

'For God so Loved the World' – Part 9

'Acceptance and Change'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

As we continue this foundational series on love we are going to look at Paul's whole letter to the Ephesians over the next couple of weeks - not in detail – just an overview. As we do that, we will discover that there is a progression in Paul's references to love and a powerful presentation of the Gospel at the same time. Before we look at this more closely, let me give you a quick 'fly-over' view of that progression.

In chapter one of Ephesians we learn that God has sovereignly chosen us - to love us. That is, as I've said before, God created us in love - for love. Our primary purpose in life is to have a loving relationship with God and in turn with those around us. It doesn't matter what else we are good at – if we blow this - we've blown life! But if we do manage to get it together with God this side of the grave and learn how to receive and give His love and we don't do anything else terribly well, then my Bible tells me we are still a roaring success in this life! On the flip side, we could achieve amazing things in this life - earn multiple degrees or win a Nobel prize or cure the world of some disease - but if we miss out on receiving and giving love, then that same Bible tells me we have missed the entire point of our life and our achievements mean nothing in the Kingdom of God.

God chose us in love - for love. This is the ultimate declaration of God's grace: Before we were good or bad; before we looked for or wanted God; before we had any sense of need for God; before we even knew how to spell the word repent; before we were even born, in fact, God chose us. God's love comes to us as His free, sovereign choice because it's God's nature to love. It has nothing to do with us, initially. All love in this sinful, fallen world is conditional. Even the purest of human love has a price tag - but God's love has no price tag. God's love is free. It has no strings attached. It is unconditional. So we don't have to be good enough or spiritual enough to earn His love.

Moving along in the progression, in chapter two of Ephesians, God's sovereign love is not just His choosing of us; it's not just His affection for us; it's also His power in us. The love of God doesn't just assure us that He feels warm and fuzzy towards us - God's love is effective. It's something that impacts us and does something to us, in us and through us. It changes us. You cannot be impacted by the love of God and not be transformed in some way.

Then in chapter three Paul calls us to now become rooted and grounded in this free, sovereign love, which has made us alive in Christ. Do you see the progression? God chose us and loves us, but not just that; His love impacts our lives, but not just that; now that we have this love that has affected us, we are to be rooted and grounded in it. We are to wrestle with it and meditate upon it and rest in it and lay the foundation of our lives upon it. That's the third aspect of this progression.

The next one is in chapter four. Paul explains that this love of God which has come to us personally and made us alive as individuals, and in which we are to become established, rooted and grounded, though it is personal – it's not private - it's also for the Body of Christ - the Church. Out of love we are to speak to each other and build each other up so that the Body of Christ will be healthy and effective. That is to say, the love of God is not our personal property or for our experience only. All spiritual experience in Christ is not supposed to stop with us - it is meant to flow *through* us. Of course God's love is meant to affect us, bring us joy, bring us power, bring us life - but it's not complete until it has been passed on, given away and channelled into someone else's life.

It's to be passed on first of all to the Church – to our brothers and sisters in Christ. But it's not meant to stop there either. Sadly it does, more often than not, but chapter five then tells us this love needs to be passed on to the whole world. That's why John 3:16 does not say “God so loved the Church that He gave His only Son ...” It says, “For God so loved the world ...”

The love that God lavishes upon us doesn't just make us alive, but through us, it is the instrument God uses to make other people alive as well. This progression, which moves through the book of Ephesians, perfectly describes how God's love affects us and matures its expression in us and through us to those around us.

So in this sermon and the next, I want to talk about the first few stages in this progression of love and give us a chance to assess ourselves to see where we are in this process - to see if we have stumbled or tripped or stalled at some point in that process and then give the Holy Spirit the chance to take us deeper in one or all of these areas. And to do that, we are going to stop and pray at certain times. This is where we can get in touch with our heart - get in touch with the Holy Spirit within us and ask for discernment to assess where we are in this progression. This is really important. If I truly believe what I have been preaching in this series on love and if you have believed anything you have heard, then I would suggest that this is all that really matters in our life. If we get love right - then we've made it in this life and everything else will fall into place. If we miss this, then we've missed it all.

Ephesians 1:3-6 *“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will - to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.”*

Notice the key reference to love here. Paul, the Apostle, the great theologian and a genius to many in the ancient world, says that the focus of all knowledge and truth is love. God first of all chose us for Himself in love and He did it before creation. He did it before we were good, before we were bad, before we cared about God at all - He chose us.

People might say: “I sought God and I found Him ..” and that is certainly how it feels from our end. But strictly speaking, God sought and found us before we were even born and it's a free sovereign choice, but it's not a choice which is devoid of emotion. Many preachers and theologians have tried for years to downplay feelings and take the emotion out of God and out of our relationship with God. Yet you cannot read the Bible and say that God is not emotional. The word for love that we find here in Ephesians is a love which is self-giving; a love that is disciplined and it will hang in there through thick and thin.

All that is true. But it is also a love that carries with it a deep and warm affection. There is a strong emotional component to this love. Just like a mother can be emotionally attached to and affectionate towards a baby that's not even born yet - so too God can be affectionate towards us in the womb of His heart long before we were born in this world. Before the creation of the world God loved us and chose us in love, but as Paul points out it was not just out of His good will but His pleasure also. It was pleasurable for Him to see us, to delight in us and to choose us before we were even born. This is the free sovereign love of God. This is grace.

It doesn't matter how many times we have heard this preached, we can never hear it too often! We need this truth to be burned into our mind. Before we did anything to earn it or deserve it, God loved us. This is all God's work. When were you saved? You were saved before the foundation of the world in the heart of a God Who is love, a God who loved you and saved you and made you alive in Christ - in His perfect plan and purpose - before you even knew God existed.

In fact, before you even entered this world yourself. That's when you were related to God and this God is committed to you in love by an act of His will and He will be true to that commitment forever. But guess what? God is also crazy about you. God gets warm fuzzies when He thinks about you. God delights in your presence. God takes joy in just being with you. I know that's hard for some of you to receive, but it happens to be true. OK – it's time to pause, to discern, to respond and to pray. Ponder these questions:

Are you convinced that you have been loved and accepted by God? Are you convinced that God chose you before you did anything good or bad? Are you convinced that you are a delight to God and that He has pledged Himself to you personally for eternity, regardless of your performance? Do you really know that truth deep in your heart today – the truth that truly will set you gloriously and powerfully FREE forever? Are you absolutely, totally convinced of that? Many of you may be. Praise God! Some of you may not be, so let me pray this prayer over you, confident that God can answer this prayer wherever you are and whenever you hear this or read this. Let me pray.

Holy Spirit of God, show us our hearts now and if any of us are not totally convinced of God's overwhelming and unconditional love for us today, then I simply ask that You would move in power right now and touch the hearts and minds and lives of everyone hearing or reading this now. In Jesus' mighty name, bring a glorious and fresh revelation of truth into each and every life and may we move forward from this day with no doubt whatsoever of Your love. May each of us know today and always that the reason You love us, has everything to do with Who You are and nothing to do with Who we are or how we perform. You love us because You choose to love us. You enjoy loving us and always have loved us. Come, Holy Spirit and saturate our spirits with this life-changing truth – this good news – this gospel. In Jesus name, amen.

Now in addition to God choosing us, this love of His is not static. It is not just a declaration of His attitude towards us. It is something that powerfully affects us. Let's move on in this progression:

Ephesians 2:4-5 *“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our sins - it is by grace you have been saved.”*

Do you remember the KFC Hot & Spicy adverts on television a few years ago where a guy sinks his teeth into a chicken burger and his mate across the table slaps him on both sides of the face – symbolising the power and impact of this amazing spicy meal? Well friends, when I read this powerful sentence, this amazing truth, this gospel diamond ... I feel slapped in the face, in love of course. So let me state this truth again in the clearest way I know as you listen in your spirit:

“When you were DEAD in your sins, GOD MADE YOU ALIVE with Christ!”

This is the heart and soul of the entire New Testament. This is the foundation of our faith. This is the bedrock upon which all doctrine must be built. This is the window through which we must view all other Scriptures. This is the essence of God's plan of salvation. This is what God's love looks like up close and personal. God's love is not just a feeling; not just an emotion; not just His affection toward us since the foundation of the world; it's all those things but God's love is also an action – it is effective – it is powerful - it achieves a purpose beyond itself – it is focussed on the transformation of the recipients.

Now we humans are pretty complex creatures. There's a lot to sort out before we understand ourselves or others. However, when we drill down through all our differences and idiosyncrasies and the things that make us unique, we will find the same emotional and spiritual DNA.

We are all the same when it comes to what we need and want more than anything else in the world. I want to tell you what that is today. In my humble opinion, there are two things which every human being wants and needs more than anything else on the periphery of their lives – just two and they form the title of this sermon. They are: *acceptance* and *change*.

We all want to be accepted as we are, don't we? Those people in our lives who have truly loved us, the ones from whom we really have felt genuine love, will be the ones who accepted us as we truly are. They knew all our shortcomings and loved us anyway. That's what we want. We don't want to have to follow someone's rules or fulfil someone's expectations in order to be accepted. That's why deep down we all hate religion – because that's what religion does. If you are caught up in religion, then you know exactly what you have to do or have to be before you are accepted or honoured or considered worthy. But no matter how sincere and devoted you are within that religion, there is something deep within you which is crying out, *"No! I don't want to have to perform or conform or behave in a certain way in order to be loved and accepted by God or God's people!"*

Well guess what? That acceptance we long for; that unconditional, no-need-to-jump-through-any-religious-hoops acceptance we crave and need is given to us in the Gospel! We are 100% accepted by God regardless of anything we do or don't do! Only the gospel, only the good news of God, in Christ can meet one of the most basic and important human needs: *acceptance*.

But you know we humans are a paradox?! Whilst we desperately need to be accepted as we are and not expected to change in order to earn God's love or the love of His people – deep down we actually don't want to stay as we are! We are just as desperate in our need for change. We actually want to change. We want to grow. We want to mature but we don't want to be forced to in order to earn the acceptance of others or of God.

Enter again: the life-changing good news – the Gospel in Christ! **God accepts us totally as we are ... but He loves us too much to leave us there!** God's love is not static. It is dynamic. It impacts us. It changes us. It leads us to repentance. It gives us life as God intended us to have – abundant life! This is what God is all about and this is what our Church should be all about. Acceptance and change. First and foremost, God has accepted us, in spite of us, regardless of our performance, our obedience, our devotion or our service. He has chosen us before the foundation of the world. Therefore, we have no right to beat ourselves up in guilt and shame and we have no right to reject others. We are called to accept each other in Christ because God accepts us in Christ. We don't condone sinful behaviour in others, but we accept the sinner in the same way God accepts them - as they are – regardless of their lifestyle or their behaviour or their appearance.

Now here is the key to real Church growth - here is the essence of the Ministry of Christ - it is this genuine, unconditional, God-inspired acceptance of others – as they are – where they are – how they are, which will bring the power of God's love into their lives and bring the transformation we desire to see in them; the change which they desire deep down but are just incapable of achieving without God's love at work in their lives.

God's heart has been broken millions and millions and millions of times over hundreds of years now as He has watched the visible Church which bears the name of Christ effectively ask God's chosen children to change, to repent, to be something they are not at present, *before* they can truly connect to the life of Jesus Christ in His Church or before they feel like they belong or are accepted as equals before God. There are some churches which still do this deliberately and without apology. They believe their mission is to call people to repentance first and love them second and in so doing, they make it very clear what is moral and immoral; what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour; what lifestyle honours God and what dishonours God.

Then there are countless other churches who don't deliberately set out to put conditions and qualifying criteria on God's love, but by default, we end up singing from the same hymn sheet and the world learns very quickly that the entry criteria for the Christian Church is very clear: You need to act a certain way, refrain from acting in other ways, and subscribe to a certain stated or implied code of conduct or belief system to fit in or be accepted or respected as a child of Almighty God.

Is it any wonder that we have Christian leaders all over the world scratching their heads wondering why the gospel is not bearing fruit as Paul promised it always would when we understand grace in all its truth? (Colossians 1:6). This 'gospel' is not bearing fruit because it's not the gospel at all! It is a legalistic, demonically-inspired corruption of truth which is designed to cripple the church and continually portray to the world a God who is anything but love!

So in this second stage in our progression through Ephesians, we really need some discernment and we really need the Truth of the Gospel, and nothing but the Truth to impregnate, to saturate, to overwhelm us to the point where we are 100% sure and unquestionably clear that our God, Who is love, accepts us totally and unconditionally in Christ and always will and that it is that acceptance and unconditional love which births repentance and transformation and change in our lives.

So let me pray with you again as we leave it here until next week. Let's pray.

Lord God, release your Holy Spirit within us afresh right now. Reveal to our mind and our heart who we are in relationship to You. I pray also Lord that you would help us see areas of our lives that still need more of Your life-giving love. Help us Lord to be honest and fearless in holding them up before you this week. If there is any religion left in us – reveal it and remove it Lord.

If our image of You and Your love and Your Church and our mission in Christ has in any way been taken hostage by Satan, by legalism, by religion, by the 'do-more-try-harder-to-please-God' forces which have crippled millions of your children and countless churches, then reveal it to us now and give us the courage to let it all go and be overwhelmed once more by the power of Your love, by the glory of Your gospel of grace and by the freedom which is ours in Christ.

Lord help us to see what You see in us and may that revelation transform us in our relationship with You and in our relationship and commitment to this Church and in our relationship and attitude to those outside the Church who are yet to really hear the Gospel, yet to really encounter their God, Who is love. We ask this in the mighty and matchless name of Jesus, Amen.