about our own hearts, and about His remedy and about His love.

Take time to read maybe one of the Gospels, particularly maybe John, which is written so that we may think about and consider Jesus more.

And do consider His love and His great love for you and the great love that He's expressed in your own life, even with maybe some of the brokenness and the difficulties and the challenges that you face.

I would encourage you, with all my heart, and will pray that you would consider Jesus Christ and His living Word to us.

[19 : 11] But also how does His love play out for us as Christians, both as parents, as a church family, as individuals? What difference does it make?

You know, we know it. You know, you may be brushing it aside. I don't need to learn any more about God's love. I know all about God's love. First of all, could I just say, don't presume that because we love naturally in our lives, which I hope we all, I'm sure we all do, that we're sorted.

You know, I think like all of our very beings, we know as Christians, every aspect of our character is a little bit dissembled, is broken.

And like every aspect of our character needs to be redeemed and transformed. So it's not self-absorbed, but it's living and it's reflecting the love and the gift of God's love in our lives.

So do remember that. And also, we need, I think, to recognize the challenge then of redeeming our hearts to love the way Jesus wants us to love.

[20 : 12] So it's not just kind of soft and sappy and sentimental, but it's much more rigorous and beautiful and challenging and transformational in many ways.

And so I think to finish with looking at Jesus' example in the same two ways, learning to love God better and learning to love others is the challenge of grace in our lives.

When we learn to love God, it's much more, it is, but it's much more than just feelings and our circumstances. It's not just our circumstances that will define whether God loves us or not.

He loves us because what He's already done completely and utterly. And prioritizing that our relationship as Christians with God is primarily and firstly a reordering of that, that we'll actually love God.

And that's the biggest challenge, isn't it, for all of us, that we love God first. And that is the greatest act of gratitude that we can give back to God and that He enables us by His Spirit to do, is to love Him.

[21 : 20] That's why we worship. That's why we put Him first. That's why we seek to tell others about Him. But also learning then to love other people. And that's a really significant and important part of understanding and knowing God's love in our own lives as Christians.

In other words, we're to work at the love of grace in our lives so that it looks like what Jesus wants it to look like. That means it's from our hearts, but it means it's sacrificial forgiving.

We're willing to be wronged. We go the extra mile. We're self-forgetful. We love those in the family of God in the church, and sometimes that can be the toughest thing of all.

We love those who don't love us in return. Those who are hostile to us and our enemies, maybe. Reaching out to the needy and the helpless, the outsider, our neighbor, whoever that happens to be, and it shrinks at no cost.

That reflects a little bit of learning to love others the way Jesus loved other people. And therefore, it's not going to be based on mutual attraction.

[22 : 21] That is probably the most fundamental difference between the love of God in our lives and the natural love that we have. Most of our natural love is based on mutual attraction, and that's a good thing. There's nothing wrong with that at all.

Nothing wrong with that kind of love. But the love of Christ in our hearts goes beyond that. Of course, we love nice people. It's absolutely common sense, isn't it?

But we also are to love those for whom there's no mutual attraction to us in our lives. And vice versa, it is a love for the undeserving. It's the hardest thing of all for us in our lives.

We often want revenge. We want quid pro quo. They treated me like that. I'm going to treat them like that. That's how they acted. That's how I'm going to act.

We treat others negatively or maybe sometimes positively in the way they've treated us. We find it easy sometimes to hold grudges, to gossip about others, to paint the worst possible picture.

[23 : 20] Even sometimes, and I think in my own heart, that sometimes we like to hate because it feeds our own sort of feeling of self-righteousness and justification for the actions that we might have taken.

It's sometimes a disordered love we have. And only Christ can change that because it's completely counter-cultural for us to be wronged and to love our enemies and to do good to them who have no desire to do good to us in our lives.

And we can only do it when we see that that is what Jesus has done for us. So these are some of the challenges, I think, and the beauty of the love of God. In baptism, we recognize the huge cost of God's love for us in redeeming us.

And as we seek to bring up our children in His love and in His grace, all of us together as a family, then we seek His blessing and His promises to be worked out in the lives of our children as well, which is a great thing.

So let's bow our heads very briefly in prayer before singing again. Father God, we thank You for Your love. We thank You for Your grace. We thank You for Your honesty.

[24 : 46] Sometimes we recoil from that. We don't like to think of ourselves as reliant on anyone else, especially on God whom we can't see. We think sometimes we've moved beyond all of that thinking with our scientific knowledge and our sophistication.

And yet we recognize and know the fundamental realities of our beings and of love and of family and the recoiling we have from brokenness and especially, obviously, from death, which we believe Jesus speaks into.

So help us today, we pray, and bless our time together now in baptism. And we thank You for the privilege of being able to share in the sacrament today.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.