

Editorial: More Loving Than God? (3)

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How to Measure God's Love

In this series of editorials, we have been analysing an argument against God's sovereignty in salvation made by Open Theist Jesse Morell who claimed, "I'm more loving than your God! I want all these people to be saved!" We have seen how modern proponents of the "well-meant offer" on occasion have made essentially the same blasphemous and hypocritical argument, and how the Scriptures specifically refute the self-contradictory teaching of hypo-Calvinism (Rom. 9:18). We underscored the fundamental flaw in the argument, its error of measuring love by the scope of its objects, and turned the argument on its head by demonstrating that God does not demand a universal unlimited love of us for every creature. Rather, against God's enemies, there is a proper place for a holy hatred (Ps. 139:21-22) and even cursing (I Cor. 16:22), including a longing for their eventual destruction (Rev. 6:10), and even a rejoicing in the execution of God's justice and vengeance against them (Rev. 18:20).

Having also explained some of the evil theological and practical consequences of this false doctrine of an unlimited universal love (either in God or required of us), we should now examine more positively how Scripture itself measures God's love. Finally, we will consider how this relates to our calling to love.

Before we continue, we should ask whether this is an appropriate inquiry or unwarranted curiosity. If the measure of God's love extends beyond the limits of our comprehension, is it idle speculation to consider the subject? Such arguments are sometimes made in churches where it is preferred that the "laity" are kept at a certain level of ignorance, so that there are fewer opinions upon which disagreements may occur or, worse, so that the people are easier to direct and even to control. The Scriptures, however, encourage us always to learn and to know our God more deeply according to what He has revealed (Prov. 2:1-9; Rom. 15:4; I Cor. 10:11; II Tim. 3:16-17). Paul prayed concerning this subject specifically for the Ephesian saints:

For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God (Eph. 3:14-19).

He finished his prayer by assuring us that God is “able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us” (Eph. 3:20). With this confidence and boldness of faith in Christ, along with reverence, we ought to seek to grow in this spiritual comprehension (I Cor. 2:7-16). Christ has taught us that to know our God is eternal life and we cannot know God without knowing His love (John 17:3; I John 4:8). This pursuit is, therefore, essential to the Christian life.

We will first consider the ideas in Scripture which relate to a definition of God’s love generally. Then we will conform and refine these concepts according to God’s Being and attributes. Following this, we will see how this love of God is revealed in His names and actually demonstrated in His works, both in Himself and with reference to the creation. Finally, we will relate the measure of God’s love in Himself to how the manifestation of His love in us must be perfected (I John 4:7-12).

A Biblical Definition of Love

The words translated “love” in Scripture have a very broad usage. With God as the subject of the verb, in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *ahab* is used and sometimes *chashaq* or *racham*, whereas in the New Testament the Greek word *agape* or occasionally *phileo* is used. Probably the most obvious and fundamental idea concerning love, consistently throughout Scripture, is that love has a subject and an object. In the activity of love, there is necessarily a desire or will from the subject which is directed towards the object. This de-

sire or will from the subject is derived from a favourable affection, disposition and/or determination of the heart or mind of the subject towards the object. Therefore, the subject is always personal (e.g., God or man) whereas the object can be a thing, whether physical (e.g., places, food or sleep) or abstract (e.g., wisdom, righteousness or evil). This fundamental affection or disposition is represented by the word *ahab* or *phileo*.

Depending on the nature of the subject and the object, this affection is expressed (or manifested) by different means and with different goals. The love required of us for God is explained as requiring our whole being so that we are actively and wholly devoted to God in all that we do with all the might of our body and soul (Deut. 6:5; cf. Luke 10:27). We do not expect all the usages of the term “love” to imply such devotion. A man who “loves” pizza, for example, may go out of his way a little to find it or pay a little extra for it, or he may ignore his affection for pizza on occasion for the sake of some higher goal. A man “loves” pizza with the aim to eat it, whereas a man “loves” a work of art with the goal to look at it. Similarly, with respect to love for people, there may be different measures or kinds of affection with different goals. The affection Abraham had for his son Isaac was very different to the affection Isaac had for venison (Gen. 22:2; 27:4).

The word *chashaq* expresses that the subject delights in the object of his love with the desire or goal of clinging to or joining with the object. It is used to describe the connecting of pillars around the court of the tabernacle with silver rods (Ex. 27:10, 17; 38:17, 28). It is used synonymously with *ahab* in reference to God setting His love upon Israel and delighting in their fathers (Deut. 7:7-8; 10:15). It is also used to refer to the love a man has for a woman by which he desires to have her as his wife, that is, to cleave to her in the bond of marriage (Deut. 21:11; cf. Gen. 2:24).

Chashaq expresses a delight in another which involves the desire to establish a relational bond or union (or covenant; Mal. 2:14). Such a harmonious and loving bond or union (as in marriage) implies mutual love from the subject to the object and from the object to the subject, in a perfect and virtuous cycle (Col. 3:14).

Another word, *racham* describes the activity or life that is desired within

such a bond or union. This word is used in the sense of having compassion, pity or mercy upon another. Significantly, this is the word used to describe the mercy or compassion of God upon some and not others, as quoted by Paul in his rebuke against those who object to God's sovereignty in salvation (Ex. 33:19; Rom. 9:15). The word carries the idea of caressing or fondling another in loving compassion. In this way, it is often translated pity or mercy with respect to those who are in a miserable condition in great need of such compassion to relieve their misery.

The Psalmist speaks of his love for God using *racham*, which is translated "love" in all the English translations I could find (Ps. 18:1). In that David has this love for God and God neither has misery nor is in need of mercy or pity, the term can be used more generally to describe the loving compassion which one has for another, such that the subject shows his or her love by doing good with respect to the object. This is the word which perhaps most closely relates to the explanation of *agape* love in the New Testament, though *agape* underscores the willingness to sacrifice and suffer loss for the sake of the good of others, that is, considering the good of the other above one's own (I Cor. 13:1-7).

At this point, we already have a pretty well-rounded concept of personal love in its highest sense, a favourable affection or disposition of the subject which desires and delights in the object with the will or determination to cling to or join with the object and have compassion upon the object by doing the object good. There are some elements we could add. With reference to lovers (typically in a negative context), Scripture uses the word *agab* which means "to breathe after," expressing a very strong desire (Eze. 23:9).

Finally, the noun *dod* can be used to refer to a sensual or erotic love or simply one who is beloved (Prov. 7:18). However, since the word is used predominantly throughout Song of Solomon (almost two thirds of the occurrences), it is a significant word to be understood with reference to the love between God and His people (Eph. 5:32; Rev. 19:7-9). It has a root meaning "to boil" and is related to another word which often implies intimacy, the verb translated "to know" (e.g., Gen. 4:1). In this kind of love, there is an intimate companionship and knowledge which overflows in joy and pleasure which is "better than wine" (Song 1:2). The delightful one called "beloved" is also called "friend" (Song 5:16).

According to His Being

We can apply this understanding of the range of usage of the words rendered “love” in Scripture (and its closely related concepts) to what we know about God’s Being to understand in what sense love is an attribute of God. In taking this approach, we are following a systematic-theological method. For the sake of time and space, and to concentrate on our subject, I will not attempt to prove at this time all the theological points I intend to raise. To most of our readers, these will already be established uncontroversial points upon we can build (cf. Heb. 6:1-3). To the rest, for further explanation and proofs, I advise consulting commentaries on the related Scriptures that I cite, commentaries on the Reformed and ecumenical confessions, as well as works of biblically-based systematic theology of which there are many available.

Appropriately, the first point we should make concerning any attribute of God is in relation to His unity, as this simple point is the preface to the first and greatest commandment (Deut. 6:4; Mark 12:29). That Jehovah our God is one Jehovah means that His love in Himself is one love. There cannot therefore be two or more loves in God. Closely related to God’s unity is His divine simplicity because He is spirit (John 4:24). That God is “one only simple ... Being” means also that He is “without ... parts” (*Belgic Confession* 1; *Westminster Confession* 2:1).

This necessarily means that God’s attributes are all simply different ways to describe the one ultimate perfection of His Being, so that God’s attributes are not only in perfect harmony, but cannot be divided from each other and cannot be considered to have different degrees. There cannot, therefore, be different degrees or kinds of love in God when we consider love as an attribute of God. God’s simplicity and unity mean also that He is His attributes, that is, His attributes are essential to His very Being, not as component parts but to be identified directly as His Being. So the Scriptures tell us: “God is love” (I John 4:8).

Considering that God is perfect (which is another way to describe His simplicity), His attributes are necessarily perfect so that we may also consider love as an attribute of God in the very highest sense of what love means in its perfection (Matt. 5:48). We must, therefore, put far from us all the lesser

ideas about love, such as the “love” for mere physical objects such as food or even weaker kinds of love for people, such as one might have for a stranger compared to a dear friend or relative. Whatever God’s love is in Himself, it cannot be less than perfect.

Because God is perfect, He is also necessarily unchangeable, for, if He could change, this would be a change to something less than perfect and being able to become less than perfect would, therefore, be an imperfection in itself (Ps. 102:27; Mal. 3:6; James 1:17). The name Jehovah, by which God is particularly known by His saved people, means “I AM,” by which we understand that God (and, therefore, God’s love) remains always the same (Ex. 3:14). Since God cannot change, He is also “without ... passions” (*Westminster Confession* 2:1).

God’s impassibility does not mean that He has no zealous disposition of the heart (also since love in its most basic sense implies such a disposition), but rather that He is not subject to any kind of external stimulus or condition by which any kind of change might be induced upon Him, such as hunger, weariness, affliction or any other kind of mutable or transitory excitement of feeling or emotion (Num. 23:19; Isa. 40:28; Acts 14:15). Hence the English Standard Version (ESV) typically translates God’s lovingkindness or mercy (*chesed*) as “steadfast love” (e.g., Hos. 2:19). As a favourable disposition or affection (if we may use the term), God’s merciful love is as unchanging and immutable as His mercy (Ps. 89:28).

When Scripture presents us with God’s immutability, it is usually illustrated in terms of His eternity since, as creatures, we see that everything changes with respect to time. It is not so with the everlasting God because He “inhabith eternity” (Isa. 57:15). He both fills all of time and is also not subject to it or anything within it. Jehovah transcends time, having always been even before the beginning (Ps. 90:2). Therefore, God’s love also is from everlasting (Jer. 31:3; Eph. 1:4-5). In connection with God’s eternity, His infinity means that His love is not only eternal but infinite.

In the introduction, I indicated that, because of God’s infinity, His love cannot be limited and cannot be completely measured (except by Himself). Because God is by nature incomprehensible to limited finite creatures, His love cannot be fully comprehended by us (Rom. 11:33; I Cor. 2:10; Eph. 3:19).

God's love, as a divine perfection, cannot be measured and, therefore, we cannot speak about any greater or lesser love in God when speaking of what His love is in Himself (Job 11:7).

With respect to God's transcendence (which we must address when considering His perfection and His infinity and eternity), although we have sought for a basic definition of love among creatures, we must understand that God's love is as far above and beyond and superior to all love that belongs to creatures as He is transcendent above creation (Ps. 8:1; 113:4-6; Isa. 40:15-25; 55:9). The Psalmist tells us "as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy [*chesed*] toward them that fear him" (Ps. 103:11). The point is that heaven is the highest that we can imagine, and so high that it is beyond the possibility of reaching, so that the greatness of God's lovingkindness transcends any measure we can envisage.

Related to God's transcendence is His aseity, which is also expressed in the divine name, Jehovah. It is also necessary from a consideration of God's eternity alone (Ps. 90:2; Isa. 45:18). God's aseity means that He depends upon nothing outside Himself, having His own existence in and of Himself without respect to anything else, whereas everything in creation stands only by His word of power to uphold it (Acts 17:24-25; Rom. 11:36; Col. 1:16-17). God's aseity means that His love does not depend upon the creature for its existence, measure or perfection in any sense. Therefore, we cannot say that God's love improved, increased or was made in any way more perfect by creation or redemption (Job 35:7; 41:11; Ps. 16:2; Rom. 11:35).

Such is the blind folly of those who dream of measuring the beauty and perfection of God's love by the number of its creaturely objects. The universalists imagine that we do injustice to the love of God by denying that His love is for every single person who ever lived but, by measuring God's love by a finite number of objects, they are actually limiting the infinite love of God. God's love is full and complete and perfect in Himself without respect to any creature, so that His love is as independent, immovable and unshakeable as a solid rock (Deut. 32:4; Ps. 18:30-31).

God's aseity implies His sovereignty. If God is wholly independent and transcendent, then He also has absolute authority and freedom to do whatever He

wills (Dan. 4:35). Such complete sovereignty includes God's ability or power to do whatever He desires, that is, His omnipotence, so that He therefore actually does whatever He wants (Ps. 115:3; Isa. 46:9-10). With respect to God, everything in creation is like a lump of clay in the hands of a potter who uses the clay for whatever purpose suits him with no input or influence whatsoever from the clay itself (Prov. 16:4; Jer. 18:4-6; Rom. 9:21). God's love is, therefore, also completely and utterly free (Ps. 51:12; II Cor. 3:17). Only God Himself, and nothing or no-one else, determines the love of God (Deut. 7:7-8).

God, therefore, loves whom He wills just as He has loving compassion on whom He wills (Ex. 33:19; Rom. 9:15). Because God is omnipotent, His love is also omnipotent, that is, the love of God accomplishes without fail all that His love wills to accomplish. In this way, the loving desire of God for the object of His love is necessarily fulfilled. There is no possibility of an unrequited love when we speak of the love of God, and here again the universalists blunder as they would have us believe that most of the objects of His love do not and will not love God for eternity. In contrast, Scripture teaches that God's love has definite and certain effects according to His omnipotence (John 3:16; Eph. 1:4, 19; 2:4-5; Titus 3:3-5; I John 4:19).

All of the above assumes that God's love is a personal, willing, thoughtful, knowing and desiring love. This is because God is spirit (John 4:24). God's spirituality means that His love is necessarily a rational and moral love, not like the kind of "love" a dog has for his master, a "love" which is neither properly rational nor moral.

As we have seen, love is often presented in terms of knowing (Amos 3:2). With respect to God's knowledge, we must understand His omniscience. God knows Himself fully and completely, including all His eternal plans and purposes for creation and everything in creation through all of history (Isa. 46:10-11; Acts 15:18). God's love, therefore, thinks upon and knows its object intimately and fully with a personal desire and with delight, actively and powerfully willing to do all that such love wills to do, that is, to establish and maintain and live in an indissoluble relational bond or union (i.e., covenant) of loving perfection in harmonious mutual comfort and joy (Gen. 9:9-17; 17:7; Ps. 89:28-37; Jer. 31:33-34; Mal. 2:4-7; Matt. 26:28; Gal. 3:15-17; Heb. 9:15).

Finally, God's immanence means that His love is also near to the creation and must necessarily involve the creation in some way such that God's love is manifest in it (John 3:16; Acts 17:27-28; Rom. 5:8; I John 4:9). God's immanence and infinity also implies His omnipresence, so that the object of His love cannot go anywhere to escape or be separated from the all-knowing, all-present and all-powerful love of God (Ps. 139:7-18; Rom. 8:38-39).

According to His Attributes

So far we have mainly constrained ourselves to a consideration of the implications for God's love regarding what theologians typically categorize as His incommunicable attributes. God's love properly belongs to His communicable attributes as we have seen from our consideration of love among creatures. Again, because of God's simplicity and unity, all His communicable attributes must be harmonized so that, for example, God's goodness means that His love is good (Ex. 33:19; 34:6; Ps. 100:5). That God is good means that, because of His moral excellence, He is full of infinite riches of pleasantness in which delight and pleasure is taken (Ps. 65:4; 107:9; Jer. 31:14). God's love, therefore, satisfies its object with goodness, even the goodness of God Himself communicated and bestowed upon the object (Ps. 16:11; 36:7-8). God's love in Himself must then also have a good object, so that God delights and takes pleasure in the goodness of the object of His love (Matt. 19:17).

God is also holy which means that He is zealously devoted to His own glorious perfection in absolute purity and He is utterly separated from anything which is not consecrated to Himself (Isa. 6:3). This necessarily implies an antithetical, committed and jealous love for a certain object, and not for another. We often think of holiness in terms of moral purity but God's holiness is much more than this. With respect to God's love, His holiness means that God ardently and unwaveringly loves with His whole infinite Being, and that the object of His love must also necessarily be wholly dedicated to God in holiness and love (Prov. 8:17; John 16:27; Eph. 1:4). His holiness also means that the object of God's love is necessarily Himself, which ought to have been apparent already from a consideration of God's eternity and aseity. This is also indicated in Scripture in various ways (Prov. 8:22-30; Luke 3:22; John 1:18; Eph. 1:6; Heb. 1:5) but we will treat this subject more fully when considering the Holy Trinity and God's works with respect to Himself (*ad intra*).

Similarly, God's righteousness is His perfect and unchangeable adherence to His own moral standard, for He defines what is righteous by His own moral perfection. Because God loves righteousness, He loves justice and will judge according to His own righteousness (Ps. 11:7; 33:5; 37:28; 99:4; Isa. 61:8). The object of God's love must, therefore, be perfectly righteous (Ps. 45:7; 146:8; John 14:21-23).

The exercise of God's judgment is tied inseparably to His lovingkindness in Scripture (Jer. 9:24). Judgment for the righteous object of God's love is not negative, but involves a loving vindication, justification and assurance (Ps. 7:8; 26:1-8; 43:1; 91:14-16; Isa. 32:16-17; Luke 18:7; Rom. 8:1, 16). This communication of love in declaring the object to be righteous and beloved belongs to the activity of love in tender compassion towards its object. The object does not need to be miserable or in doubt for this activity to be welcome and necessary for God's love in its perfection (Mark 1:11).

Closely related to God's righteousness and justice is His faithfulness and truth, such that He always does what He purposes to do and it is impossible for God to lie (Deut. 7:9; Heb. 6:17-18; Rev. 19:11). God's love is, therefore, faithful so that, even when Israel is adulterous, God maintains His betrothal with her and thereby causes her to know Him in love (Hos. 2:14-20).

That God's love is true means that it is absolutely sincere. God's love cannot be a mere feeling or expression without real action and power (cf. I John 3:18). Sincere love involves deeds which effectively manifest that love, so that God's love is always bestowed upon His object with mighty actions accomplishing the goal of His love by His infinite power. Because God is also wise, His love is full of wisdom so that He perfectly uses His infinite knowledge in the best possible way to accomplish His loving deeds (Jude 24-25).

That God is gracious means that He is full of attractive and precious beauty and splendour in Himself, and that God has such a favourable disposition to His own perfect beauty and glory in His sight according to which He communicates and bestows beautiful favour upon the objects of His grace (Gen. 6:8; Ps. 45:2; 84:11; Prov. 22:1; Ecc. 3:11). In God's love, there is, therefore, a favourable disposition towards the object of His love (Ps. 118:6; Rom. 8:31-35). The activity of God's love is also necessarily a gracious activity in which

beautifying favour is bestowed upon the object of His love. The object of God's love must also be favourable and delightful in His sight, that is, full of beauty (Ps. 45:11; 90:17; 149:4; Song 1:15-16; 4:7, 10; Isa. 61:3; 62:4-5).

God's mercy in Himself appears hard to explain, because we normally consider mercy with respect to a miserable object and mercy as the lifting of that object out of misery (Ps. 40:1-3). Because God is full of mercy, there can be no misery in God (Rom. 9:5). God's mercy or compassion in Himself is the lovingkindness and tender care according to which He blesses Himself with goodness (cf. Ps. 67:1).

God's merciful love, therefore, encompasses and embraces its object with tenderness and care, so that the object of His love is blessed with goodness and comfort (which does not imply any lack of comfort in God but rather the opposite; Ps. 34:6-8; Isa. 51:3; II Cor. 1:3-4). This implies a constant loving nearness and presence, so that God dwells with and upholds the object of His love, as His beloved is hidden in refuge under the safe, secure and comfortable cover and shadow of His wings (Deut. 33:27; Ps. 91:1-2; 139:3-7; I John 4:16; Rev. 21:3). God's aseity means that He depends upon and upholds Himself, because He is full of loving mercy and comfort.

Scripture also speaks of God's longsuffering, forbearance, patience or slowness to anger (Ps. 86:15; Rom. 2:4). Properly speaking, God cannot suffer but, with respect to time, because He is eternal, He is willing and able to endure the offence against His majesty of the vessels appointed to wrath for the sake of His good purposes toward the vessels of His grace until the time for final judgment is right (Deut. 32:35; Ps. 37:7-13; 73:12-20; Rom. 9:22-23; I Pet. 3:20; II Pet. 3:9-15). In time, the reprobate wicked remain under God's curse and wrath, being hardened so that they harden themselves and heap up more judgment to themselves by their continued sins and impenitence (Ps. 69:20-28; John 3:36; Rom. 9:18).

But what does it mean then that God is patient and longsuffering in Himself eternally without respect to the creation? This is related to God's immutable faithfulness and impassibility. One who lacks patience becomes weary, upset and restless (Job 10:1; Ps. 69:3; Isa. 57:20-21; Matt. 6:30-32; James 5:11). In contrast, God is eternally and unchangeably full of perfect peace and never

grows weary (Isa. 26:3; 40:28; II Cor. 13:11). God's love is, therefore, patient and longsuffering so that all the temporary incompleteness in the outworking of all His purposes in time cannot affect or change His love (I Cor. 13:8-13; I John 4:12). God's love is never weary in Himself through all eternity and prevents weariness in its object. Also God's love is full of peace according to which peace is bestowed upon the object of His love and perfect peace is enjoyed in the bond of mutual love.

Finally, God is full of joy, gladness and delight (Rom. 14:17; I Thess. 1:6). God's joyful love, therefore, takes delight in the delightful and joyous object of His love, and bestows joy and gladness so that God rejoices over His beloved (Isa. 62:4-5; 65:17-19; Zeph. 3:17). Considering what God's love is in Himself, it should be very apparent that there is no possibility for the kind of imperfect, weak, lesser love that is advocated by the universalists. Instead of entertaining such philosophical fantasies, we ought to know God from His Word, and so adore and worship Him for His revelation of Himself to us in Jesus Christ.

So far in this discourse, we have mostly treated the object of God's love in abstract and hypothetical terms, although we have said that the object of God's love in Himself must be Himself. To avoid any unworthy misconception of God's love, as if it were inherently selfish, self-centred or narcissistic, we must treat it in connection with how it is revealed in the Holy Trinity. We should see why, for example, the monad of the Muslims is not and cannot be essentially love. In our next editorial, we will consider how God's love is revealed in relation to His names and His works, especially in the Holy Trinity, but also with respect to the creation and His church (DV).