



LOVING

The attributes of God: Loving

Taught at our Sunday evening service, 4th September 2022 @ Deal Christian Fellowship

Reading: 1 John 4:7-21

Series introduction

Over the next 7 weeks we're going to consider some of the attributes of God, and so, in a way, you can expect lots of inadequate sermons. That's neither self-deprecating or a slight on others who will be teaching - but rather an acknowledgement that it's impossible to adequately describe an infinite, omnipresent and omniscient creator-God.

Really, it's an impossible task. But we're going to try. And here's why - our God is not unknowable, or evasive. In fact, He *wants* us to know Him. He *wants* us to know what He is like. He has revealed Himself to us, and He has given us His Word. He has gone to such great lengths to restore our relationship with Him, and He wants us to have the closest of relationships with Him as our Heavenly Father, us as His children, joint-heirs with Christ!

So what is God like? That's the question we're going to answer in part. In part, because we're going to look at just 7 of God's attributes - there are certainly more that we won't get to. But I hope that by the end of this series, we each have a better understanding of who He is, and, what He is like.

Over the coming weeks then, we'll look at these attributes - that God is...

- Loving
- Holy
- Merciful
- Gracious
- Sovereign
- Faithful
- Infinite

As we study we'll see that these attributes are not isolated from each other. For example, it is precisely because God is loving, that He is also gracious. And we should note that His attributes are not in conflict with each other, nor does He show one attribute at one moment, and a different one at another time. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. What a reassurance that is!

Indeed, the dictionary defines an attribute as a quality or feature regarded as a characteristic or inherent part of someone or something. And all these things are integral to who God is - all that He is determines all that He does. So it's good we consider them.

But, as with any Bible study, the consideration, the thinking through what we're hearing, what we're reading, will only do us good if it makes that 9 inch drop from the head to the heart - that is, we need to apply what we learn. This is not an academic exercise to learn what a historical figure was like, but hopefully an eye opening insight into the the living God who can be known, and wants to be known by you and I. And if learning more of his nature and character doesn't change us one bit, I suggest we're not really listening, and that we're certainly not applying.

So, simply put; How do we describe God? What is He like? What are the implications of that?

Study introduction

Tonight, we're going to consider that God is **loving**. Where do we get this idea? Well, as you might know or suspect, we read this in the Bible. And that's exactly where we should get our concept of God from - not from TV, music, art or culture. Not from RE lessons or what our friends think. But from what God has said in His Word to us. And we read in 1 John chapter 4...

1 John 4:8

He who does not love does not know God, for **God is love**.

Then again a few verses later...

1 John 4:16

And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. **God is love**, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.

God is love. That's clear, but we must take care to note that this is not a *definition*, but a *description* of His character - of one of His attributes. You can't reverse this and say *love is God*. As one commentator said, if we thought that God and love were the same, then we could worship love, and we would be worshiping the attribute of personality and not the Person Himself. Indeed, to say *love is God*, is sentimental pantheism that is incompatible with Scripture and is confused theology.

Of course we also read in John's letter that God is light - but we don't try and limit him to just that. And we shouldn't try to limit God to any one of His attributes, but seek to understand more of the whole of who He is.

But while love is not all that God is, it does affect all that He does. God cannot act *without* love, for He *is* love. That includes when he disciplines or chastises us - and we'll get to that a little later. And so intertwined is God's love with His other attributes, that I couldn't hope to explain His loving nature in 20 minutes, 10 hours, or a week long conference! But in the time we do have this evening, I want to draw your attention to 5 aspects of the wonderful fact that God is *loving*, and consider:

- The nature of love
- The act of love
- The constraints of love
- The result of love
- The security of love

The nature of love

And so, the nature of love. Simply put, love is selfless. It puts others first. And we have the most famous of descriptions in 1 Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 13:4-13

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

But love is more than a noun - a mere descriptive word. It is a verb - a word that requires action. AW Tozer wrote a series of studies over two books of the same title as our series - "The attributes of God" - and in his chapter on God's loving nature, he describes love as the principal of good will, in the sense that the angels sang "good will toward men" in Luke chapter 2. This good will isn't simply good intentions, but backed up by action.

Another way of putting it is that we need to know more than what love doesn't do. That is, we need what love does. And we get a greater insight to that in Paul's letter to the Romans:

Romans 12:9-21

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honour giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion. Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. Therefore "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Ultimately, of course, we see the most selfless demonstration of all that is good will toward the other person - all that is love - in Jesus' sacrifice for us. He said in John chapter 15:

John 15:13

Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.

And that's exactly what Jesus did for us in dying in our place. But, note He said immediately before that...

John 15:12

This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

Indeed, we really should be changed as we consider more of who God is and what He is like.

The act of love

Now, of course, we know that great act of love that God showed to us in sending Jesus to die in our place. But what should be even more breathtaking to us is that He planned that before He even created us. We read in 1 Peter...

1 Peter 1:20-21

He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

We make big promises when we marry someone - to love them whether richer or poorer, or in sickness or health. But we also enter marriage with the rightful expectation of faithfulness. Consider for a moment then, knowing with certainty that your future spouse was going to commit adultery... would you marry them anyway? That seems unlikely, right?!

But the reality is that before God even created us, Jesus was willing and knew we would indeed have to die for us because of the free choice God gave us, and our subsequent rebellion in sin. Despite our unfaithfulness to Him as our Creator, He loved us enough to die for us. He obviously considered us worth it!

CS Lewis put it like this:

God created things which had free will. That means creatures that can go either wrong or right... and free will is what has made evil possible. Why, then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having.

CS Lewis, Mere Christianity

How selfless was God to create us anyway! Yet He did, because that was how He could ultimately show this great attribute - his loving nature. We read in Romans...

Romans 5:8

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

Yet there's more. Consider the wonder of God's creation - all that He has given us to enjoy. People sometimes think of God as a cosmic killjoy, yet that is so far from the truth. He is the One who made us in His image - able to create art, music, poetry, literature, crafts. And He both created the beauty of nature, from sunsets to mountain tops, to the verdant green grass, to the aqua blue sea - and also created our senses and the capacity to enjoy it all. He is the one who designed sex, the one who created the ability to have children. And not that only, but the joy of food, of flavours, smells, textures. We are beneficiaries of all He created.

God created, and He declared that it was good! It is only sin that has marred it, and He has dealt with that through His Son dying in our place. He loves His creation!

And for those who approach Him in repentance and faith, who cry out to Him as their Saviour, He has this tremendous promise:

John 14:1-4

"Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And where I go you know, and the way you know."

Jesus loves us beyond our comprehension. To have created us anyway, died for us willingly, and to prepare a place for us in eternity with Him.

I like this insightful comment from Dustin Bengé:

Jesus didn't die to make the Father love us, Jesus died because the Father loved us.

Dustin Bengé

The constraints of love

Now, we hear the phrase often - *love knows no bounds* - and perhaps there's some accuracy, some goodness in that. It's often a phrase used in the good context of indicating to how great a degree someone will give of themselves for another.

And we should be familiar with these incredible 2 verses in Romans chapter 8:

Romans 8:31-32

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?

It's amazing to think How much God loves us. But actually, there are limits to what love will do. There are limits to what God will do. As I've said before, God will give us great things if we ask - but only if they are within His will and His timing.

You see, love constrains itself. It cannot be unloving.

And God, who is love, will not, and in fact cannot do everything we ask when some of the things we ask would not be for our good - that would be against His nature.

Let's consider young children for a moment - typically, they love sweets, ice cream, chocolate and so on. I know I did! (and still do!). But to give them what they want, would not always be loving, right? While they may ask for something that is pleasurable to them, and may even say "if you love me you'll give me another cookie" - the loving thing to do is to **not** give them what they want! At least not in every context, or every moment.

And God, our Heavenly Father, is loving enough to give us anything for our good, and to withhold giving anything to us for our harm - including giving us good things at the wrong time. We read Jesus' words in Luke's gospel:

Luke 11:9-13

"So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"

That which God will do for us will always sit within the constraints of His loving nature. However, these constraints don't only mean God will not give us that which will harm us, but that He'll also lovingly correct us when we need it too. We read in Proverbs:

Proverbs 3:11-12

My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD,
Nor detest His correction;
For whom the LORD loves He corrects,
Just as a father the son in whom he delights.

He'll do that through His Word, and He'll sometime accomplish that via other people. He is too good, too kind, too loving to not correct us.

Much could and has been said of trials, some of which we bring on ourselves, some of which are a result of this fallen world. Indeed some God sends our way, and all He permits to come our way. But in the end we have this great reassurance that He loves us, and His pure and loving nature means He is set on our ultimate good - not our ultimate destruction. Spurgeon put it well...

God is too good to be unkind and He is too wise to be mistaken. And when we cannot trace His hand, we must trust His heart.
Charles Spurgeon

The result of love

When we consider God's loving nature, and the lengths He has gone to in order to restore our relationship with Him, for our good, we should be astounded as John was when he wrote "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!"

When we consider the wonder of His creation, and all that He has given to us to enjoy, we should be amazed. And when we consider the hope of eternal life that we have with Him, we should be overwhelmed. All this should change us. It's John also who said "everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure." Indeed when we recognise God's love toward us, we should desire to please Him in all that we do. We should respond to His great love!

Spurgeon said:

I cannot trifle with the evil that killed my best Friend. I must be holy for his sake. How can I live in sin when He has died to save me from it?
Charles Spurgeon

But there's more than that which God's love accomplishes, for we read this:

1 John 4:17-19

Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us.

Note that again... *perfect love casts out fear*. What does this mean? Well, I'm grateful to AW Tozer for this analogy; consider a lost child in a department store. He looks around at the sea of faces, none of which he knows, in a place he doesn't know, that is bigger than his comprehension. Many if not all of them would wish him no harm. But he doesn't know that. And he is afraid. But then, his mother appears and instantly he runs to her with relief, and with confidence that she will do him no harm - for she has always sought his good.

And that is what our great and loving God is like. His love toward us really is perfect. He has never done anything for our harm, and has gone to extreme lengths for our good - even though we didn't deserve it. And it is that kind of love that casts out all fear.

You can continue to run around in the department store or the world from one thing to be fearful of to the next - or you can run into the arms of your Saviour. That is the better option!

But with that great news should come a warning - for if you don't have Him as your Saviour, you have everything to be fearful of, including God himself.

The security in love

Last of all then, consider for a moment the security of love. For example, consider the security a child has in a loving home, the security the spouse has in a faithful marriage, or the security you feel in a job where you are valued by your employer - then consider the demonstration of love God has shown to you, how faithful He is (despite your unfaithfulness), and how great a value He places on you to pay the price He did for you.

God loves you! And His love will not fail. He is unchanging. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. And nothing can separate us from Him. We read in Romans:

Romans 8:38-39

For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That includes you. If you are a Christian, you are secure in Him. Your place in Heaven is sure. As Paul Washer said;

I have given Christ countless reasons not to love me. None of them changed His mind.

Paul Washer

We have a faithful and loving God. He cannot ignore our sin, for He is Holy. But because of His loving, holy and gracious nature, we can be forgiven and set free from sin.

Once again;

John 15:13

Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.

That's what God has done for you.

Conclusion

Oh what a short time this is to talk about God's love! But our thoughts on the subject don't have to, nor should end here this evening. Let's keep pondering these things through the weeks ahead.

- The nature of love - is our good
- The act of love - in creation & salvation
- The constraints of love - the kindness of saying no & loving correction
- The result of love - no fear
- The security of love - confidence in Him (including in prayer)

Is there a way to summarise all this? I'm not sure the best way, so instead suggest a response from us - and that is thankfulness. DL Moody said this:

Even if nothing else called for thankfulness, it would always be an ample cause for it that Jesus Christ loved us, and gave Himself for us.

DL Moody

Application questions

This week, I encourage you to think about these questions:

- How has God demonstrated His loving nature in what He has given you?
- How has God demonstrated His loving nature in what He hasn't given you?
- What would be a reasonable response to His love toward you?

Let's pray.