

Revealing The Love Of God

The Meaning Of The Cross

Ever since I was a kid, I can remember songs about love. People were singing each other love songs long before I was born. So I did a little experiment. I got on Google and typed in "love songs". Guess what. There are nearly 46 million pages of love songs on Google. Needless to say, I didn't start investigating every site. But it's obvious that love is alive and well on planet earth. But what do we mean by the word love?

If you ask people why they love a person they will say things like "I saw her and it was love at first sight!" What they mean is that they were attracted by the way she looked. Or a woman might say "He was just wonderful. He was kind and courteous. He was funny and his jokes were just hilarious! His was such a sparkling personality I just loved him straight away." Is that what love is based on? Is it based on physical attraction or sparkling personality? What happens if that person changes? What happens if the attractive woman is disfigured in a car accident, or the sparkling personality suffers from depression? Do we then say "I used to love her or him, but I just don't anymore because they are no longer the loveable person they used to be". What's happening here? We are describing love on the basis of the other persons lovability, rather than on the basis of our loving nature. It's what they do for us rather than what we do for them.

The Bible says that God loves us. What does it mean when the Bible says "***This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:10 NIV)***" When I find out someone loves me, I want to know why. What's the reason? So when I read in the Bible that God loves me, I want to know why.

1. Why does God love us?

Is it because he finds something loveable and attractive in us? There is a clue in the Old Testament to why God loves us. God chose the Jewish people to be a light to the nations. They began to think that it was because they had some qualities that no other nation had. Were they more attractive, more reliable or more religious than any other nation? Were they more generous or compassionate than other nations of the world? I don't think so.

Listen to Deuteronomy 7:6 – 8 "***The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you ...***"

What was God saying? "I love you because I love you. End of story. It's nothing you have done. It's my loving nature to love." We assume Gods love is like ours, which is drawn out by something we find attractive, commendable or loveable in another person. But when God looks at us he doesn't find anything loveable or attractive. He is holy and pure, and he doesn't see holiness or purity in us. There is nothing in us that attracts God to us. He doesn't love us because we are loveable.

The New Testament was written in the Greek language. That language has words to describe different sorts of love – sexual love, affection, friendship and so on. But there is one Greek word – "agape" – which describes love for a person that is completely unrelated to the qualities of the one being loved. The one who is loved may be attractive or unattractive. They may be responsive to love or they may not. Agape love doesn't depend on a response. Agape love is where all the love is in the lover. This kind of love actually creates in the unlovely person loving qualities that were not there to begin with.

Gods love is entirely different from our kind of love. When God loves us, it's not because we are likeable, or attractive. It's not because of what we say. It's not because of what we do. God doesn't love us because he reacts to who we are. He loves us because of who He is. His love for us is dependant on His character, not ours. Even when God looks on us in our worst moments, he still says "I love you". That's good news. It means that if I'm attractive or unattractive, intelligent or slow to understand, personable or a social misfit, God still loves me.

2. How does God love us?

Sometimes in our lifetime we come across parents who don't believe in setting boundaries for their children. Even if the children smash windows or paint the cat green, the parents just see that as childish exuberance or legitimate self expression. But those parents are not loving their children. They are indulging them. Some people think that God's love is like that. That he is like some benevolent grandfather who sort of turns a blind eye to our shortcomings. But if God overlooked our sin, he wouldn't be showing love, but unconcern. It's because he loves us that he has to do something about our sin. He did something far more costly than simply overlook our sin. He sent his son Jesus to die for it. He paid a price which makes sin the most expensive commodity in the world. Sin has to be paid for. It cost him his Son Jesus. There is no Christianity without a Cross. That's why the Apostle Paul wrote to the Roman Christians ***"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom 5:8 NIV)***

Let me tell you a story that was written over 100 years ago. It's called "The Gadfly".

A Roman Catholic Priest named Montinelli had a son. The son was born by a woman he wasn't married to, because as you know, Catholic priests don't marry. When the boy grows up, he learns that his father has become a prominent Cardinal in an Italian city. The boy becomes rebellious and degenerates into a life of crime, until he finally resorts to terrorism. As a result of his actions, people die. He becomes a threat to society, and tries to overthrow the government. Finally, he is captured, arrested, tried, and sentenced to death. In the story, the paths of the Cardinal and his son the terrorist cross in a bizarre way. Through a local law, the Cardinal is given the opportunity to pardon this terrorist, but the twist in the story is that he doesn't realise the terrorist is his own son. Before he grants this terrorist a pardon, the Cardinal decides to visit him in prison. When he discovers the truth, that this young man is his own son, he has a terrible dilemma. His son is unrepentant, and a danger to the public. Should he save his own son's life by pardoning him and put the people's lives at risk, or let the execution of his son go ahead? He makes an agonising decision that his son must die. He refuses to grant the pardon, and his son is shot. No one knows it's his son who has been put to death.

The next Sunday he stands up in church to serve the Lords Supper. As he serves the bread and the wine to his people, his heart has been torn apart with the decision he has made. He's in turmoil as he talks to his people about the broken heart of God, who gave the life of his Son, that the people might be saved. The story goes on to describe how the Cardinal went mad. He couldn't cope with the agony of choice he had to make as a father, between killing his own son and saving his people. Within a few days he was dead. His human heart couldn't cope with that kind of choice.

Do you know how much God loves you? He put all your sins and mine on his own Son in order to save us. Love isn't measured by what it feels, but by what it does. It's measured by the suffering it is prepared to face and the pain it is prepared to accept. Gods love is measured at the Cross by the suffering and pain Jesus went through for our sakes. His love is summed up in this little statement, that we sometimes use at Easter.

"One day I asked Jesus how much He loved me. He said 'This much' – and stretched out his arms and died."

This total love which God shows toward us is given a special term in the New Testament. It's called "grace". It means a love that is not deserved. It's a love that cannot be earned.

3. How do we respond to His love?

Jesus taught us how to respond to God's love for us. He said we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind. In other words, we are to love Him the way He loves us. Just as Jesus gave everything for us, so we are to respond to his love by giving our everything to Him. Focus on His love. Read about it. Memorise what the Bible says about it. Meditate on it. Look for evidences of his love for you. It's all around you. You will see it in people who care for you. You will find it in the events of your day. You will see it in the beauty of his creation. You will discover it in the most unexpected of places. Thank Him for his love. Sing about it. Worship Him for it.

I want to finish with a story that helps me understand a little more how God loves me. Moses Mendelssohn was the grandfather of the famous German composer Felix Mendelssohn. He was not a handsome man, and he knew it. He was very short, and was stooped over with a back deformity that in those days was called a "humpback." On a business trip to Hamburg, he met the beautiful daughter of a merchant. He fell deeply in love with her, but she would have nothing to do with him. She was turned off by how ugly he was. For several days he tried to make conversation with her, but she wouldn't answer. She wouldn't even look at him, she was so repulsed by his appearance. But in his final attempt to win her love he asked her a question. "Do you believe marriages are made in heaven? Without looking at him, she replied "Yes. Do you?" Moses Mendelssohn said "Yes I do. You see, in heaven, at the birth of each boy, the Lord announces which girl he will marry. When I was born, my future bride was pointed out to me. But then the Lord added that my wife would be humpbacked. Right there and then I called out "Oh Lord, a humpbacked woman would be a tragedy. Please Lord, give me the hump and let her be beautiful."

According to the story, there was a long silence. Then this beautiful woman looked into his eyes, reached out her hand and touched him. Something deep within her had been stirred. She gave him her hand and the two of them had a long and happy marriage.

God loved you and me so much, that long before we were born, he volunteered to take the agony and deformities of our sin to a Cross. That's how much He loves you. That's how much he loves me.

David McChesney, Westlake Church in Nyon, Switzerland