Systematic Theology Study
Session 3C
Who is God and what's He like?

In our last session we began our study of what are commonly called God's attributes of goodness. We saw how God's goodness is typically broken down into two categories: God's moral qualities; His holiness, righteousness, and justice. Then we began our investigation into the other dimension of God's attributes of goodness which deal with His integrity; such as His genuineness, truthfulness, faithfulness and love. However, we did not get to God's love as it is so exhaustive that it truly needs its own session to begin to cover it adequately. In addition to God's love, in this session we are also going to examine the tension between God's justice and His love and also look at His Triune nature.

When we begin to look at God's love, it become immediately obvious to anyone who's opened the pages of the Bible to see the incomprehensible vastness of God's love.

4. Love

When speak of God's love, it is such a vast and varied term, we need to break it into four different sections to do begin to do it justice to it. The attribute of God's love is usually broken down into benevolence, grace, mercy and persistence.

[I John 4:7-12, 16]

Many people regard love as the primary or main attribute of God based on I John 4:8 & 16. God's love can be termed as God's eternal giving or sharing of Himself. Though the Greek language had nine words that are translated "love" in English, the one used to describe God's love in the New Testament is "agape". It is a self-giving, sacrificial love for someone else. It selflessly gives for the object of that love's best. It is not a reciprocal love based on receiving anything from the beloved first. It leads the one loving to take the initiative to demonstrate loving actions first and not based at all on whether or not the recipient of the love returns the love in any manner. We see this in the I John 4 passage that God took the initiative to love us first and this was to become the pattern of our love for one another and God.

What is interesting is that the word "agape" was not used very often in ancient Greek writings. They used the other words far more often and this word was not really used at all until God used this word when inspiring the authors of the New Testament. This is because the world doesn't understand or value this sort of love. It is not a sort of love that anyone can practice in their own strength. While it has an emotional element to it, it is an action oriented love that demonstrates it's existence through its actions. God's love is not mere sentimentality. In the Old Testament, the word that is often associated with God's love is "kessed" and is translated "lovingkindness". They are equivalent in the love is described as a kind and merciful and active towards another's best.

Think back again to I John 4 in that God is the initiator of love. We are able to love others because He has loved us first. We would have no concept of what the genuine love of

God was like if He didn't take the initiative to show us. Yet, by showing us His unique type of love, He reveals Himself to us most clearly. The love of God revealed in I John 4 becomes the permanent foundation for God's love. Because it is the first love, the originating love, the initiating love - it is what flows from God and what we then possess and reflect as we come to know God more fully.

[II Corinthians 13:11]

Q: What two qualities define God to us in this verse? (*love and peace)*

[Matthew 3:17] - This verse shows us that there has been an eternal exercise of God's love long before there was ever any created beings. The members of the Trinity have always showed this love to one another as it is who God is.

We must see that love is both a noun and a verb. As a noun, it has a certain substance and character. As a verb it is active and living. We are about to read the "love passage" quoted in most Christian weddings. It describes God's love. However, without knowing that it is God who gave it first to mankind (I John 4) it is merely a list of laws or rules we strive to do on our own when it suits us. The key to what we are about to read is to not make it a law but rather see it as how God's love shows itself in our lives as we related to others. In this, it is a mirror of how the Holy Spirit is working in a believer's life. To the degree that a believer's life has been transformed by the indwelling Holy Spirit, that person's life will reveal these same characteristics as they are the fruit of the Spirit pertaining to God's love.

[I Corinthians 13:4-8]

Q: According to this passage, what are some of the qualities of God's love? *(patient, kind, not jealous, humble not arrogant, doesn't act unseemly, does not seek its own, does not keep score, does not rejoice in unrighteousness but in the truth, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, it doesn't ever fail. This is what God's love looks like. Paul gave this list to the Corinthian church because they were failing to love one another with God's love - a love that looked like what He described.)*

The first grouping of traits that define God's love are those which are benevolent.

A) Benevolence - God is concerned about the welfare of those whom He loves. He unselfishly seeks our best welfare.

[Deuteronomy 7:7-8]

Q: What did the love of God lead God to do for the Israelites? *(To keep the oath that He made to their forefathers to bring them out of Egypt into the Promised Land.)*

[John 3:16-17]

[Romans 5:8]

Q: In these two verses, what was the demonstration of God's love to mankind? *(God loved mankind and gave His Son, Jesus, over to death to pay for the sins of mankind.)*

This leads to one of the most important points that must be made about God's love, especially as we relate it to benevolence. No one can ever say that God does not love them. God has proven, demonstrated His love by sending His only Son, Jesus Christ, to die in our place, for our sins, on the cross. Because of this one act, everyone has been shown love by God and not just any love but the greatest and most meaningful love that could be offered. Nothing was as important to God as being able to reconcile mankind to Himself and only the death of Jesus could make that possible. While a person may claim that they are unloved by God due to "bad" experiences, these claims do not hold up to Biblical truth. Our feelings or human reasoning are not a true indication of whether God loves us or not. God loves everyone as He has given sacrificially to everyone. God's love for us is an unselfish interest in us for our own sake. He took the initiative to send Jesus, His Son, to earth for our sakes. The love of God is what is credited for being what brought salvation to mankind.

[John 15:11-13]

Q: What was the purpose of Jesus' teachings to His disciples in this passage? *(v.11 - that their joy would be made full)*

Q: What is the greatest love that can be given according to Jesus in this passage? *(v.13 - that one lay down his life for his friends)*

This shows us that the love of God is relational in nature. It's friend-to-friend in nature, not employer-employee based. Think of it, not everyone received Jesus' act of love and got saved. Thus, God's love spread to people that gave nothing to God in return. His love was to everyone selflessly, even if that person did not return the love or give God anything in return for it. God's concern for us is like a friend's concern - not for what he can get out of us but rather for the well-being of the friend.

[Luke 15:3-6]

Q: What qualities of God's love does this parable show us? *(God not only took the initiative to show us what love truly was but also his love is continually seeking us out. He is actively seeking us to draw us to Himself so that His love for us can be realized. That love, when realized in us, produces true joy. The end of His love for us is joy. He is always seeking out our ultimate best welfare.)*

[Matthew 5:43-48]

Q: Based on this passage, what percentage of mankind does God love? *(v.45 - 100% - all of mankind. He is benevolent to all in various ways - in Jesus' example - through sending beneficial*

rains in their season.)

Q: Based on the fact that God shows love to all people, how are those who belong to God to react of other people? (*vv.46-47 - love everyone despite their level of love for you)*

This is one of the greatest indicators of demonstrating God's love in any relationship. Does your love seek something for itself? Does it set up barriers and hoops for the other to jump through? This sort of love is called Performance Based Acceptance (PBA). We love others when the perform up to our standards (or whims) and deny our love and reject a person when they fail to perform up to the standards we have set. On the other hand is the love you give, given freely, even when it knows in advance it's going to be ultimately rejected? God's love is benevolent and so ours is to be as well - not seeking our advantage but that of the other.

B) Grace - Grace is the aspect of God's love that deals with people, not on the basis of their merit, but rather according to their need. God deals with us on the basis of His goodness and generosity, not our worthiness. This is different from benevolence. Benevolence is simply that idea that God does not seek after His own good, but rather that of others. If He were benevolent but not gracious, He could love us unselfishly but still demand that we earn the His favor to be received. Grace puts that notion to death. Grace is unmerited favor of God.

[Exodus 34:4-8] - The first set of tablets with the Ten Commandments had been broken by Moses in a fit of rage against the people of Israel.

Q: How is God showing grace in this passage? *(God reappeared to Moses and was willing to write on a second set of stone tablets for the people.)*

[Ephesians 1:3-8]

Q: What quality of God is credited in this passage for us being able to experience the forgiveness of sins? *(v.7 - grace)*

The God of both the Old Testament and New Testament is the same God and both are gracious in that they are not stingy but give abundantly.

[Ephesians 2:7-9]

Q: What is God showing in the ages to come in this passage? *(v.7 - the surpassing riches of His grace towards us.)*

If God gave only to the deserving, none would be saved and all would be condemned. God gives abundantly to all who come to Him for salvation. He doesn't just give us barely enough grace to be saved but superabundantly He gives us above and beyond so that we all we need for life and godliness forever (II Peter 1:3-4). Now we read what I consider to be the capstone and defining teaching of the New Testament on this matter of grace.

[Titus 3:3-7]

Q: What did being justified by God's grace do for us? *(v.7 - we were made heirs according to the hope of eternal life)*

Titus was explicit that we didn't do anything for God's grace. It was His gift to us based upon His love for us.

C. Mercy - Mercy describes God's tenderhearted, loving compassion for people. It is God's compassion to the needy. Grace views man as sinful, guilty, and condemned while mercy sees man as miserable and completely needy.

[Psalm 103:13-17]

When God's people were being mistreated during their slavery in Egypt, God heard their cries and responded.

[Exodus 3:7]

[Mark 1:34]

Q: How did Jesus respond to those who suffered various afflictions and demonic possession? *(He showed them mercy and healed them fully.)*

We see that Jesus was concerned about the spiritual affliction of man but also the physical condition of man, as well. Jesus often spoke spiritual truths and healed people at the same time.

[Matthew 9:35-38]

Q: How did Jesus see the multitudes in this passage? *(v.36 - like sheep without a shepherd. They were in need of God's mercy.)*

God loves the wretched, poor, downcast, outcasts as well as those who don't see themselves as such but in truth are. It is God's mercy that sends workers out to be the hands and feet of God to those who don't know Him yet and are suffering in some manner.

D) Persistence - This describes God's slowness to anger and His patience in His dealings with mankind. This is an outflow of God's faithfulness to man.

The children of Israel often rebelled against God, desired to return to Egypt, rejected Moses' leadership, set up idols to worship in God's place, fell into the wicked practices of those whom the Lord was seeking to destroy, and still God never cut them off or wiped them out.

[II Peter 3:8-9]

In one instance Peter came to Jesus and asked how often he should forgive a brother who sinned against him. He offered seven times as a suggestion to Jesus. Jesus responded that he should forgive his brother seventy times seven times - in other words there is a relentless nature to God's love that is patient beyond human standards. (Matthew 18:21-35) Even after Peter denied the Lord three times on the night of His betrayal, Jesus forgave and restored Peter to full fellowship with Himself after His resurrection. (Matthew 26:69-75 & John 21:15-23)

Q: What are some other instances in the Bible where God showed His patience to people?

Again, the key to God's love is that it is a love that demonstrates itself to the objects of His love which is us. Likewise, as we have been shown a persistent, patient love, we are show that same love to those around us so that the love we give others is actually God's love and not some mere human, temporary love.

[Matthew 6:12]

Q: Who are we to forgive and why? *(We are to forgive those who are indebted to us because God has forgiven us who were in massive debt to Him.)*

[If we were to convert the 10,000 talents into today's currency, the debt of the slave mentioned in Matthew 18 above would be slightly over $48 billion. That's the enormity of our debt against God. Who in real world terms could ever even accumulate such a whopping huge debt in the first place? Yet, this slave managed to do it. The number isn't important but what is important is the overwhelming, incomprehensible size of our debt before God and why only He is great enough to forgive it.]

[Luke 7:40-50]

Q: According to this parable, what is the key to being able to live out abundant love? *(v.43 - by recognizing the vast debt we were forgiven by God and then by others, it allows us to love more fully and freely. This keeps our love persistent like God's love is persistent. The more accurately we see the fullness of the debt that God forgave us of, will lead to us loving God more.)*

[I John 3:11-18]

Q: What do our acts of concern for others reveal to us about our love? *(If we don't show concern for others, then our Christian experience is not genuine. The love of God doesn't abide or remain in the person who doesn't share and show Gods' love. This isn't a one-time or short-term lapse but rather a way of life characterized by a refusal to show God's patient love to others.)*

These are God's moral attributes and attributes of integrity that show us that God is indeed a good God. While we have touched on many of the attributes of God, we have not exhausted them by any means. This is given to just give you the big picture of what God is truly like.

II. Is there tension between any of God's attributes?

Since God is a unified being whose personality is harmonious as a whole, we would expect there to be no tension among any of God's attributes. Yet, as humans grasping to understand the infinite God, we often find points of tension among God's attributes that would suggest He is not as unified as the Word leads us to believe. Is there a way to harmonize these attributes or not? I want us to look at the most clear example of this so we know how to approach it in the conversations we have with others and within our own hearts. The question is this: Is there tension between God's love and God's justice?

Q: How would you answer this question?

What we need to do is start with the truth that God is truly unified and that there is no tension. An eternal, omnipotent and all-knowing God who is the Prince of Peace would not have any attributes in tension with one another. The problem is always one of perspective from our vantage point.

On one hand God's justice seems so severe, requiring death to all who sin. This is a fierce, harsh and demanding God. This is what is revealed in Scripture. On the other hand, the Scriptures also reveal God as merciful, gracious, forgiving and long-suffering. Aren't these in direct conflict with one another? Isn't this proof of a division or internal conflict within God's personality?

To answer any question concerning God's attributes, we need to start from the place of truth, which is that they are harmonious. A perfect being would not dwell forever in inner turmoil between two of His revealed attributes. The best way to handle this perceived dilemma is to define the attributes in light of each other. Thus God's justice is loving justice and is love is just love. The idea that these is disharmony is a result of attempting to define the character traits apart from one another. Also, if we define these attributes apart from the revelation of Scripture, we will find ourselves holding a completely non-Biblical teaching.

Let's unpack this. Love is not fully understood unless we see it as including justice. If love does not include justice, it is mere sentimentality. The love that merely gives what the other desires is not Biblical at all. There are two problems with this concept of love: 1) If you give someone what they want, it might make him comfortable for a moment but maybe nothing more than indulging a whim and such an action may not be what is truly right, 2) This sort of love is typically nothing more than an emotional reaction to an immediate situation rather than what is best for the long-term. But the true love of God is so much wider than this love. It entails justice - a sense of what is right and wrong. Joseph Fletcher said that justice is love distributed. True justice is love to all of one's neighbors, those immediately present as well as those distant. This is why God's love shows concern for all people - because it shows concern for all.

Love and justice also work together in God's dealings with man. As mentioned God's justice demands payment for man's sins against Him. God's love desires for a restored fellowship between God and man. The offer of Jesus Christ as the atonement for sin means that both the justice and love of God have been both maintained and satisfied. Thus there is no tension between God's love and justice due to the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ for mankind. Both justice and love are both distributed freely to all. The payment made by God

shows that His love is greater than simply being an indulgent God who releases people from the consequences of their sin without the administration of His justice. God was not inconsistent within Himself in any way. God's justice was shown in that Jesus took the full penalty of our sin and paid it through His own death. Thus, God has shown Himself both just and loving always. When you are confronted by such dilemmas, set the solution up by phrasing the two attributes with each other and then allow the Bible to speak to instances of both.

III. Is God a Trinity?

In the Bible, God is revealed as one God yet three persons at the same time. Among all the doctrines of the Bible, no one has been more misunderstood and maligned than this one.

[Deuteronomy 6:4] - This is called the Shema. It was the proclamation of monotheism by the Israelites. God revealed Himself to them as the only living God. There is only one God.

[II Corinthians 13:14]

Q: Who is mentioned in this verse? *(Jesus, God (the Father) and the Holy Spirit)*

[Matthew 28:19-20]

Q: What is the baptismal formula given by Jesus in the Great Commission? *(in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. All of them are co-equal to each other. Each is a distinct person in the Godhead.)*

[Isaiah 43:11]

Q: How many Saviors are there? *(one)* Who is that Savior? *(The Lord)*

[Isaiah 44:6]

Q: How many God's are there? *(one)* What are the titles of this one God in this verse? *(King of Israel, Redeemer, First and Last)*

[Revelation 1:17-18]

Q: Who is speaking to John in this passage? *(The first and the last, the living One)*

[Revelation 22:12-16]

Q: Who is speaking in this passage? What is His name? *(The same first and last but He identifies Himself as Jesus)*

[Acts 13:1-4]

Q: Who called Paul and Barnabas to go on a missionary journey? *(v.2 - the Holy Spirit)*

Thus the Holy Spirit is not an impersonal force but rather a full member of the Trinity. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all equal being co-eternal in nature.

There are a few points to make about the Trinity that must be kept in mind when dealing with who God truly is. First, There is only one God - the Trinity is not a belief in three mini-gods. Second, each member of the Trinity is deity and must be affirmed as fully God. Next, the Trinity is eternal. Each member of the Trinity has existed forever and will exist for forever. The three-in-one nature of God, like His other attributes, has never changed. Next, while the function of one member of the Trinity may be subordinate to another member for a time, this does not infer inferiority of that member of the Trinity in any way. Then lastly, the Trinity is truly incomprehensible. No one will fully understand it this side of eternity. We employ various models and examples from nature to describe as aspect of the Trinity (Such as St. Patrick's use of the three leaved clover to say that it was one plant but had three leaves) will all fall short when pressed. One theologian stated, "Try to explain it and you'll lose your mind. Try to deny it and you'll lose your soul."

This is very fast summary of 2,000 years of debating over this theology but what it means for us is that God is beyond our comprehension. If someone denies the truth of God existing and revealing Himself as a Triune being, that person is seeking to understand rather than to live by faith in an infinite God. God cannot be reduced down to terms that we can comprehend when it comes to this three-in-one nature of God's being.

Q: Do you have any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?