

'God Is Love'

Yes, this is true. But do we really understand what the  Bible means by this—on God's terms?

In 1967, Beatle John Lennon's lyrics "All you need is love" became the anthem of the hippie movement. Christians answered Lennon by introducing people to the Prince of Peace, Jesus (see Is. 9:6). The "Prince of Peace movement" worked at first, until God's other attributes had to be balanced with the love and peace. Unfortunately, the church wasn't—and still isn't—ready for this task.

Today, the church is proclaiming, "God is love" (1 John 4:8), a message that's being accepted because people aren't reading the Bible. You read that right: It's working because people *aren't* reading the Bible.

Even though they've heard that the God of the Old Testament is vengeful and destroys without mercy everyone who stands in His way (and in part, they're right; see Num. 31:1–20), people are starting to believe again in the God who is love.

The church must deal with their questions about this. To do so, we need to understand what the Bible means by "God is love"—and why many of us we actually have trouble believing God loves us. This study will help you discover that for yourself.

God Is Love, But Not Love Only

When I recently spent time in the apostle John's letters preparing an issue of *Bible Study Magazine*, I was struck by how often God's love is connected to His other attributes, such as *sacrificial* and *truthful*. Let's look at 1 John's

proclamation that God is love, in context:

“By this you know *the Spirit of God*: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. ... We [Christians] are *from God*. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know *the Spirit of truth* and the spirit of error.

“Beloved, let us love one another, for *love is from God*. ... In this the *love of God was made manifest among us*, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, *not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation* [the payment] *for our sins*. ... So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. *God is love*, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:2, 6-16, ESV; emphasis, parentheses added).

Chew on This

What is the progression of thought in John's letter? (Hint: Look at the italicized words.)

1. How is God's love connected to His other attributes and actions?

2. What proves that “God is love”?

3. How can we be certain that God loves us?

There's a reason why it's difficult to see God's love. We struggle with the idea that God is love because we don't see His love at work. We look around and see anger and strife. We blame this on God when, really, we're to blame. People who ignore Christ are living a life without His transforming work, and some Christians are ignoring God's desire to transform

them. That's why there are so many problems in our world—and why it's so difficult to believe that God loves us.

Yet God's desire for us to transition from our old way of life to His new one is inseparable from His love for us: "For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray ... but when the goodness and loving kindness of *God our Savior appeared, He saved us*" (see Titus 3:3–8, emphasis added).

Part of the reason we struggle to accept that God loves us is that we have fought religion so hard we've stopped reciting liturgy. I'm not suggesting we recite liturgy again in Protestant churches. I am suggesting that we need the book of Psalms to be central to our churches again. The psalms were liturgy. They were how God's people claimed and proclaimed God's love. If you say something enough times—if you remind yourself that it is true over and over again—you will remember that it's true when things become difficult. This was the purpose of many of the psalms.

Dozens of psalms proclaim God's steadfast and enduring love (see, for example, Ps. 100:5; 103:1, 4, 8; 117:2). Most of these connect His love to His faithfulness, redemptive power, mercy or grace. These psalms tell us that we know God loves us because: 1) He is faithful despite our unfaithfulness; 2) He redeems us from suffering and our self-inflicted pain; 3) He has mercy on us though we don't deserve it; 4) He's gracious to us though we deserve wrath.

It's only when we understand that we don't deserve God's mercy, redemption, grace or faithfulness that we can begin to understand how His other attributes are connected with His love. Dozens of psalms also connect God's love with His justice—what He does with wicked people. People who truly love are not timid about protecting those they love. God is no exception.

Your Turn

What do you think? When the psalms were written (before Jesus came), did God's justice and love also involve His judgment and wrath to make things right between His people and the rest of the world? Study these passages to decide: Psalm 17:4; 33:5; 98:1–3; 7–9; 146:7–9.

If we connect the love of God with the rest of His attributes, we get a holistic picture of who He really is. That picture, though, presents some problems both for us and for the people we minister to.

Why Does God Seem Angry?

We all have trouble accepting and understanding a God who seems angry. What's really happening when God's love seems to turn to anger? We see an example of this in Deut. 23:3–6. Here God is telling the Israelites how to handle a group of people who wronged them when they were in need.

"No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the Lord ... because they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way, when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam ... to curse you. But the Lord your God would not listen to Balaam; instead the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, *because the Lord your God loved you*" (Deut. 23:3–6, ESV, emphasis added).

This is one of the few biblical examples where we see, without any other context, exactly why God got angry. We also see that God's love for the Israelites was connected to His anger. Essentially, God was saying: If the enemy has a problem with you, He has a problem with Me.

Chew on This

1. *In light of Deuteronomy 23:3–6, why is God’s love connected to His anger?*
2. *Can anger, love, mercy and wrath coexist? If God’s love in Christ gives everyone a chance to come to God, is there any need for Him to act now like He did in the Old Testament?*

God’s love is something we can’t understand, and that’s OK. No parent in their right mind would give up their child for people who had wronged them, and certainly not for people who had repeatedly hurt them and others. Yet that’s exactly what God did.

In the act of God sending His Son, we learn something about love that we can never truly understand: Love is connected to justice. God sending His Son was the only way He could bring justice to the world without destroying it. None of us was worthy of Jesus’ sacrifice—we’ve all been unfaithful, unjust and lived without mercy. Yet God was faithful, just and merciful. God is love, even though we’re certainly not.

That’s the message people need now. It’s the answer to Lennon and the movements of today. God is love, but let’s not forget what that really means.

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