

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

THE FATHER'S GREAT LOVE

1 John 3:1

By

Steven J. Cole

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1 John Lesson 13

The Father's Great Love
1 John 3:1

Love is one of the greatest motivators in the world. When someone loves you, it gives you hope and strength. When you feel unloved or rejected by someone you love, it can be devastating.

George Matheson was a 19th century Scottish pastor. He was born with an eye defect that left him totally blind by age 18. Shortly after this, his fiancée left him, deciding she would not be content to be married to a blind preacher. Years later, at age 40, Matheson was alone on the night of his sister's wedding. Something happened, perhaps the memory of being rejected by his own fiancée years before, that caused him severe mental suffering. Suddenly, the words of a hymn came to him as if dictated by some inward voice. The whole thing was done in five minutes and he never had to edit or correct it (from Kenneth Osbeck, *Amazing Grace* [Kregel], p. 49). The first verse is:

O love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee.
I give thee back the life I owe
That in Thine ocean-depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

The third verse reflects Matheson's experience of God's love through suffering:

O joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow thro' the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain
That morn shall tearless be.

In his blindness and loneliness, perhaps feeling forsaken by the love of a woman, Matheson sought and found comfort in the unchanging love of God (this story is also in, John MacArthur, *The Love of God* [Word], p. 151).

Although human love is wonderful, God's love is far greater. It is the most life-changing force in the universe. The apostle Paul

prayed for the Ephesians (3:17b-19), “that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.”

My task is to speak about this unfathomable love of God in Christ. To the extent that God opens our eyes to see it, we will be changed people.

The apostle John has just said (2:29), “If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him.” The thought that we have been born of God causes John to exclaim (3:1), “See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him.” His point is simple and powerful:

The Father’s great love has made us His children
And it distinguishes us from the world.

1. The Father’s great love has been bestowed on us.

The apostle John had been blessed more than most men in the history of the world. Many prophets had desired to see what John had seen and to hear what he had heard (Matt. 13:16-17). He had spent three years as one of the closest disciples of Jesus Christ. He had heard Jesus’ profound teaching. He had seen Jesus perform dozens of powerful miracles. He had seen Jesus transfigured in His glory. He had witnessed Jesus alive from the dead and stood transfixed as He ascended bodily into heaven.

Here he is as an old man. We ask, “John, as you think back over your illustrious life, what stands out? What motivates you and gives you hope?” He replies (3:1), “See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are.” His words show us that...

A. The Father’s great love should both amaze and instruct us.

“See” is often translated, “behold.” It is both an exclamation and a command. As an exclamation, it shows that *the Father’s great love should amaze us*. Some things grow commonplace over time.

We've heard about them and known them for years. Maybe at first, when it was new, an idea or experience affected us. But over the years, the effect grows weaker and weaker, until finally it's just a far-distant memory.

But the Father's great love for us is the kind of experience that should grow stronger and stronger over the years, until it totally dominates every aspect of our lives. It should consume our thoughts and control our behavior. It should motivate us to serve God and to live holy lives. It should give us comfort in all our trials. It should fill us with the eager hope of being with Him in heaven. It should fill us with awe and worship, that He, the holy sovereign of the universe, would set His love on a sinful, self-willed rebel like me! "Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou, my God, should die for me!" Don't let yourself ever hear of the Father's great love and think, "Ho hum!" It ought always to amaze you.

But, also, *behold* is a command. This shows that *the Father's great love should instruct us*. The command is, "Stop everything else! Look at this Think about it! Ponder the significance of it!" The word translated, "how great" is, literally, "what kind." It originally meant, "of what country," and always implies astonishment (John Stott, *The Epistles of John* [Eerdmans], p. 118). It's as if John thinks about the Father's great love and says, "Where does this come from? It must be from heaven, because there's nothing like it in this world!"

Alexander Maclaren (*Expositions of Holy Scripture* [Baker], on 1 John, pp. 298-299) points out that a habit of devout, thankful meditation on God's great love as seen in the sacrifice of His Son for us, along with the humble, thankful conviction that I am a child of God because of it, lies at the foundation of all vigorous, happy Christian living. He uses the illustration that if you had a friend in Australia, but you never thought about this friend and never communicated with him, that friendship would fade and not have much significance in your life. For the friendship to affect you, you must think often about this friend and what he means to you.

Maclaren also points out that such thought always requires great effort. We all have too many other things crowding into our daily lives. If we do not deliberately take the time and effort to block out all of these pressing things and to focus on what God

has done for us in Christ, His great love will get crowded out of our thoughts and daily lives.

The Father's great love also should instruct us about our relationships with one another. This is the apostle Paul's thought in Ephesians 5:1-2, "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma." Imitate God by walking in love, with Christ's sacrifice on the cross as your great example! If you need more specifics about what walking in love really looks like, go to Paul's great chapter on love (1 Cor. 13:4-8a). He writes,

Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails....

Can you substitute your name in place of "love"? ("Steve is patient," etc.) Those qualities should increasingly describe your relationships with others, beginning with those that you live with.

We're all prone to excuse our lack of love by blaming those that we are supposed to love. We say, "I am usually a very loving person, but if you knew how unloving my husband is, you'd understand why I treat him as I do." Or, "I work long hours to provide for my wife, but all she does is gripe and criticize me. Sure, I'm mean and angry sometimes, but who wouldn't be?"

But such excuses don't hold up because such unloving behavior does not in any way resemble God's great love for you. Where would you be if God made up excuses for why He should withhold His love from you? He doesn't need to make up excuses—He has legitimate reasons why you do not deserve His love! He would have been completely justified to leave you in your sins, with no remedy. But, instead, He so loved you that He sent His only begotten Son to bear the penalty that you justly deserved. Now He says, "Imitate My love by loving those who are insensitive, mean, and unloving toward you."

John's words here also apply to how we as earthly fathers relate to our children. All of biblical parenting can be summed up in one sentence: Love your children as the heavenly Father loves you. Such love involves proper correction and discipline, of course. But, I think that most Christian parents fall short primarily in the realm of love, not discipline. God lavished His love and grace on us in Jesus Christ. As Christian parents—especially as fathers—we need to lavish grace and love on our children. It will motivate them to follow Christ far more than strict rules ever will. I'm not saying that there is no need for rules. I am saying that if your children feel your love for them, the need for rules is greatly diminished.

So John shows us that the Father's great love should both amaze and instruct us. Stop and behold it often!

B. The Father's great love has been lavishly bestowed on us as a gift.

The word "bestowed" is, literally, "given." It points to the fact that God's love is not earned or deserved. Rather, it is purely a gift that comes from His undeserved favor, or grace. Paul emphasizes this in Romans 5. First he says (5:6), "For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." In 5:8, he adds, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." In 5:10, he states that "while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son...." Add up the terms: we were *helpless*, *ungodly*, *sinners*, and *enemies* of God. His great love is demonstrated in that He sent His Son to die for us while we were in such an awful condition!

Paul says a similar thing in Ephesians 2:4-7:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

God is under no obligation to save us. He could have left us, as He left the fallen angels, with no way of salvation. He justly condemned them to the eternal fire without any chance to repent

and be saved. But, instead, He set His great love on us to raise us from spiritual death to life, and even more than that, to make us His beloved children through the new birth! Paul ends that great chapter, Romans 8, with these triumphant words (8:38-39):

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The fact that God's great love is a gift means that you cannot do anything to earn it or deserve it. All you can do is receive it. You cannot vow to pay it back, because the cost is infinite and because God will not be anyone's debtor. This means that your pride is one of the biggest factors that will prevent you from receiving and experiencing God's love in Christ. But if you will acknowledge that you are a sinner and that you cannot do anything to deserve or earn God's love, the gift is there for the taking, no matter how badly you have sinned. All that you can do is to receive God's gift of eternal life by faith and bow in wonder, thanks, and love in response. The Father offers such great love to all who will receive it.

2. The Father's great love has made us His children.

Because God has bestowed His great love on us, we are now called children of God. John adds, "and such we are" (the KJV and New KJV omit these words, but there is solid manuscript support for them). The idea is that we not only have the name or title, "children of God," but that that title reflects our true condition. Through His power, God causes us to be born again through His Holy Spirit (see John 3:1-8; James 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:3; 1 John 2:29; 3:9, 10; 5:1, 18). He imparts new life to us, so that we are raised from spiritual death to spiritual life. We actually become partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4), although we never become "gods" in any sense. But, we share His very life.

This means that becoming a Christian is not a matter of human willpower, but rather of God's power. In John 1:12-13 we read, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the

will of man, but of God." Those who receive Jesus Christ do not do so because of their will, but because God by His sovereign will causes them to be born again. This takes away all ground for boasting and leaves us bowing in adoration and awe, that the Father would bestow His great love on us apart from anything in us.

The fact that God's love has made us His children should also cause us to feel His love and to love Him in return, even (or, *especially*) in all of the trials that we encounter. I have told you before that I never appreciated how much my dad loves me until I held my firstborn in my arms. As I gazed at her, helpless and dependent and so beautifully formed by God, it hit me: "My dad loves me as much as I love her! And, what is even greater, God loves me far more than this!" As we already read from Romans 8, there is no trial on this earth, and not even death itself, that can separate us from His great love!

Perhaps at times you have wished that you had been born into a family with great wealth. But the truth is, such families are often lacking in love. It is a far greater privilege to be born into God's family as His dear child. All the riches of Christ are yours for time and eternity! John adds another thought:

3. The Father's great love distinguishes us from the world.

The great tragedy of those in this world is that they do not know God. In John 1:11 we read, "He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him." John undoubtedly has that verse in mind at the end of 1 John 3:1, where he writes, "For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him." Jesus warned His disciples that they would suffer persecution, especially from the religious crowd. Then He added (John 16:3), "These things they will do because they have not known the Father or Me." (See also, 1 Cor. 1:21.)

Believing in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord distinguishes us from the world. One of the distinguishing marks of God's children is that they know Him. Jesus said (John 17:3), "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." In 1 John 3:10, he divides the world into two opposite camps: the children of God and the children of the devil. If you have experienced God's great love as shown at the

cross of Jesus Christ, you are a child of God and know Him. If you have not trusted in Jesus Christ, you are a child of the devil and do not know God. There is no third camp.

Because of this divide, if you know God's love in Jesus Christ, you are an alien in this evil world that has rejected Christ. You should *feel* like an alien when you are in the company of the world, or when you encounter the world's godless entertainment. You should not expect to be popular in the world's eyes. You should not seek to gain the world's approval; to the contrary, you should fear it (Luke 6:27). When you go into the world, you should not go to join them in their dissipation (1 Pet. 4:3-4). Rather, go as Jesus did, to seek and to save the lost. He attended the gatherings of sinners, but not to join them in their frivolous revelry. He went as the Great Physician, to heal their terminally ill souls (Luke 5:29-32).

Can you honestly say, "The world does not know me"? Can you truly say, "I am a stranger to this world"? If you cannot answer those questions affirmatively, you'd better examine how well you know and experience the Father's great love. If you know His love and you are His child, you will be distinguished from this evil world that rejects His love. As the hymn writer put it, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face; and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace" (Helen Lemmel, "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus").

Conclusion

Several years ago, John MacArthur had the opportunity to spend several days traveling with the well-known gospel musicians, Bill and Gloria Gaither. At one point, he asked Bill what, in his estimation, were the greatest Christian lyrics ever written, aside from the inspired Psalms. Without hesitation, Gaither began quoting the words from F. M. Lehman's "The Love of God":

The love of God is greater far
Than tongue or pen can ever tell;
It goes beyond the highest star,
And reaches to the lowest hell.
The guilty pair, bowed down with care,
God gave His Son to win;
His erring child He reconciled,

And pardoned from his sin.

When hoary time shall pass away,
And earthly thrones and kingdoms fall,
When men who here refuse to pray,
On rocks and hills and mountains call,
God's love so sure, shall still endure,
All measureless and strong;
Redeeming grace to Adam's race—
The saints' and angels' song.

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

O love of God, how rich and pure!
How measureless and strong!
It shall forevermore endure—
The saints' and angels' song.

Gaither said that no lyrics in all hymnody surpass the third stanza of that song (MacArthur, *The Love of God*, pp. xi, xii). That third stanza, by the way, was part of an ancient lengthy poem composed in Arabic in 1096 by a Jewish songwriter, Rabbi Mayer, in Germany. The lines were found in revised form on the walls of a patient's room in an insane asylum after his death. The author of the hymn heard these words cited at a camp meeting, where he wrote them down. God later gave him the words for the first two stanzas and the chorus, which his daughter put to music (Osbeck, *Amazing Grace*, p. 47).

If you know God through faith in Jesus Christ, pause often to revel in the Father's great love that made you His child. If you do not know God, His great love calls you even now to the cross, where Jesus Christ shed His blood to pay the penalty for all that will believe in Him.

Application Questions

1. Practically, how can we keep our first love for Christ fresh and vital?
2. Since sinful anger is contrary to God's love, how should an angry dad or mom overcome this sin toward his/her children?
3. Does God love the entire world in the same way and to the same degree that He loves His children? Give biblical support.
4. "Friendship with the world is hostility toward God" (James 4:4). How then should we properly love worldly people?

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