

God is Love

Last week we looked at one example of amazing grace, a grace that allowed one man to tell the truth about the horrible things he had done during the revolution in Cambodia during the late 1970's. The grace of God changed this man from being fearful, hopeless and despairing to being an active worker for the good of others, a compassionate man who served people in great need. This grace gave him a joy and a reason for living - in gratitude to the God who had loved him and given him his life back.

But where does this depth of grace come from? Why does God show such mercy towards a person who has done such great evil? The answer is easy, but the implications of that answer create problems for some people who can't quite accept that God is the way He is.

Let's think for a little bit about what words we use to describe God. One word that the Bible uses often is the word "holy". Holy is an adjective. So are the words "compassionate" and "gracious". Another word that Scripture uses to describe God is "righteous" - another adjective. And there are words like "faithful", "worthy" and "good" that are also found in our Bible describing what God is like, all adjectives. But there is one noun that is used by our friend John, whose gospel we have spent the past four months learning from. This noun is found in John's first letter, chapter 4 and verse 16:

God is love.

John doesn't use the adjective: God is loving. He uses the noun to describe what God is in the essence of who He is - God is love. And John goes further to explain what that means to us:

All who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face Him with confidence because we are like Christ here in this world. Such love has no fear because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of judgment, and this shows that His love has not been perfected in us. We love each other as a result of His loving us first. (4:16-19)

What that means to us is that our whole identity as believers, as followers of Jesus, as people who are putting our hope, our trust in God, is going to grow in love - love for God and for one another. That's what God is - He is love - and if we are "in Him", we will become more and more like Him and that has to mean that we will grow in love. So John says, in verse 17, "As we live in God, our love grows more perfect." And John also says, later in that same verse, that this growing in love is making us more and more like Jesus.

This is wonderfully simple to understand, even if it's not that easy to practice. As we become more and more like Jesus, more and more motivated by the love He has been nurturing in our hearts, we have less and less reason to be afraid. We will not be afraid

of God's anger or judgment and we will not be afraid of disappointing Him or falling short of His standards. The reason we will not be afraid is that we will see the evidence of His work in our own heart. We will be the witnesses that He is making us more like Himself, more loving, more merciful, more filled with grace and more forgiving of those who have wronged us.

All of that stems from the first statement that we looked at in verse 16: "God is love." Of all the statements about God that separate Him from the world of the gods humans have invented, this one might just be the most important and profound for our understanding of Him. If God is love, then what? If God's very essence, His nature, His character is defined by love, then how does this affect the way we live, the way we think about ourselves and our relationships with others, our purpose, our destiny?

Talk about life's biggest questions - you can gain insight into them all when you dig deeply into this facet of God's nature. How does He feel towards me when I sin? What changes about our relationship when I disappoint Him? How can He keep forgiving me when I don't seem to be making the progress that I feel I should be making? All those questions are birthed in fear and all are dealt with when we come to understand the love of God perfectly revealed for us on the cross of Jesus Christ. Is this too good to be true? Yes, sure it is. But, that's because we define "true" as something we experience repeatedly in the world that surrounds us. What's true in our experience is not going to be true of God because He is not determined by the actions and attitudes of the people we run into on a daily basis. You would not say of your neighbour who is constantly running all your other neighbours down that "he is love". In fact, you wouldn't say that about any of your neighbours, even the nicest ones. That's because God is different - He operates on a higher plane, a different standard. He loves continually because He is love. Love isn't something He tries to do because He thinks it's a good thing, or that it's best for us - He loves us because that's His nature; that's who He is.

So, let's look at another word that John uses of God, one that is on the lips of Jesus all the time, the word "Father".

Now we need to ask, "What is God like as a Father?" Fortunately we have a number of texts that show us how God 'fathers' us. Let's start with Isaiah 63:16:

You, O LORD, are our Father

Our Redeemer from of old is Your name.

God is the Father who redeems His people from the results of their own failures. He rescues them over and over again from the power of their enemies.

Here's another passage - the Sermon on the Mount:

But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and He sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

(Matthew 5:44,45)

God shows love towards everyone and those who are His children will learn from His example of parenting us, how to love others. God as Father shows us how to spread

love broadly, including to many people who don't deserve it - because that's how He loves.

In the next chapter, in the verses leading up to the Lord's Prayer, we see that God is a Father who gives rewards to those who seek to build relationship with Him, rather than show off their religious piety to people. How about this picture of a loving Father from later on in Matthew 6:

So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (31-33)

We're learning a lot about the Father from Jesus' teaching - let's go on to the end of the Sermon of the Mount - Matthew 7:9-11:

Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him!

Later we find the Father speaking to His children through the Holy Spirit. In Luke 6 we are told to be merciful like our Father is merciful. In Luke 15 we hear Jesus tell the story of a wonderful, forgiving Father in the Parable of the Prodigal Sons.

We have just been studying through the Gospel of John and there Jesus refers to the Father on many occasions, often revealing the special bond of love and unity that He shares with the Father. After all that talk of special relationship, when Jesus rises from the dead and is greeted by Mary outside the tomb, He tells her to go to His brothers - the disciples - and tell them, "I am returning to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God." (John 20:17)

They are Jesus' brothers because they have the same Father and they share with their Teacher the love that the Father has shown His Son.

In Paul's writings, first in Romans, we read that we are to call God, "Abba, Father" because the Spirit of God is testifying with our spirit that we are His children, and not only children, but heirs with Christ. (Rom. 8:15-17) In other letters we see God referred to as the Father of creation, the Father of compassion, the Father who is over all. We are told that we have access to the Father through His Spirit and that we should respond to Him with thanksgiving and honour Him.

Some people will admit that the father image doesn't work well for them because their experience with their own father wasn't a positive one. I don't want to minimize anyone's personal pain - it's real. But I do want to say that the fact that you were disappointed with how your father treated you shows that you have an image in mind of how a father should treat his children and you need to keep that image front and centre when you examine the fatherhood of God in the Scriptures.

Now, I want to tell you a story that will, I think illustrate the loving heart of God the Father, God our Father. The story also comes from Lee Strobel's book, The Case for Grace and it concerns one of the world's most famous evangelists, especially in the Latin world, Luis Palau. Through his outreach festivals, books and radio programs, Luis has reached a billion people in 75 countries with the good news of God's love for us.

The story-telling begins in a restaurant in Chicago where Luis Palau is sitting between Lee Strobel and Mark Mittelberg and suddenly he grasps the forearms of the two men and says, "Friends, I have a favour to ask. Would you pray for my son, Andrew? He's far from the Lord and we're very concerned about him." The two men began to pray that Andrew's heart would be opened to grace. Strobel writes:

The expression of fatherly concern on Luis' face made it clear that even though he had told multitudes around the globe about Jesus, this was the individual he most ached to reach.

More than two decades later, Lee Strobel sat in an office at Luis Palau's ministry near the Portland airport. Andrew was there with him, telling the story of his falling away from the faith of his father.

"I was the fool of Proverbs. I squandered every opportunity, I took the path of least resistance, and I stumbled through life drunk or stoned or both. Just about every decision I made was wrong. Everything was about me - having fun, chasing women, partying with friends, getting into trouble. It was a competition to see who could do the craziest stuff and laugh about it the next day. If that's not being a fool, then I don't know what is.

When Strobel asked him what motivated that kind of behaviour and if he blamed his upbringing he said:

I can't blame anyone else. You see, I was in love with Andrew. I wanted to be cool so I'd be accepted by all the girls and the right guys in the right cliques. I was selfish, self-centred, self-indulgent - and I was rebellious, although not because I was angry with God.

Strobel asked him about hiding his lifestyle from his parents:

I was very duplicitous. I would act like I was friendly and gregarious and positive. I would say all the right things - and when I had to, I'd lie to get myself out of trouble.

Andrew even admitted that he liked church, that he attended missions conferences and youth group, that he tried to avoid things that would make problems for his parents. After a year of Bible school he was invited by the school to "seek success elsewhere" and moved on to University of Oregon. With no one looking over his shoulder and with no Christian peer pressure, Andrew's life trajectory went downhill from there. Already used to drugs, alcohol, and petty crime, he went deeper into hallucinogenic drugs and cocaine. He became more manipulative and deceitful in relation to the women he was

dating and his shallowness began to show up in the marks he was getting in his university courses. His dad suggested he drop out and work in Europe for awhile to gain some life experience.

While working at a clothing store in Northern Ireland, he got a letter from his dad back in Portland. In the first part of the letter, Luis invites his son to open his heart to Jesus, to invite Him in and in the second part, he urges him to offer his secret life, his inner person, to God. He ends with this:

Andrew, my love for you as my son is very deep. The potential I see in your life as God has made you is superb. You could bless and change and bring great happiness and eternal life to millions if you obey Jesus Christ as your Master and Lord.

"Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men." I took that quote from Jesus very seriously at your age. I love it. It's the best life in the whole world. You will enjoy it, too, my son, if you follow Jesus with all your heart and soul. What else is there in this rebellious world? Not much.

See you soon. I love you and pray for you.

Dad

"That's my father," Andrew said to Lee. "The same things he said to a hundred thousand people, he said to his son. He knew that the only thing that could change my life would be God's grace.

For the ones who come out of this self-destructive and aimless lifestyle, there always seems to be an experience of "hitting bottom". In Andrew's case, it involved him and some friends having a shouting match with a homeless man and then kicking him while he lay on the ground. Andrew says:

How did I descend to where I thought that was okay? That was probably my lowest point.

The second thing that shook him was an encounter at a night club where a guy grabbed his arm and said, "You're a believer, right?" Finally, hoping to get rid of this guy, he said, "Yeah, I'm a believer." The guy responded, "I knew it. You're a follower of Satan, right?" and then disappeared into the crowd before Andrew could deny it.

In the meantime, Luis was planning an evangelistic festival in Jamaica at a time when Andrew, then living in Boston, would be experiencing a cold north-eastern winter. He invited Andrew to come down and promised him a marlin-fishing trip while they were there. Luis had him stay with a Jamaican businessman and his family, including son Chris and daughter Wendy. They were vibrant, enthusiastic Christians and their joy in life and their normalcy, touched something in Andrew. He went to hear his dad preach on three of the five evenings at Kingston National Stadium. On the final evening of the festival Andrew made a decision to invite God to come into his life. When he shared that decision later with his parents, they seemed a bit reserved in their response - like they knew there was more that needed to happen. When he got back to Boston, he could only stick to his promise to put Jesus first for about a month, then he fell back into all his old ways.

He later described this “first conversion” experience this way:

I was only winking at God. I was saying, “I want all the good things you offer - the forgiveness, the release from guilt, heaven and all that - and I’ll try my hardest to do good to keep You happy and get the things I genuinely desire. Yes, I want you, God, but without giving up me. Is it a deal?”

Andrew went back to Jamaica because he had been very impressed with Wendy and her friends. But they could tell pretty quickly that his newfound faith wasn’t sticking, that he was pretending to be a believer in order to fit in with them. One of Wendy’s friends, a guy named Steve, invited Andrew to a retreat that they held every year in the Blue Mountains. There they would pray, worship, build friendships and study the Bible together. Andrew went willingly and began praying for a spiritual encounter with God, a life-changing experience that would cement his new faith and provide stability for his journey - but nothing. Finally, frustrated, he blurted out a prayer that God answered, “God, what is keeping me from You?”

God’s answer was to reveal to Andrew a mountain of garbage that was keeping them apart, a horrifying pile of lying, cheating, stealing, abusive relationships, pride, arrogance, deception, hypocrisy, callousness, addictions, people he had hurt - as high as he could see:

I was stricken. I was horrified - I gasped and fell on my face, embarrassed and humiliated and remorseful, bawling like I never had before. I was heaving with sobs; my tears were falling on the floor. “God,” I said, “how could I have been such a fool? Please forgive me! Please take this away! I can’t live with it anymore. What hope do I have when all of this garbage is in me?”

God’s response to him in that moment was right out of Scripture. The Father reached out to the child:

If you confess your sin, Andrew, I am able to forgive you of your unrighteousness. I will clean it out. I will take it as far as the east is from the west. I will remember your sin no more.

Over the next 2 or 3 hours Andrew confessed his sin against God and people and experienced the incredible grace of his Father who pieced his life back together again:

For the first time, I understood what Jesus meant when He said He will not only make us free, but free indeed - like a captive not only released from prison but running into the arms of his father . . . I whispered, “I will tell everyone what You have done.” As the words left me, He replied, “You will.”

Andrew went from there to study at a seminary and later began to work for the Palau organization. After accompanying his dad on mission trips for four years, he began to do the groundwork with local churches to prepare for the festivals at which his father would preach. He has since become an evangelist himself, sometimes speaking to crowds of tens of thousands - and at other times encouraging a single inmate in a prison. He and Wendy have been married for over twenty years.

This has been a story of two fathers - Luis Palau and Father God. For years Luis would ask strangers all over the world to pray for his wayward son Andrew, and God heard those prayers. But the Father in heaven didn't just answer those prayers by blowing Andrew out of the water, by overcoming his sinful pride and selfishness in some overpowering or miraculous event. He waited patiently for this young man to come to the end of himself, to come to the place where he could truly repent of the way he was living and humble himself before the God of love.

God is love and love doesn't control, manipulate or intimidate. Love works in a different way and gains a different result than those ways do. God is also Father, and a Father who relates to His children out of pure love, out of genuine fatherly love, out of the love that seeks what's best for the other, *agape*.

How did Luis love his son Andrew the way God the Father loves you and me? What are the common threads here that help us understand God's love?

1. Patiently
2. With truth - he reminded him in many ways of God's plan for our salvation - good news
3. With a goal of seeing his son healed and saved
4. With a deep knowledge of what made his son tick and what would bring him great reward
5. With great compassion - he wept for him, more than he was angry or afraid.
6. With great hope
7. With grace, always with grace, even when Andrew fell short of true repentance ...
grace

This is how God loves us, with good plans and goals, with patience, truth, compassion, hope and grace - and He never stops loving us this way.