

The Gathering Church

Dan's message 6/21/26

Knowing God as He is (Week 2) – Love

Never was Not
God Is Love
God Simply Loves
Perfect in Love
Love Others Disinterestedly
Give Love Anyway

Seeing God clearly, trusting Him deeply, and worshiping Him freely

**"What comes into our minds when we think about God
is the most important thing about us." AW Tozar**

Whenever we start to think about God and try to understand Him, we need to remember that He is big, and even though he has given us a glimpse into who He is by scripture, through giving us Jesus who came as a man and lived among us, we need to remember that He is bigger and more vast than our minds can comprehend. We do our best to try and understand His ways and His attributes, but we need to be careful not to make him in our image.

We are the created and He is the Creator. What does that mean? That means there was a beginning of me. I was formed in my mother's womb; I grew in wisdom and stature, and, by the grace of God, I began to take on some of the attributes of God, and these attributes start to form and inform my character, my integrity and how I live.

But this is not the same with God. He is the Alpha and Omega. **He was never created, He just was, and He is and scripture tells us He is to come.** (Revelation 1:8) When Moses asked what he should refer to the name of who sent him if Paroah asks. Tell him, "I Am." (Ex 3:14)

And because of this He doesn't "take on" these attributes and characteristics, they are who He is.

So, when we say God is Holy or Loving. **He never was not holy or not loving.** He cannot act or be unholy or unloving. And, if He could, we would not see Him as God.

Our minds can't quite comprehend the mystery of this, and be thankful for that.

Example: When I got to my last few math classes like differential equations and abstract algebra and was required to prove why zero was zero, I realized I understand very little about math. The more I knew the more, I realized I didn't know. I thought zero was just zero. But in reality there is more to it than that.

And so it is with God. A lot of the ways we think about God are too small and we think we have him figured out. But we need to be careful not to let our understanding of how we have been formed by our humanistic philosophies and understanding be imagined on to God.

When I teach Geometry, I teach something called translations. To do a translation you must start with a pre-image and then you can translate another image in space. Without a certain pre-image you cannot make an image. **We are the image. God is the pre-image. And where we go wrong is when**

we think we are the pre-image and God is like us. We start attributing how we think and how we would want God to be according to our ways. But he is beyond us; HE IS BIG.

Today I am going to try and talk about God's love. How do you understand God's love. Many of us get our understanding of God's love by how well we have been loved. If my earthly father loved me well, I have an easier time wrapping my mind around the Love of a heavenly father. But the reverse can also be true.

Somehow we must take our eyes off of our earthly understandings and consider something that is beyond us: a love we can't fathom and a love that we won't know truly until we see Him face to face.

One last thing by way of introduction: I can know a lot of great thoughts about God, but mental assent is not the end goal of our pursuit of wisdom. If we give you a bunch of new thoughts about Who GOD IS, and categories where you can understand him more, they might make no difference in the way you live; it is just knowledge. Scripture tells us, "knowledge puffs up." (Corinthians 8:1)

Having great theology doesn't mean that we will become great people. "A really nice person, who has no understanding of God, is a really nice, lost person." So, it's both theology and practice. Know God so that you can know yourself. And let your knowledge of Him change who you are and how you live in your relational world.

Our Desire in this series is that as we explore the attributes of God and hopefully come to know Him better, we will grow in our understanding of who we are and how God has called us to live like Him in this world.

I John 4:7-21 (God Is Love)

There was a song I learned as a kid. I learned it in the King James:

7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loveth is born of God and knoweth God. 8 He that loveth not, knoweth not God, for God is love. (SO, beloved, let us love one another first John four, seven and eight.)

A.W. Tozer says "**love is not God; God is love.**" Our world chases love as a God. And they make everything God that feels like love. But love is not God nor can it be. God is love.

Love is an essential attribute of God's being. Tozer says that this means **"that in God is the summation of all love so that all love comes from God. And it means that God's love conditions all of the His other attributes, so that God can do nothing except that he does it in love."**

On judgment day when, we are all brought before the judgement seat, he either says welcome into heaven or I never knew you. (Matthew 7:23) His final judgment is perfectly consistent with His love, holiness, and justice. Even when God judges, He does not stop being the God who is love.

Example of being disciplined as a kid ("Doing this because we Love you")

My Point: My parents brought pain into my life because they knew that was the most loving thing to do at the time. To correct my rebellion and teach me. It was done in love.

My parents loved me, but because they loved me, they disciplined me.

God's love, mercy and grace flow together in harmony with His holiness, righteousness and justice.

3 Biblical Words for Love

New Testament (Greek)

- **Agapē (ἀγάπη)** – Self-giving, sacrificial love; God's love.
- **Philia (φιλία)** – Friendship love
- **Storgē (στοργή)** – Family love
- **Eros (ἔρως)** – Romantic or marital love

In Biblical Greek, **Agape** (the noun) and **Agapao** (the verb) represent the highest, most selfless form of love. It's the word used in the in John 3:16 (for God so loved the world...) and in the I John 4:7-8 passage I am using today.

It is a relational, outward looking, other-centered, self-giving, sacrificial love that comes from God, out of who He is. **God is agape.** And when we love, with this type of love, it does not come naturally for us.

We have been well trained by our world and our flesh to love that which makes us feel good. That which brings us delight; and to avoid, stay away and look away from that which does not bring us happiness.

Example: for the foodies in the room that like a good steak. I put two steaks in front of you: one a beautifully cooked filet mignon and the other a rancid-smelling chuck steak. Which one are you going to eat?

When we love with Agape love, we don't turn away or throw away that which is rancid (that which is not pleasing to us) but the love that God has for us slows down to ask how I can love that which is unlovely.

It's natural for us to love that which is lovable but Agape love doesn't stop there it loves the other not because there is something in the other that desirable and good.

When Jesus tells us that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart soul mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself, (Matthew 22:36-40), Jesus is not telling us to find some emotional love for the unlovely in this world. He is telling us to love our neighbors in the sense of being willing to work for the others well-being, their good, even if it means sacrificing our own wellbeing."

Question: Where have you been “loved not because you are lovable, but because love itself is in the other person extending love”? (I wonder if marriages that last have to have some form of agape to weather the storms of relational strife)

This is how God showed His love to us..... (I John 4:9-10)

9 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.

God's (agape) love was gifted to us; it was bestowed on us. When he sent Jesus to die for us, and we received the gift of forgiveness, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and love (Agape) was poured out into our hearts. If we choose by the power of the Spirit to receive it and give it, the very love of God himself will be poured out to others.

Now, it seems as though from this passage in I John that John primarily sees this agape love as something that can be perfected in us on this of eternity. In fact, if it is not evident in us, we should question whether we are children of God:

When we are transformed and redeemed by Christ's love, we don't love out of need or self-interest but we are participating in the love of God. We start to love with a love that is similar to what we see in God. **And we can be perfected in this by the power of the Holy Spirit.**

*11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and **His love is perfected in us.***

*15 Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. 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.***

It's pretty incredible if you think about it. The Perfect Love of God, the agape love of God is available to you and me if we have believed in Him and confessed Him as our Lord and Savior. You and I have been given through the Spirit the ability to love (Agape) like He loves, because He lives in us.

I have heard it said that **“The deepest reality of the redeemed heart is not that I am a sinner.”** (Yes, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God) But this is not the deepest reality of those who have confessed Him as their Lord and Savior. The deepest reality of the redeemed heart is that **“We are lovers of God and Lovers of others.”** We have been given God's love are being perfected to love the way Christ loves us.

One of the best physical representations of God's love on this earth is when others love me with the Agape Love of Christ. We get to know who God is by tasting it (Psalm 34:8) when we are loved through the Spirit (when we least deserve it) by others.

Here's another way to look at it: A theologian in the middle ages, Bernard of Clairvoux, developed a concept he called the 4 Degrees of Love or the 4 Stages of Love. See if you can see where AGAPE falls in His stages.

Bernard of Clairvoux (4 stages of Love)

1. Man loves himself for his own sake. (Selfish Love)
2. Man loves God for his own sake. (Dependent Love)
3. Man loves God for God's sake. (Devoted Love)
4. Man loves himself for God's sake. (Selfless Union)

Translation (4 Stages)

1. I love myself for my own sake.
2. I love God because He benefits me.
3. I love God because He is worthy.
4. I love myself and others through God's love.

Bernard of Clairvaux would say that this last stage is rarely and briefly achieved in this life because it's hard to forget our ego.

I hope you can see that I am not directly trying to explain God's love but paint a picture of what it looks like when we walk in His love.

One of the clearest representations of the Love of the Father in the Bible is seen in the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

I would like to finish my sermon today by taking the 4 Stages of growth that I just shared and talk through this parable. We are familiar with the parable, but today I want you to consider love as we map out the son's journey of selfishness and redemption and the father's love for the son.

Luke 15:11-24 (Parable of the prodigal son)

11 And He said, "A man had two sons. **12** The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. **13** And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. **14** Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. **15** So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. **16** And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. **17** But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! **18** I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; **19** I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men." **20** So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. **21** And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' **22** But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; **23** and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; **24** for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate.

Now let's walk through the parable considering the attribute of Love.

Stage 1: "I love me for my sake."

The younger son begins here. *"Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me."* (Luke 15:12)
The son is more concerned with himself and his desires, his freedom, his happiness, his inheritance than anything else. **He wants the father's gifts, not the father. Everything is centered on "me."**

Stage 2: "I love God because He benefits me."

The son reaches this stage in the pigpen. *"How many of my father's hired laborers have more than enough bread, but I am dying here from hunger!"* (Luke 15:17)

Notice what draws him home. It is not yet love for his father. It is his need of the Father. In the pigpen he remembers the life he used to have in his father's house.

Bernard says this is where many people begin with God—we seek Him because we need Him.

Stage 3: "I love God because He is worthy."

The son is beginning to move toward this stage in his confession. **"Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."** (Luke 15:21)

He is not merely thinking about bread. He is starting to see the goodness of his father and how much he is a sinner. "I am not worthy to be called your son." The focus starts to move away from himself to the father.

Stage 4: "I love myself and others through God's love."

The parable never explicitly tells us whether the younger son reaches this stage, but the father already lives there. The father's actions are not driven by what he gains:

"While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." (Luke 15:20)

The father is loving from a place of abundance, not need. He's not thinking: What can my son do for me/ has he earned restoration/ does he deserve forgiveness? **He loves with an agape love.** Totally uninterested with what had transpired with the inheritance. He loved from a different place.

He simply loves. The father becomes a picture of God's Agapē love for us.

*"Such I conceive as the world of Agape: a world of unbounded giving and unashamed receiving, where all blessed creatures need and know that they need nothing but God, and are therefore **set free to love one another disinterestedly**. And so your love shall be like His: born neither of your need, nor of my deserving, but of plain bounty. I think those are drawing near to heaven, who in this life find that they "need men less and love men more", and delight more in being loved without being needed. For where Agape is, there, in some degree, is heaven."* CS. Lewis

Question: Who are the hard people, people in our lives that don't deserve love, have no loveliness in them toward you, but because of Christ's love, you are inclined to give them love? **When you choose to give love, love anyway.** This is agape love.