

## THE MYSTERY OF GOD, PART 15

Well I'm thinking about the cross this morning, and I know that doesn't surprise you because you know that I am committed to preaching Christ and Him crucified. I'm thinking about the cross and I am wondering what does the cross say to us? What does it tell us? What does it tell us about God? I want you to open your Bibles, if you will to the book of **Ephesians** (it's a great book and it will do you some good to read it often). Open to the **2<sup>nd</sup> chapter**, and let's read this—verses 1-7—as if Paul was thinking about us when he wrote it, okay?

*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.***

What does the cross of Christ tell us? I suppose it tells us many things; probably more than most of us have ever given it any thought. I have tried to emphasize one thing over the past several weeks, and that is for sure the cross tells us that God takes sin—every sin—seriously. It's important that we understand that so that we do not take sin too lightly. But we need to understand, as Paul makes clear here, that the cross also shows us the love of God. If you read the Bible with any understanding at all, you know that's true. The Scriptures make that point so often and so clearly that I'm afraid that we almost take it for granted. We hear it loud and clear for example, in what may be the most familiar verse in the Bible—**John 3:16**. *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*

Paul tells us that as well. In **Romans 5:8**, he says: *“God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*

The apostle John, who is sometimes spoken of as the *apostle of love* because he wrote more about love than any of the other New Testament writer, wrote these words for us to consider in **1 John 4:9-10**. He said: *“In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. 10) In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”*

These verses and others like them make us feel good. We like to hear those words, that *God loves us*. However, there's a danger when we hear or read verses like that. There's a danger that our only reaction will be, “Of course, I know that, so what's new! Move on, there's nothing to see here!” We like to hear these words, but on the other hand I suspect we are a little

suspicious of them. We wonder why He loves us. We wonder how He can love us, what with all of our warts and wrinkles, sins and bad habits, evil desires, and hearts that too often are either not paying attention, or not very loving themselves. It's like we hear someone say to us, "God loves you," and we are waiting for the "but..." "God loves you, but..." and then you can imagine in your case what the but is.

It isn't that we don't know, or even that we don't believe that God is love. We know that! John told us that also, didn't he? There in **1 John 4:8**, John says: *"Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love."* We know God is love; that's one of His qualities. God doesn't just love us, the Bible says He is love! That makes Him different from us, doesn't it? We might love others, but we are not love. But God, He is different! He doesn't just act in loving ways, the very essence of His nature is that He is love.

Over in **chapter 1, verse 5**, John tells us that *"God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all."* We only know light because of the existence of darkness, but the essence of God's very nature is light. When in the beginning God said, *"Let there be light!"* He was simply causing a physical and temporal expression of what He is Himself.

There are a number of things the scriptures stipulate about God. **Hebrews 12:29** tells us *"Our God is a consuming fire."* **Leviticus 11:44**, and numerous other scriptures—1 Peter 1:15—tell us that *"God is holy."* Isaiah had that vision where he saw the seraphim, numerous angels, each having six wings, flying about the throne of God, and as they flew, they called out to one another—as if no other fact could be uttered except the one that commanded their attention at that moment—*"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."*

I'm going to change the subject for a few minutes. I will come back to the love of God, but it's important that we think about this "holy God" who loves us. That's what gives us a problem isn't it? He loves us. We know that, and we believe that, but we also know that He is holy, and so we think to ourselves, *"God loves me, but...!" "He loves me, but what about my sins? But what about all of my shortcomings? But what about all of those thoughts I have that I shouldn't have, and all of those things that come out of my mouth that I wish they hadn't; and what about all of those things I do that I know I shouldn't, or all of those things I don't do that I wish I had?"*

That's it, isn't it? That's the rub for us. God may be love, but He is also holy, and it's His holiness that scares us. Why is that, do you suppose? Well, you say, "we are not very holy." That may be true, but we are not very loving either, much of the time, are we? Why is it that the holiness of God bothers us so much? Do you suppose it is because in our minds the word holy, or the idea of His holiness is associated with ethical and moral purity. Didn't we just read, "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all"? And we know of course, that one day we are going to stand before this holy God and we are going to give an answer for everything we have done in this body, whether it is good or evil. We know that, don't we, because God is holy!

But what if the holiness of God means more than just that God is morally and spiritually pure? What if the holiness of God refers to how different, or unique God is in His being? Is He morally and ethically pure? Absolutely! But that doesn't exhaust what the holiness of God means. The word holy, or holiness, just as it is with the word sanctify, refers to separation. God is high and lifted up. He is above the heavens and the earth. He is distinct from all of creation. He is above all of creation.

- God isn't holy just because He is good. He is good, but His goodness is part of His nature that is unlike anyone or anything else.
- God isn't holy just because He is just. He is just, but His justice is part of His nature that is unlike anyone or anything else.

When you speak about the holiness of God, you are speaking about the transcendence of God; of His being above everything that exists, of His being different from everything that exists. It speaks about His absolute uniqueness. The Bible speaks about the "glory of God." What is that? The glory of God is His infinite nature beheld by eyes and minds that are completely finite!

Now I made that little excursion because I wanted you to understand that God's love is not something different from God's holiness. It is part of His holiness. His goodness and His loveliness are not opposites. They are part of the same thing, the holiness of God. We can't talk about the love of God; we have to talk about the holy love of God. Which means what? It means it is a love that is infinitely passionate about the objects of that love. What if God's holiness is just another way of talking about God's love, and what if all His burning hatred toward sin is just another way understanding His holiness that has at its heart redemption for His beloved?

We are the ones who have made a distinction between God's holiness and His love. We are the ones who pit them against each other, so that at times we make God out to be nothing more than a kindly old grandfather who dotes on his loved ones and gives them whatever they want, including an infinite number of times of forgiveness. At other times, we make Him out to be this cold, rigid judge whose only concern is whether or not His Word has been obeyed at all times. Both of those views of God miss the mark by a million light years!

Is God good and kind? Yes. Is God gracious and giving? Yes. Is God patient and longsuffering? Yes. He is all of those things, but He is not dumb and blind! He knows you and me! He created us, and He understands us, and He has told us that above all things, our hearts are deceitful! He has told us that we all sin and fall short of His glory. But He has also told us that He loves us and because He does, He can't stand idly by and do nothing while we busily go about destroying ourselves and everyone around us; He had to do something. Of course He knew all of this when the notion came to express Himself in a way that would result in a whole host of beings other than Himself being blessed. Sin gets in the way of a relationship that has been forming since before the creation, and He wanted to do something about that. He wanted badly to do something about that!

But do you understand that God wasn't thinking about just His holiness? He hasn't been brooding ever since the beginning over His bruised ego. He certainly hasn't been only thinking about how He is going to get even one day, how He will extract His vengeance on a rebellious creation—both human and angelic. There is going to be that, I'm not denying that. The Bible says vengeance belongs to Him. Romans 2:4 clearly says there are some for whom God's wrath is being stored up for the day of wrath when His righteous judgment will be revealed. I know that, but if you believe anything that the Bible says, believe what Paul wrote there in **Ephesians 2, verse 4**: "***But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us.***"

Do you get the feeling from that passage that God has been sitting around nursing a grudge since the beginning of time? No that isn't the feeling we get at all. He hasn't been doing that; He's been too busy for that!

"What's He been doing?" we ask. That's a good question, isn't it? What has He been doing since the beginning?

Look at **John 5:17**. Jesus said, "*My Father is working until now, and I am working.*" They weren't working against each other, so they both had to be working together, and what was it that the Son came to do? Luke 19:10 tells us that He came to punish those miserable sinners to the utmost! Is that what it says? No, that isn't what it says. It says He came to seek and save the lost. Do you understand that? That's what the Father and the Son have been working on since the beginning. They've been working on restoring our relationship with them.

Somebody had to! For sure we weren't doing it! Have you ever thought about the fact that in this whole thing, God is the One who has done all of the running? And why has He done that, because He is holy? Yes it is because He is holy, holy love. God is love, a love so pure and righteous and so infinitely passionate that He hasn't quit working up to this very minute to redeem us from our sins.

I love the **15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke's Gospel**. You know, of course, that it consists of three parables. There is the parable of the lost sheep, and the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the lost son. But do you remember how Luke sets that up for us? Look at **verses 1 & 2**:

*Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. 2) And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them.*

I think about the words of **1 John 3:1**, where John writes (I'm reading from the NIV): "*See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!*" How can we say, "*Move on, there's nothing to see here!*"

How can we say that when in all three parables, there is a search going on for that which had been lost? The shepherd goes looking for the lost sheep. The woman lights a lamp and grabs

her broom and sweeps the house in search of the lost coin. And the Father didn't just happen to be out there on the hillside overlooking the road coming from the direction in which his son had gone. You get the impression that had become a part of his daily routine. That's what the cross shows us. A love so true and burning that it will go anywhere, do anything to bring the loved one back. And what else do you see in each of those stories? There's great rejoicing going on, isn't there?

- After finding the sheep that had gotten lost, **verses 6 & 7** says:

*"And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' 7) Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."*

- After finding the lost coin, **verses 9 & 10** says:

*"And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' 10) Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

- And after waiting and waiting, and watching forever it seemed, when the Father sees it is his son coming up that road, what does He do? Read it with me, will you? You don't want to miss this, look at **verse 20** (Luke 15)...

*"And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him."*

- Where was he when the father saw him? *"He was still a long way off,"* Jesus said. And what did the father do? He *"felt compassion,"* Jesus said, *"and ran and embraced him and kissed him."* And then what did he do? He threw a party for him! **Verses 23 & 24**, he said:

*"...let us eat and celebrate. 24) For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate."*

Don't tell me, "there's nothing to see here!" If your heart isn't crying in all of this, then get on your knees and beg God to be merciful to you a sinner because you have become that older brother whose heart has grown hard after years of taking the Father's love for granted.

This is what we were meant to see when we look at the cross. John was right when he said—**1 John 3:16** (this is the other John 3:16 we need to hear and know and fill our hearts): *"By this we know love, that Christ laid down his life for us."*

So what do we do when we see the cross, and when we see God's love like this? Well, I hope that we are humbled by it, as John says, "*Behold what manner of love has been bestowed on us, that we should be called the sons and daughters of God.*" I hope that we are convicted by it, not just that it was for our sins that Christ went to the cross. He wasn't trying to condemn us, to make us feel guiltier. He was trying to draw us to Him. And I hope that we are convinced by it. So convinced of the fact that someone loves us—and not just someone, but the very One who created the heavens and earth! We are convinced that He loves us and that His love is so infinitely holy and passionately true that it is irresistible. So, if we have not already made that decision to commit our lives to Him, we will today, and if we have not been faithful to that commitment that we will recommit to Him today. I think that's what He's hoping you will do right now, as we stand and sing!