

God Is . . .

Love and Mercy

Ephesians 2:1-9

Mark Vroegop

¹ And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:1–9).

If you were to conduct a series of man-on-the-street interviews about the attributes of God, I think I know what would happen if you asked people, “What is God like?” Just think of the people you know. Consider those who would not describe themselves as Christians. What answer would they give? What answer would you give?

I would guess that particular attributes like the ones we talked about last week—omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence—might not make the top of the list. God’s holiness would probably not be the first thing most people would mention.

I think it would be a safe bet that most people would respond, “God is love.” They might even quote John 3:16 as the basis for their answer: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son . . .” So, to say that “God is love” is correct. Love and mercy are vital attributes of God.

But I wonder how many people really know what the love and mercy of God actually mean. Do you know what the love and mercy of God are all about? Do you know why we needed His love? What the core of His love is? How about the purpose of His love? And what about the effect of God’s love?

This is the fourth of nine messages on the attributes of God. Next week I’ll be on vacation, celebrating 25 years of marriage and repeating our honeymoon. Pastor T.C. Taylor will be preaching from Psalm 90 on the attributes of God’s sovereignty and infinity next week.

Today we are in Ephesians 2 so that we can deepen our understanding and application of the attributes of God’s love and mercy. You probably know God is love. But do you know what that really means?

Need for God's Love

In order to understand the nature of God's love and mercy, we need to start with why we need this divine love. These attributes are not merely amazing in and of themselves, but they take on a depth of meaning when we consider our desperate need for and our unworthiness of God's love and mercy. To see the love of God, we need to see the way He loved undeserving sinners. That is where His love and mercy are most evident and glorious.

You see, it is one thing to set your affection on something that would seem to deserve or warrant love. When you love your children, your family, a really good meal, a day of rest, or a beautiful sunset, your heart-orientation is understandable and normal. But the love of God is stunning because God set His affection on those who did not deserve His kindness. He set His love on those who were helpless.

We find this description in Ephesians 2:1-3. Notice the following four characteristics. These help us understand our need.

1. Spiritually Dead. The Bible paints a bleak moral picture here. Verse one describes all humans as being spiritually "dead in the trespasses and sins . . ." The word "trespass" is defined as missing the mark, and "sins" are understood as falling from the way.¹ This means while human beings are physically alive, there is a spiritual deadness to our existence which is expressed in the wrong things that we do. Our sinful actions are merely the reflection of a tragic spiritual alienation from God. To be spiritually dead means that the darkness of depravity has settled in, and there is no hope of fixing the problem on your own. We are deceived. Our minds are darkened. Our hearts are hard. We are God's enemies.

¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart (Ephesians 4:18).

2. Wrong Influences. Along with a helpless spiritual condition, verse 2 describes the trajectory of our lives. The path is described as "following the course of this world . . . following the prince of the power of the air . . . the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience." There is a strong gravitational pull, a wicked current pulling you the wrong direction. Our lost condition happens in a mob.

3. Broken Desires. The Bible tells us that we have desires which oppose God. What God wants, we don't. What we want, God forbids. The passions of our flesh and the desires of the body and the mind are broken. We are terribly creative in how we express our sinfulness.

4. Corrupted Nature. The summary of this spiritual helplessness is found in verse 3: we were "by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind." The problem is not merely what we desire, what we think, or what we do. Our need penetrates the very foundation of our humanity. Our identity—our understanding of who we are, what is important, and what is right and what is wrong—is fundamentally broken.

¹ Francis Foulkes, *The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians – Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 68.

Now I know that this picture is pretty dark. But is it not true? If you are a Christian, you can look back and see how accurate this summary is of where you were before you came to faith in Jesus. And if you are not yet a Christian, understanding this is the starting point of knowing God and believing in Jesus. Despite the fact that all of this is true, God still sets His love on us and offers us mercy.

Tim Keller summarizes what we are talking about like this: “The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.”²

To understand the greatness of God’s love, we must understand the depth of our need for His love.

Core of God’s Love

The second aspect of God’s love that we find in this text relates to the greatest evidence of His love and mercy. In other words, where do we see God’s love on display? What did God’s mercy look like? The core of God’s love is seen in the gospel.

Nothing demonstrates the love and mercy of God more clearly than the way in which He rescues people from their sinfulness. That is why the first two words in 2:4 are so important: “**But God . . .**” With the backdrop of our need, God intervenes. He chooses to love us. He moves to save us. J.I. Packer, in his book *Knowing God*, says this:

“ . . . the objects of God’s love are rational creatures who have broken God’s law, whose nature is corrupt in God’s sight, and who merit only condemnation and final banishment from His presence. It is staggering that God should love sinners; yet it is true . . . There was nothing whatever in the objects of His love to call it forth, nothing in man{kind} could attract it or prompt it . . . God loves {people} because he has chosen to love them.”³

Verse four continues. Now we’ll hear the core of God’s love as applied in redemption in verse five, but before that we see the source of God’s rescuing sinners from themselves: His mercy and love.

⁴ *But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us . . . (Ephesians 2:4)*

His mercy is described as rich; His love is described as great. How rich? How great? Charles Spurgeon, who pastored in London in the 19th Century, described God’s mercy this way:

*“It is **infinite**—you cannot measure it. His mercy is so great that it forgives great sins {of} great sinners, after great lengths of time . . . and raises us up to great enjoyments in the great heaven of the great God. It is **undeserved**—there was no right on the sinner’s part to the kind consideration of the Most High. It is **rich**—His mercy is cordial to your drooping spirits; a golden ointment to your bleeding wounds; a heavenly bandage to your broken bones; a royal chariot for your weary feet; a bosom of love for your trembling heart. It is **unfailing**—it will never leave you. Mercy will be with*

² <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/16321346-the-meaning-of-marriage-facing-the-complexities-of-commitment-with-the>

³ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1973), 112.

you in temptation to keep you from yielding; with you in trouble to keep you from sinking; with you living to be the light and life of your countenance; and with you dying to be the joy of your soul when earthly comfort is ebbing fast.”⁴

The greatest expression of God’s love and mercy is what follows in verses 5-6. The words are incredible. The truth transformational. And the hope is eternal. Listen as I read them slowly:

⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus . . . (Ephesians 2:5–6)

Out of God’s wealth of mercy and the immensity of His love, He raises spiritually dead people to life. He opens eyes blinded by the depravity of sin. But that’s not all. Out of the extravagance of His grace, He not only rescues sinners through Jesus, but He also bestows upon them the full rights as sons and daughters. He blesses us with “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:3). This means that out of the love and mercy of God, His promises to us are so sure that we can count them as already completed.

If you ask a friend a favor, and she says, “Done!” what does that mean? She’s attempting to communicate such eagerness to fulfill your desire that you should consider it already accomplished. That’s the nature of God’s love and mercy toward those who are “in Christ.” The promise of God toward you is so sure, the atonement of Jesus so complete, and the divine love so deep that we should consider God’s purposes as already completed.

That’s really helpful if you are in the midst of a hard trial or a season of uncertainty. You might be tempted to wonder or even worry *how in the world is this going to work out?* But you need to know that it already has. And the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ were the greatest demonstration of God’s love and mercy. Here is how Paul describes this truth in Romans 8:

³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:31–32)

If God was merciful and loving to you in the cross, will He not be gracious to you in every other way? The cross is the place where we see the core of God’s love.

For some of you, however, this is a fundamental question because you’ve never trusted Christ. Perhaps without even knowing it, you have experienced the love and kindness of God. You are listening to this message. You are alive. While your life hasn’t been perfect, you can see the kindness of God in some ways. Do you know that this kindness of God is meant to lead you to repentance? All of the good things—some of which you probably take for granted—are designed to point you toward a God who has already provided a way for you to be made right with Him.

⁴ <https://jasonkallen.com/2016/12/lords-day-meditation-the-mercy-of-god-by-c-h-spurgeon/>

The greatest demonstration of His love was in the way He rescued sinners through the death of His son. It is the core of His love.

Purpose of God's Love

God's mercy and love are not designed to highlight the recipients. On the contrary, God's love comes to sinful human beings despite our lack of worthiness. God's love and mercy, as expressed through Christ, are meant to say something powerful about who God is. In this respect, who God is (love and mercy) help us know who God is. We find this clearly in verse seven.

⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:7).

The aim of God in making His love and mercy very clear is to platform His glory and the "immeasurable riches of his grace." So, if we understand that attribute of His love and mercy, we will marvel and stand in awe of what God is like.

There are some attributes that tend to blow our minds. Next week you'll hear about God's sovereignty. A few weeks from now we'll learn about God's transcendence. And while that is true at one level when it comes to the love and mercy of God, these attributes are uniquely personal in the way they show us the heart of God.

Through Christ, God has been unbelievably kind to us. He loved us before we loved Him. He rescued us from ourselves when there was no other hope. If you are a Christian, I'm sure that you could tell me story after story of the way that God has demonstrated his love to you. But do you know what is crazy? That is the story of every believer!

God has not just been kind to a few of us; He's been merciful to *all* of us. Verse seven is referring to the church. In fact, the purpose of the church gathering together is to be the beautiful display of God's love and mercy. The New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce says, "Throughout time and in eternity the church, this society of pardoned rebels, is designed by God to be the masterpiece of his goodness. When he brings into being the reconciled universe of the future, the church will provide the pattern after which it will be modeled."⁵

This is why the church gathers on a weekly basis. It is to remind one another and to rehearse how good and merciful God has been to us. This is why we pray for one another. It is to remind one another of the mercy and love of God that is still available to us. And this is why we treat one another with love and mercy—because it shows the world what God is like. The reason God was loving and kind was in order to platform what He is like.

Can I ask you what kind of godliness people saw in you last week? Did those around you see the character of God in your words or in your actions? Did you have a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation, and were you ready to lavish the same kind of grace on people that has been given to

⁵ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians – New International Commentary on the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 288.

you? Were you patient? Were you longsuffering? Did you give people the benefit of the doubt? Did you believe the best about others?

You see, God's love and mercy toward you are part of a bigger agenda. God's aim is to show the world His glory, and He aims to do it through the church—through individual people who have tasted and seen His love and mercy.

Effect of God's Love

Our text concludes with a beautiful and compelling statement regarding the way Christians should think about their relationship with God. If God is full of love and mercy, then how do we think about relating to God?

First, these verses tell us that the foundation of our salvation is grace through faith. Human beings are saved by placing their hope in the promise of God's love and mercy through the work of Jesus on their behalf. Grace is amazing because it is the conduit of God's love and mercy.

Second, this text makes it very clear that our works do not create God's love and mercy. On the contrary, it is our actions that are the problem. Our only hope is looking away from our attempts to justify ourselves. God's love does not come to us because of what we do or because of what we don't do. God's mercy is not applied to your account because you are good enough.

The only reason God applies mercy to your life is because of the work of Jesus on your behalf, so the more we understand the love and mercy of God, the greater our love for Jesus should be.

Third, this passage obliterates boasting. If the love and mercy of God have come to you because of Jesus, and if that love and mercy have been applied to your account despite what you have done, then it ends our boasting. If that love and mercy has cleansed you from all your sins, it makes you enthralled with Jesus, not yourself.

Paul asks the Corinthian Church, "What do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Cor. 4:7). And the answer is, of course, nothing! Everything we are, everything we hope for our future, and every ounce of sustaining help we have right now is owing to God's love and mercy.

God's love and mercy make us humble.

And Hungry for More . . .

The beautiful and incredible thing about God's love and mercy is that these attributes not only serve as the foundation of Christianity, but we are invited to continually live them throughout the rest of our lives.

- Hebrews 4:16 tells us to draw near with confidence to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.
- Jude 1:21 tells us to keep praying so that we keep ourselves in the love of God as we wait for mercy.

- In Galatians 2:20 Paul anchors his life to gospel saying, “I am crucified with Christ . . . and the life I live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who love me and gave himself for me.”
- In Luke 18 we see we can be like the blind man on the road who cries out to Jesus “Have mercy on me!”

Where do you need to assured of God’s love today? In what areas of your life do you need more mercy? How should you anchor your heart to God’s mercy and love? What do you need to say to God today about the lavish display of love and mercy He has poured out on you?

The love and mercy of God changed everything!

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved . . . (Eph. 2:4-5).

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