

Love in Perfect Proportion

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. Well, the way that I introduced the series last week was to talk about how the Bible defines God as love. It defines God several times, but one of the ways it does is God is love.

But if we just take human ideas of what love is and we use them to think about what God is like, having heard that God is love, we run into huge difficulties.

We might start thinking, well, maybe God is in love with me today, God loves me, but he won't love me next week. Maybe he won't feel so strongly that he loves me.

Maybe if I stop loving him, he won't love me. Or maybe if I don't please him, he'll not love me. His love becomes conditional.

It might become unreliable. And what we saw last week was when we recognized that God is eternal and that within God, there are three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit.

[1 : 0 2] He has always been love. Father, Son, and Spirit loving one another. So we don't take human ideas of love and transfer them onto God. No, rather, he defines love for us as we look at how he loves in himself.

Now, tonight we're going to think about another key way that the love of God is wonderfully different to human love. And that's because human love gets distorted. We love things, some things too much and other things too little.

So we're going to start with a love story that is a true story. And it's a great example of disordered love. It's the story of the great philosopher Abelard and his wife, Heloise.

Just before we do that, I just wanted to explain kind of where these kind of meditations and this series is coming from. It's from a book called His Love Endures Forever.

It's by Gary Williams. I think I've got a slide about it, which Neil might be able to bring up. Neil's doing two jobs at once tonight. So here is the book, Reflections on the Love of God, His Love Endures Forever, Gary Williams.

[2 : 1 0] And I'm taking some of the prayers and meditations and themes from that book as we look at this together. And we're going to look now at this, just a few minutes, explaining the story of Abelard and Heloise, which is from, I think, the 12th century.

But we'll see more about it here. Pierre Abelard was born in 1079 AD.

God would have allowed such a thing to happen. And she was very honest that Abelard had taken God's place in her life. So he was her first love and not God.

That was even why she'd become a nun. Not even her religion was for God. It was for Abelard. So she wrote this, In every circumstance throughout my life, as God knows well, I have feared an offense against you, that's Abelard, more than any offense against him, that's God.

And I have sought to please you more than him. It was your command, not love for him, that brought me to put on this habit of religion. And she says that she would have gone to hell if Abelard had wanted that.

[3 : 27] So she says, But as God knows, I would have followed you to Vulcan's flames if you commanded it. And without a moment's hesitation, I would have gone first. My heart was never my own, but was always with you.

And now even more, if it is not with you, it is nowhere. Without you, it cannot exist at all. Now, it's remembered and celebrated as a wonderful story of romantic love, to see the strength, the depths of love that she had for him.

But we need to think, well, with the glasses on, with the lenses on of the Christian worldview, what's actually going on there? Actually, it's awful. She rejected God and turned a man into her God.

And of course, the ultimate tragedy in that is that when you look at Abelard's letters, it looks as though he actually had a faith and had repented of his sins. And so, by making him into her God and not trusting God, she will have been separated from him forever.

So her love for him was tragically self-defeating. By loving him more than she loved God, she lost him forever. But I don't raise that so that we'll look down on her and be self-righteous about it.

[4 : 45] She's a brilliant illustration of what's true for all of us in the ways that we love. In our fallenness, that we're not the people we should be, we turn good things into God things.

So we take great things in our world that it's only natural to love, and we love them, but we love them too much. We push God away, and instead, we love other things in his place.

So in Romans 3, it says, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And it explains, we've got, we'll have the verses on the screen in a moment, it explains sin using this idea of idolatry, of substituting something else for God.

So Romans 1, verse 22, although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

So what's the result of that exchange? Well, it says in verse 24, Romans 1, therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.

[5 : 52] They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served created things rather than the creator who is forever praised. Amen. Now that disorder in our love has a number of disastrous effects on us.

It means that we've stopped living in line with the fabric of our universe because God is the one who's deserving of our love most of all. It means that God is right to be angry with us and to hand us over to spend forever away from him and from his goodness because we don't love him as we should.

But it also means that we're spiritually blind. The Bible says that God's made it obvious all around us that he's there and what he's like but because of our hearts being kind of turned away from him in our infatuation for created things we are blind to that revelation of what God is like.

So our hearts and our minds are darkened by our sin. It said in that verse Romans 1.22 although they claimed to be wise they became fools.

We can't see what we should see about God. So that's the distortion of human love and how has God responded to that? Well he's responded with the restoration of the spirit's love.

[7 : 15] So God's response to our disordered love we started by looking at it last week was to send Jesus Christ into the world. He came and laid down his life for us so that we can come back to God.

All our lives we've put things in God's place and worshipped them instead of God so God enters the world and takes our place and in Romans 5.8 it says this is the ultimate revelation of the love of God to us.

God demonstrates his own love for us in this that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. So it's still the case that we're spiritually blind but in the kind of objective reality of the universe God has dealt with our disordered love.

The problem then was that in our fallenness we wouldn't have been able to see that and accept it. So God sent not just a saviour he sent the spirit into the world and it's only through the spirit opening our eyes that we can see Jesus and respond rightly to God.

So Paul says this in 1 Corinthians get it on the screen Neil is that okay? 1 Corinthians we have received not the spirit of the world but the spirit who is from God that we might understand the things freely given us by God.

[8 : 34] So you see in that verse there that because we have the spirit we're able to understand the things that God has freely given to us in being who he is in making us in his goodness to us and in the gospel in sending Jesus.

So God the Father gives us the Lord Jesus to deal with our love problem and he gives us the Holy Spirit so that we can respond rightly to him and they work together to save us.

In fact the three persons of the Trinity always work together they never work separately from each other. So in John chapter 16 Jesus said this it is for your good that I am going away for if I do not go away the helper will not come to you but if I go I will send him to you when he comes he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment.

So he is saying he will send the advocate to you he will send the spirit and we need the spirit that's why it's for our good that Jesus goes away. In the inseparable working of the son and the spirit they bring us into a relationship with God the Father.

And it's worth just thinking then how then does the spirit enable us to grow in our knowledge of God having opened our eyes to see what God is like so that we can know him. See what the spirit then does is in the pages of scripture he condescends in the way that he's had the Bible written to take things that we can see around us in our creation things we can understand and he uses them to describe things about God.

[10 : 12] So we hear in the Bible that God is a lion that he is an eagle he is a fountain a sun a shield a fire a rock Jesus Christ is a lion a lamb a hen a door bread concrete things that we can see in the created world that help us to by God's spirit know God better.

Now of course when we see things like that in the Bible intuitively we know yeah God isn't just a rock there must just be something about a rock that is true that God is saying is true of him as well.

So they're not completely true parallels obviously but God uses them so that we can understand qualities about him and it's a wonderful act of mercy to us that God speaks like that.

In fact you could even go as far as to say they are the primary reason that God made those things. You see it's not that God looked at the world as the spirit of God was having the Bible written in the way he wanted it.

God didn't look at the world and think how am I going to explain this to people about me? Oh hang on look at the eagle over there and the way it soars and carries its young on its wings that's a bit like how I deal with humanity yet let's use that.

[11 : 32] No the way that God works is he created a world and a universe and put things into the fabric of it so that he could use them to make himself known to us.

Yes the lion has other things that the lion does but the greatest honor of the lion is that God made him in a way that he could use him to say something that's true about God the son that he's a lion.

Yes the stars do other things in the universe but the greatest honor of the stars is that God made them so that he could say to Abraham look at those that's what my kingdom is going to be like your offspring my people will be like the stars in the sky.

He made rocks knowing that one day it would be important to explain to humanity that he is a rock. So he weaves these things into his creation and then he opens our ears and our minds and our hearts by his spirit to hear and understand and be moved by who he is.

So we're going to have a couple of minutes of quiet now and a couple of questions on the screen. Well one question to think about and then we'll pray. So the question is consider your natural spiritual blindness where would you be and what would your life be like if God had left you in the dark?

[13 : 04] Just going to have a minute to think about that and then I'll lead us in a prayer of confession on the screen where we thank God for his mercy in sending the spirit from you and exchanged your glory for created things.

I acknowledge with shame the guilt of my sin darkened mind. I know that I am by nature spiritually blind. I deserve to be left without the revelation of anything but your wrath.

But you have given your spirit to breathe the scriptures and to open my eyes. In them you speak to me in terms I can understand. What am I and who are we that you would have made creation to speak to us?

Yet you designed the world to be used to speak about yourself. Help me to listen to your word and not to my own head. To rejoice that you have made yourself known and to delight to hear you speak through your son and your spirit.

Fix my eyes and thoughts on Jesus. In his name. Amen. So we've thought about our distorted love and where that leaves us in terms of relationship with God and then about the spirit's response in dealing with all of that and opening our eyes in love.

[14 : 31] And now we're going to think about how very different God's love is to our own. So inside the notice sheet on the outline I've called this the proportions of God's love. See God is perfect and that means that his love is perfect.

So he loves in perfect proportion. And what that means is that his greatest love is for the greatest good in the universe. That's only right.

So his greatest love is himself. We would probably think of the cross as God's supreme act of love.

And we think of that normally in terms of his love for us. Jesus has come into the world to deal with our sin because he loves us. And that's true. But on the night before Jesus died he said this.

We had it in our reading. He said to God Father the hour has come glorify your son that the son may glorify you. So supremely Jesus dies on the cross because he loves his father.

[15 : 40] As he went to the cross he died to show the world how much he loves his father. And he wanted to show that he loved his father by obeying his father.

Just look at the next slide. He explains why he's going to die. I will not say much more to you for the prince of this world is coming.

He has no hold of me over me but he comes so that the world may learn that I love the father and do exactly what my father has commanded me. He did die because he loves us but he loved us under his love for his heavenly father.

See the Bible says in Isaiah 48 that God won't give his glory to anyone else even in saving us. He doesn't do that so that we would have a glory that takes glory from him. So he acts for our good but he does that because it glorifies him.

Just think again about how Jesus describes his death. In John 12 27 and 28 he says that his death is the hour of his father's glorification. In Isaiah 52 it talks about how the one who comes the promised one which is Jesus will be lifted up he'll be glorified and in John chapter 3 Jesus explains when he's talking to Nicodemus that it's by his death that he is lifted high.

[17 : 07] So he's acting for his own glory as he saves us. The supreme love is for God and we had that in our other reading in Ephesians 1 we've been looking at this in growth groups throughout this term and on Sunday mornings but in Ephesians chapter 1 three times God tells us why he's blessed us with all the spiritual blessings we get for being Christians and one of them is in verse 6 he says it's to the praise of his glorious grace which he's freely given us in the one he loves.

So he does all this saving and adopting us into his family so that his grace his kindness will be praised. And then in verse 11 it says in him we were also chosen having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.

Why? In order that we who were the first to put our hope in Christ might be for the praise of his glory. He's acting for his own glory supremely.

Now that is a kind of love that would be selfish in a human being. It would be sinful in a human being. But it's not so in God because it's not an ego if you actually are the center of the universe.

It's only an ego if you think you are and you're not. In fact if God did anything else he would be sinning to try and glorify and love something else more than himself.

[18 : 33] He deserves the greatest love and glory because he is the ultimate good. But let's just think back to us as well. You see even if we're already Christians our love doesn't become like that does it?

Our love is still tainted by sin. Even our love for God is like that. It's still disordered because all fallen human love is disordered love.

So we love some things more than we should including ourselves and we love other things less than we should. I just wanted to give you a couple of examples of where this might play into your life.

They might not be examples that are true of you. I think they're true of me to an extent and maybe if they're not true of you you can still think of ways that they might help open a window on something that captures your heart perhaps more than it should.

So one example is sport. So sport is great. God made sport. He made us in a way that meant that we wanted to have sport and we were creative with sport and it's good to enjoy sport as a good thing from God and love even love sport under our love for God.

[19 : 47] But what happens to someone like me is I get so into sport that there are times when if my football team or my rugby team has won my emotions are completely driven by that to an extent where other things that should matter much more like the difficult time a Christian friend is going through don't affect me as much as they should because I'm walking on air because of my sports team.

Conversely if I have a weekend when my football team or my rugby team do very badly I can come into church and hear wonderful things about God and what he's done for us in the gospel and I'm less joyful than I should be because my emotions have become mastered by something other than him.

Another example is holidays. Holidays are great. They're a good thing. It's good to take a break. But sometimes in the way that we talk about our holidays it's as though they're the ultimate thing and we can be in a situation where the Christian life is difficult other things in our life are difficult we're grieving with others as we should about difficult things they're going through and trying to support them but then we realize we've got a holiday coming up and that's all we can really think about we're just daydreaming about it it's taken instead of loving it under God it's taken affection away from an ordered understanding of God and our universe because we just can't wait for that break we know it's coming that's all that matters maybe if the holiday was taken away devastation another example is achievement

I was thinking especially about our careers but maybe about our studies if you're a student and the ways that it gives you prestige again God calls you if you're a Christian to work hard for his glory so it is good to enjoy work and really give it your all and do the best you can whatever your job is but I remember when I was a lawyer that they used to have these annual awards ceremonies it was like being at the BAFTAs you'd all go for dinner and then people who'd done the best deal of the year the best case of the year the nominees would be read out the winners would go up on stage and there was rapturous applause now the first time I ever went to one of these things it seemed a bit silly because it was quite rock and roll it was like the Brit Awards and it was about law deals and I thought there's something not quite right about this doesn't quite work but actually just imagine what that's like you're working 60 hours a week on average and you're in an industry where everybody else is giving their all to their job sometimes working a lot more than that so you've all really committed yourself to this particular profession and you go along to a posh dinner and you are asked to go to the front and all those people for whom work means such a big thing in their lives applaud you because of what you've done it feels really good to have that kind of recognition and maybe we're not in a career or a job where that kind of award ceremony goes on but I just wonder how much the prestige that we get from doing something well letters after our name exam results that are better than others a career path that other people envy how much does that start to drive us so that if it was taken away from us we'd be crushed and if we do well with it we just get proud no matter how sinful we're being and how much we're failing in our living for God we're proud because of what we're achieving in our career so again those are three examples where they're good things and it's great to love them in their right order but disastrous if they replace

God maybe there are other things that you would struggle with it's just worth saying as well we need to clarify what the problem is so the problem isn't how much we love it's what we love and again supremely the great example of this is Jesus Christ you see he says in John 15 greater love has no one than this that someone lay down his life for his friends that is the greatest love you can have and when Jesus died for us he showed that incredible immense love for us so when he died was he putting us in God's place had we become an idol to him well of course not he did it because he loves us within his love for the father and under his love for the father and that's how love relationships truly flourish it's okay to be passionate about sport holiday career relationships with other people it's okay to have a deep love for those things it doesn't matter how immensely you love them or how intensely you feel about them what matters is do you still love them in a way that is contained within your love for God you love them for his sake let me read you a quote from Gary

[25 : 39] Williams do we think that we could not live without someone we should consider the possibility that that someone may be becoming our love our life our very existence and he talks about if we lost that person bitter deep wrenching loss is wholly compatible with love for God okay bitter deep wrenching loss is wholly compatible with love for God but it will be a loss that despite anguished struggles along the way finally coexists with faith and hope because it is a loss that comes in the context of a greater love for the God who remains the same and can never be lost by his true children but if our loss of a person leads us finally to abject despair then we have loved them disproportionately so we're going to finish now with a couple of minutes to think through two questions on the screen and then

I'll get up again and lead us with another prayer one that's in the sheets as well so two questions to think through prayerfully for a couple of minutes sheets just inside there is this prayer it might be easier to follow it as I read it and if you'd like to you can then pray it along in your own heart so let me read that prayer for us Lord God I know that I do not love you as I should my loves are so distorted and disordered my old idols still fight for my heart and new ones come each day I constantly struggle to love you first and I often fail forgive me for the sake of your son who loved you perfectly I delight in the knowledge that your love is flawless always rightly ordered

I praise you that you always seek your own glory Heavenly Father I worship you for the way in which you sought in the death of your son your own glory his glory and my good Lord Jesus I praise you that in laying down your life you sought the glory of your father your own glory and my good Lord God may my love for you be my first love may all my other proper loves flourish within and under it help me to love my family my friends and my neighbors only and always in and under you for your sake Amen■ them I do Study I Say man may

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