

Title: God is Love ... but that's not all

In the beginning of John MacArthur's book (Our Awesome God, p. 7), he gives the illustration of ... *an old fable about six men blind from birth who lived in India. One day they decided to visit a nearby palace. When they arrived, there was an elephant standing in the courtyard. The first blind man touched the side of the elephant and said, "An elephant is like a wall." The second blind man touched the trunk and said, "An elephant is like a snake." The third blind man touched the tusk and said, "An elephant is like a spear." The fourth blind man touched the leg and said, "An elephant is like a tree." The fifth blind man touched the ear and said, "An elephant is like a fan." The sixth blind man touched the tail and said, "An elephant is like a rope." Because each blind man touched only one part of the elephant, none of them could agree on what an elephant is really like.*

Bringing that analogy into the spiritual realm, many people have misconceptions about what God is really like [and if we only touch or know a part of God, like just his love but not all his attributes, we will have a wrong picture of who He really is]. Believing the wrong thing about God is a serious matter because it is idolatry ... idolatry is more than bowing down to a small figure or worshiping in a pagan temple. According to the Bible, it is thinking anything about God that isn't true or attempting to transform Him into something He isn't.

God Himself pointed out the fallacy of idolatry, saying of man, "You thought that I was just like you" (Ps. 50:21). We must be careful not to think of God in our terms or entertain thoughts that are unworthy of Him. It is perilously easy to do both.

Today I want to draw our attention to perhaps the most famous attribute of all, God's love, but I want to come at it from a little different angle and perspective than you might expect. Virtually every nonbeliever knows something about God's love, but just because it is so well known, doesn't mean it is correctly understood. In fact, I could argue that this attribute of God is one of the most misunderstood and misused of all.

Ex: I John 4:8 "God is love"

I would venture to say it's hard if not impossible to find any person in America who has never heard that God is love.

“There are many ways to *misunderstand* John’s meaning. In fact, 1 John 4:8 seems a particular favorite of cultists. All kinds of false sects from Christian Science to the Children of God have misapplied this verse to support wildly heretical notions—the former using it to portray “God as divine Principle, Love, rather than personality”; and the latter using it to justify sexual promiscuity.² [MacArthur, *God Who Loves*, 27]

A more common misuse of this verse is that people say because God is love, I don’t believe in the existence of hell. But the same Bible that tells us God is love, also tells us God is holy and hates sin. His love has a limit, and those who reject His love and salvation in Christ will have their sins judged for all eternity by the Righteous Judge, no matter what we think. Hell is not a comfortable subject, it’s not recommended by church growth experts to teach what I’m going to teach today. But we can’t worry about being politically correct – we must be biblically true.

God’s wrath is not believe by all, and even His love has also been used by critics of the Bible for every possible potshot at Christians and every challenging of God’s love, whether 9/11 or the tsunami or Hurricane Katrina or tragedy in general.

Over 20 years ago, Harold Kushner wrote a famous book “When Bad Things Happen to Good People” which basically wrestled with the question is God really loving or is He really sovereign. He argued that God could not really be both at the same time (ignoring rest of Scriptures), and since God’s love is unquestionable, he argued that therefore God cannot be truly sovereign, God is not in control, but He does love all unconditionally and wishes He could do more to help.

The fatal error is taking one part of one verse “God is love” and ignoring the rest of the Bible. The serious error is concluding love is God’s only attribute or the only thing He’s capable of, and that He can’t do anything different than how we define love.

² The Children of God sect, otherwise known as the Family of Love, have been known to practice an evangelistic technique they call “love bombing,” where cult members offer potential recruits sex “to show them the love of God.” [Maurice C. Burrell, *The Challenge of the Cults* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 44–45.]

This is not just a problem that people in the world can fall into, even the best of Christians, if they don't think carefully and biblically, can make unbiblical statements and conclusions by an imbalanced overemphasis on God's love, while overlooking other biblical statements about God's character.

One of the most moving sermons I ever heard was from a powerful preacher in Texas who spoke at TMC and has spoken from GCC pulpit, signed my Bible, etc. He later wrote a book saying that people out there who don't believe in Jesus or even know who He is, will be saved, because they get "trans-dispensationalized"
The idea seems to be that because God is love, there must be other ways to get to heaven.

Newsweek Cover Story, 8-14-2006 about world famous evangelist: 'A unifying theme of [his] new thinking is humility. He is sure and certain of his faith in Jesus as the way to salvation. When asked whether he believes heaven will be closed to good Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus or secular people, though, [he] says: "Those are decisions only the Lord will make. It would be foolish for me to speculate on who will be there and who won't ... I don't want to speculate about all that. I believe the love of God is absolute. He said he gave his son for the whole world, and I think he loves everybody regardless of what label they have.'

Of course it's not a *label* that gets you to heaven, but it is the *Lord!* It's not about what *religion* you grew up with, but it is about whether you have a *relationship* with Jesus or not as the Lord of your life, are you trusting in Him and Him alone. It's not about us *speculating* about who will be in heaven, it's about the *Scriptures* and what God has said:

Jn 14:6 "*I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father but through me*"

Acts 4:12 "*There is salvation in no one else, there is no other name given under heaven by which men must be saved*"

1 Tim 2:5 "*There is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus*"

Today I am going to talk about what it means that God is love, but that's not where I want to start. The next verse we're going to look at is not John 3:16 it's Psalm 7.

We need to spend some time on the wrath and holiness of God to get a right perspective on God's love. Like a diamond that may not be as impressive by itself, we need to see the black velvet backdrop and put it in the light of God's Word in order to see the multifaceted brilliance and beauty of God's love.

READ PSALM 7:11-15

Steve Lawson writes: "Only after we see the depths of His righteous wrath can we appreciate the heights of His unmerited love. If, however, we were to rearrange the sequence of thought and speak first of God's love, with no understanding of His holiness, we would minimize His love and not treasure it as we should . . . Whenever we elevate God's love to a preeminent place in our thinking without first considering His holiness, sovereignty, and wrath, we distort the true picture of God. We reduce His love to syrupy, sentimental mush and turn Him into a user-friendly god who pats us on the head instead of delivering us from condemnation." (*Made in our Image*, 125).

OTHER KEY TEXTS ON GOD'S WRATH:

Deut. 32:35, also v.39-43

Rev. 19:11-16

* In beginning, middle, and end of Bible, and every genre (epistles, prophets, etc.)

Heb. 10:26-31 – wrath is prominent in NT, not just OT (no wrath vs. love dichotomy)

Dr. Ray Pritchard has written some helpful remarks on this subject (taken from calvarymemorial.com). "The fact is that the subject of divine wrath has become taboo in modern society, and Christians by and large have accepted the taboo and conditioned themselves never to raise the matter" (quoting Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 149). True though these words may be, two facts stare us in the face:

The Bible says more about wrath than about love.

Jesus spoke more about hell than about heaven.

We may speculate as to the reasons behind those two facts, but no amount of reasoning can change the truth. The Bible is filled with warnings about God's wrath and about eternal judgment. I would not be a faithful pastor if I did not deal with this topic. God has made no secret of his wrath, and neither should we.

The Meaning of God's Wrath

Let's begin with a simple definition of wrath as one of God's attributes. It's important to get a proper definition because when we use the word wrath we tend to think of uncontrolled anger. While that may be human wrath, it is far from the truth about God's wrath. Here's a working definition: God's wrath is his settled hostility toward sin in all its various manifestations. To say it is "settled" hostility means that God's holiness cannot and will not coexist with sin in any form whatsoever. God's wrath is his holy hatred of all that is unholy. It is his righteous indignation at everything that is unrighteous.

Please note these distinctions. God's wrath is not ...
 Uncontrollable rage.
 Vindictive bitterness.
 God losing his temper.

In fact, the Bible says in more than one place that God is "slow to anger" (Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 103:8). God never "loses his temper" the way we do. Wrath is God's "natural" response to sin in the universe. He cannot overlook it, he cannot wink at it, he cannot pretend it is not there.

Wrath is what happens when holiness meets sin!
 Wrath is what happens when justice meets rebellion!
 Wrath is what happens when righteousness meets unrighteousness!
 Wrath is what happens when perfect good meets pure evil!
 As long as God is God, he cannot overlook sin.
 As long as God is God, he cannot stand by indifferently while his creation is destroyed.
 As long as God is God, he cannot dismiss lightly those who trample his holy will.
 As long as God is God, he cannot wink when men mock his name.

TURN TO Nahum 1

Some of the most common objections to the Christian faith begin with ...

“But how can a God of love ...?”

To borrow a phrase from R.C. Sproul, today we have the character of God in the hands of angry sinners.

Things have come a long ways from Edwards' sermon which rightly emphasized we are *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. It was over 265 years ago this most famous sermon in American history was delivered. His text was what we read earlier from Deuteronomy 32, “their foot shall slide in due time”

“ ... it is not because God is unmindful of their wickedness, and does not resent it, that he does not let loose his hand and cut them off ... The wrath of God bums against them, their damnation does not slumber; the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is now hot, ready to receive them; the flames do now rage and glow. The glittering sword is whet, and held over them, and the pit hath opened its mouth under them ...

The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure [will] of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood. Thus all you that never passed under a great change of heart, by the mighty power of the Spirit of God upon your souls; all you that were never born again, and made new creatures ... are in the hands of an angry God. However you may have reformed your life in many things, and may have had religious affections, and may keep up a form of religion in your families and closets, and in the house of God, it is nothing but his mere pleasure that keeps you from being this moment swallowed up in everlasting destruction ...”

When you understand the weight of Almighty God’s fury and how offensive sin is to him, the question we should be asking is not “how could a God of love let ...” but “if God is this wrathful and furious at sin, how can He be so gracious and patient everyday?” Not “how could He let so-and-so die” but “why does He let any of us sinners live?”

THE ANSWER IS THE LOVE OF GOD -> turn corner here
Notice that in Nahum 1, these statements of God’s wrath, jealousy, vengeance, anger, and justice are also intermingled with His:

- patience (v. 3a)
- goodness (v. 7a)
- and the good news (v. 15)

It is good to study God’s wrath and love together

Read Exodus 20:4-6 – much debate and literature about “third to fourth generation ...” but don’t miss the point and contrast and point of v. 6!!

God is by nature and essence a Savior, gracious, merciful – God is love

** Exodus 33:18-23 and 34:6-7 -> never divorce His love from His justice and wrath

Paul tells us to “behold the kindness *and* severity of the Lord” ... so I feel it’s not only ok but important that we look at both these attributes in one message.

Even the classic text in the Bible of God’s love for humanity (John 3:16) also says this in the same chapter:

"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him." (John 3:36, ESV)

It’s important that we not only remember God’s love but also His holy hatred of rebellion and sin. The Christian life is not just about faith, there is also a fear of God. There is joy, but there is also trembling – they should go together.

*Read Psalm 2:11-12:

"Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him." (Psalm 2:11-12, ESV)

If God is love, does He hate sin or sinners?

"For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you. The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers." (Psalm 5:4-5, ESV)

"The Lord tests the righteous, but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence." (Psalm 11:5, ESV)

"And you shall not walk in the customs of the nation that I am driving out before you, for they did all these things, and therefore I detested them." (Leviticus 20:23, ESV)

"Every evil of theirs is in Gilgal; there I began to hate them. Because of the wickedness of their deeds I will drive them out of my house. I will love them no more; all their princes are rebels." (Hosea 9:15, ESV)

"Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated" (Rom. 9:13, Mal. 1)

I do believe God loves the world as John 3 says, but there is also another sense in that chapter that God's wrath abides or remains on those who do not obey Him and believe in Jesus as Lord. God has a holy hatred for sin and wrath towards unbelievers, but it is not devoid of love or compassion – God's patience and longsuffering towards rebellious sinners is all over the Bible, He is again and again "slow to anger ..."

God's general love for even His enemies is seen in Matt. 5:45 in context. TURN HERE

LOVE OF GOD FOR HIS OWN

1. Special love – like spouse (Eph. 5:25) or parent-to-child (Eph. 1:4-5 "*in love He predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ*")
2. Saving love – Rom. 5:5-9
3. Sovereign love – I John 4:19
4. Secure love – Rom. 8:31-39

How does the Bible apply these truths?

"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love." (1 John 4:7-8)

For unbelievers:

John the Baptist warned the insincere Pharisees in Matthew 3 about "*flee[ing] from the wrath to come.*" How do we flee the coming wrath? The next verse (3:8) says: "*Bear fruit in keeping with repentance ... Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." "* (Matthew 3:7-12, ESV)

It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of a living God

For unbelievers we know:

"Knowing therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men" (2 Cor. 5:11)

For believers:

"Behold what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are ...

"By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him;" (1 John 3:16-19, ESV)