

THE *Greatest*
OF *These*
is **LOVE**



MICHAEL GIFFORD

The Greatest of These is Love

A 13 lesson study of the Bible's
teaching on love

By

Michael Gifford



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All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the Holy Bible, King James Version, Cambridge, 1769.



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Introduction

When it comes to a discussion of true love, the Bible is the standard. Therein we find love portrayed as the crown jewel in the diadem of saintly graces that all Christians are to wear (II Peter 1:4–7). Love was the motive for the Father sending the Son as the ransom for souls (John 3:16). It was love that led our Savior, Jesus Christ to temporarily leave heaven’s portals to come and redeem fallen man through His blood (John 15:13). The Bible itself is the product of love, for it comes from the One “who will have all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (I Timothy 2:4).

The purpose of this book is to lead its readers into a study of love as it is defined and described in the Bible. As each of us considers this important topic from the standpoint of God’s verbally inspired Word, may we realize that the kind of love with which the Lord would have us fill our hearts and motivate our thoughts and actions is indeed “the greatest of these.”

Michael Gifford
September 2010

CHAPTER ONE

The Love of God For Man (Part 1)

Memory Work:

“We love him, because he first loved us.” (I John 4:19)

LOVE ORIGINATED WITH GOD

Central to the message of God’s love for man is a fact that comes from inspired statements in I John 4:10,19. Verse ten reads, “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” Verse 19 is recorded above as this lesson’s memory work.

Love is not something that man invented. Furthermore, its presence continues to baffle the infidels of the world who are too “sophisticated” to accept the fact of God’s existence. Their theory of evolution demands survival of the fittest but love gives way to helping those who are weak and infirm. Man as an evolved being would slaughter the crippled and leave the aged to die unaided, but man as a being created by Almighty Jehovah builds hospitals and convalescent homes, occupies himself in the helping professions of doctor and nurse and seeks to cheer the downtrodden and comfort the afflicted.

It is in man’s nature to be good (Ecclesiastes 7:29). Indeed we do have in our world those who hurt and maim and neglect the needy

and commit other crimes, but these actions can be explained by the presence of sin and not by the absence of the Divine Creator. The atheist questions, "If there is a God, why is there evil in the world?" Would that they would deign to answer a question in return: "If there is no God, how do you explain the presence of good?" The presence of evil can easily be explained by considering man's free will and his frequent abuse of same in committing offenses (cf. Deuteronomy 30:15–20), but the atheist is strapped for an explanation of the presence of good.

Love not only originated with God, our God **IS** love (I John 4:8). He is love in its completeness, He is love inexhaustible, and as we mortals seek Godliness, we strive to grasp the magnitude of the love of God and find that He is love incomprehensible (Romans 11:33).

Before man there was the love of God. Before the fall of man there was the love of God. And now, though sin stains the soul of every accountable man and woman (Romans 3:23), there is still the love of God.

GOD'S LOVE NOT EARNED BY MAN

That love originated with God and that He loves even the vilest of offenders are two rays that illuminate the truth that mankind does not earn God's love and favor. This statement, taken out of context, would likely cause many false teachers to squeal with delight as they try to convince the world that mankind can have no part in obtaining salvation and that anyone who teaches that we must do something in order to be saved is teaching the doctrine of salvation by human works.

When one obeys the Gospel of Jesus Christ and has his sins washed away by the blood of Christ, he is not earning God's love. Rather, he is evidencing the love that he has for God. Jesus, in John 14:23, said, "If

a man love me, he will keep my words.” John echoes this in I John 5:3. “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments.”

Notice how the love of God for man and the love of man for God meet in God’s commandments. Now, if we were to develop some unscriptural rituals in order to try to please God, we would indeed be guilty of trying to earn His love and salvation, but in that we follow the instructions that have come from Him, we are merely taking advantage of one of the products of His love (His inspired Word) and demonstrating our love for Him in return by obeying Him.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOD’S LOVE FOR MAN

The list of the characteristics of God’s love for man could go on and on. F. M. Lehman, in “The Love of God,” poetically suggested the depths of our Lord’s love for us when he wrote:

*Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made;
Were ev’ry stalk on earth a quill,
And ev’ry man a scribe by trade;
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Tho’ stretched from sky to sky.*

For our study, we shall consider but three of the characteristics of our Lord’s love.

The love of God is, first of all, **PEERLESS**. There are no rivals to the love of God. A search through the creeds of the foreign religions produces a composite picture of gods who are aloof and distant from their worshippers. Buddhism insists that God is an impersonal force. The Koran says of Allah, “God loveth not the unbelievers” and “Verily

God misleadeth whom he will, and guideth whom he will.” It is also taught in Islam that, while Allah is kind to man, he does nothing for man’s salvation that costs him anything.

The reason that the gods of the world religions do not love like Jehovah is because these gods are the products of the minds of men. When man creates a god, he creates one that is inferior in every way to Jehovah; inferior in power, inferior in knowledge, inferior in love. Hence, we may safely say without fear of successful contradiction that our God is peerless in the realm of love.

The fact of the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Bible is verified by its teaching of God’s peerless love. Man-made gods reflect man’s imperfect love. “For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die.” (Romans 5:7). Man’s concept of love has him barely giving himself to save another and even then that sacrifice comes only after considerable contemplation. On top of this, the price is paid only for those who are deemed righteous or good. “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8). Notice the vivid contrast between the hesitation of man in verse seven and the willingness of God in verse eight. Notice further that no qualifications are placed on the sacrifice made by the Lord. All may benefit from it, even the self-proclaimed chief of sinners (I Timothy 1:15). Truly, the love of God is peerless.

A second characteristic of God’s love is that it is **PURE**. We may question the motives of men when they do good to us and sometimes we are right in so doing. Some time ago an article was printed that told of a couple who received a card in the mail. The card read, “A free full-course meal will be awaiting you at Luigi’s Restaurant this Friday evening at 8:00.” It was signed, “A friend.” The couple was leery at first but checked with the restaurant and found that someone had indeed paid for a meal for them. Thinking that all was well, the two went to the restaurant and enjoyed their supper. When they returned home

that evening they found that their house had been broken into and that many of their valuables had been stolen. In the living room, on the stand where the television once sat, was this note: "Hope you had a good supper. (Signed) A friend."

We don't have to be doubtful regarding the motives where God's love is concerned. He wants us to be joyful (Philippians 4:4), to have the things we need to live (Matthew 6:33) and, most of all, He wants us to be in heaven (II Peter 3:9). God does not "set us up just to see us fall." He does not give us good to get our hopes up and then hurt us just so He can see us cry. Such is a trick done by man from time to time but never by the Almighty.

Because God's love is pure, we can trust Him explicitly, being assured that He will never do anything to harm us (James 1:13) and that, when we are in trouble, He will help us handle it (I Corinthians 10:13). Our hearts, our souls and our minds are safe with God. We can give ourselves to Him completely and rest in the bosom of His love because His love is pure.

A third characteristic of God's love is that it is **PERSONAL**. Consider the wonderful wording concerning our God as found in I Thessalonians 1:1. In the opening statement of that verse, Paul speaks of "God *the* Father." Our God is the Father of all creation. "...the Lord thy maker, that hath stretched forth the heavens, and laid the foundations of the earth." (Isaiah 51:13). Everything and everyone owes their existence to Him whose creative powers have brought us into this world.

Now notice the second segment of I Thessalonians 1:1. "Grace be unto you and peace from God *our* Father." God is the Father of all creation, but in a special sense, He is the Father of those who have obeyed the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Christians have been born into the family of God (John 3:3-5; Ephesians 3:15). The Lord has promised to the obedient that He "will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty." (II Corinthians 6:18). In like manner, Jesus is the Savior of all the world (I John

2:2), but Paul wrote that Jesus “loved *me* and gave himself for *me*.” (Galatians 2:20).

We are not just a number to our God. We are not just another of the billions of men and women who have walked this earth. Each of us is unique. It can be said of every last one of us that our God knows us so intimately that “the very hairs of your head are all numbered.” (Matthew 10:30). The verses preceding and following this one speak to the fact that God knows everything that happens to us. He who even knows when the seemingly insignificant sparrow falls to the ground is aware of our every need and our every care.

Because the love of God is personal, we can carry “everything to God in prayer.” We can cast all our cares upon Him, for He cares for us (I Peter 5:7). We can be confident that He hears us when we pray according to His will (I John 5:14). No matter how desperate the trouble, how deep the pain, how tall the stumbling block, how awesome the fear, our God is aware of it and, through His flawless love, He helps us overcome it.

CONCLUSION

As per the principles of evolution, if man were an evolved being, he not only could not create love but he would not. His interest would be solely in self-preservation. Furthermore, it is not even conceivable that Jehovah God is a product of man’s imagination as some would have us think for the love of God as described in the Bible far exceeds man’s concept of love. The characteristics of the foreign gods which men have created provide evidence of what God would be like if He was the product of man’s imagination.

God is love. He is love without peer, love in purity and love that is personal. In the next chapter, we will go into detail concerning the many ways in which God has demonstrated and continues to demonstrate His love for man.

EXERCISE YOUR MIND

True Or False

1. Man invented the idea of love. T F
2. The gods that man creates are inferior in every way to Jehovah. T F
3. Man has never done anything nor ever will do anything to earn the love of God. T F
4. God is unconcerned about our personal needs and, even if He was concerned, He would be powerless to help. T F
5. It is inconsistent to talk about God's love and man's need to faithfully obey the Word of God. T F

Multiple Choice

1. God:
 - A) Loves us because we love Him;
 - B) Loved us first;
 - C) Loves only those who have been predestined to eternal life.
2. The theory of evolution teaches:
 - A) Survival of the fittest;
 - B) Love comes from God;
 - C) The Bible is correct in its explanation of man's origin.
3. Man is born:
 - A) In sin;
 - B) Full of evil thoughts and intentions;
 - C) Pure and sinless.

4. It is impossible for man to:
 - A) Earn God's love;
 - B) Be saved;
 - C) Understand the Bible.

5. The gods of the world religions such as Buddhism and Islam:
 - A) Are the same as Jehovah but with different names;
 - B) Have as much power as the God of the Bible;
 - C) Are inferior to God in every way.

Fill in the Blanks

1. "Herein is _____, not that we loved _____, but that He loved _____, and sent His _____ to be the _____ for our sins."

2. "If a _____ love _____, he will _____ my _____."

3. For this is the _____ of _____, that _____ keep his _____."

4. "For _____ for a _____ man will one _____; yet peradventure for a _____ some would even _____ to die."

5. "But _____ commendeth his _____ toward _____, in that, while we were yet _____, _____ died for us."

Questions For Discussion

1. Define and discuss the term, “propitiation” in I John 4:10.

2. How is the presence of evil and suffering in the world used by atheists to try to disprove God’s existence?

3. How does the presence of good prove God’s existence?

4. Respond to this statement: “Those who insist that we need to obey God’s commands to be saved are guilty of trying to earn their salvation.”

5. In what sense can God’s Word, the Bible, be considered a product of the love of God?

6. What would it be like to serve a god whom you believed to be distant and unconcerned about his followers?

7. How does the Bible's discussion of the love of God verify that it is Divinely inspired?

8. When we experience problems, is it fair for us to blame God for the trouble? Explain your answer.

9. What keeps some Christians from taking "*everything* to God in prayer"?

10. List some more of the blessings we enjoy as a result of God's love.

11. Discuss this saying: “If you are not close to God, who moved?”

12. What benefits do we get from knowing that God is always with us?

13. Describe the kinds of gods man has created.

14. List any additional characteristics of God’s love that stand out in your mind.

15. Can one fully understand love without the Bible? Explain your answer.

SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES

(Note: For this section, you will find a good concordance and a Nave's Topical Bible helpful.)

Where is the following Bible verse located?

“As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love.” _____