

## God's Rich Mercy and Great Love (Pt 2)

*An Exposition of Ephesians*

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**Bible Text:** Ephesians 2:4  
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Before I begin, I'm sure that there are a number of you who have heard either through the church prayer chain or church members, or even through not that avenue, the Record Courier, that we're more reliable than the Courier, by the way, that our dear brother, our fellow elder and pastor, Dave Gamble, did have some very serious heart trouble this week. Dave is doing very well. We thank God for the way in which he worked and there is no damage done to Dave's heart. He did have four stents put in in an angioplasty procedure and we will continue to uphold him and Diane, and we should give much praise to God for his goodness to us, and I'm sure that on behalf of Dave and Diane, we thank everyone for their prayers and we ask that it would continue. I did feel that it was a tad bit risky for him last night to watch the Giants and Angels again and, sure that he suffered some various heart palpitations and is grieving even now.

We are in Ephesians 2:1 to 10 and we've been here for a little bit of time. In verses 1 to 3, we saw our dreadful condition. As I was writing out my notes, I thought I would put man's dreadful condition, it's not just man's dreadful condition generically speaking, it's our dreadful condition," dead in trespasses and sins, walking according to the spirit of this age, according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now works in the sons of disobedience, doing the desires and the will of the flesh and indulging, desiring, the lust of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath even as the rest." My friends, there is no more dreadful picture in all of holy Scripture. Psalm 53 quoted by Paul in Romans 10, Romans 3, probably comes closest to painting the most dreadful picture of the condition of our own hearts anywhere in all of holy Scripture, but certainly Ephesians 2:1 to 3 leaves no stone unturned in how bad off we really are.

As we looked at those first three verses in detail trying to draw out as much as we possibly could under God, then we got to verse 4 and saw the greatest antithesis of all, "But God." As we consider those two precious words, "But God," we have to look at them in terms of the incredible contrast, the antithesis with chapter 2, verses 1 to 3. "You were dead in trespasses and sins, but God. You walked according to the course of this world, but God. You lived according to the prince of the power of the air, but God. You were children of wrath even as the rest, but God." Two of the most precious single syllable words you will ever ever hear.

Then we looked at this little expression, "But God, being rich in mercy." We looked at this term "mercy," the Old Testament background to the term "chesed" and "racham," lovingkindness and compassion, and we saw that in the Old Testament the concept of God's mercy was his covenant love and his covenant compassion upon his people. Then we looked at the New Testament use of this term "mercy" and we saw from Romans 9:15 and 16 that this mercy is absolutely sovereign. Listen once again, "it does not depend," Paul says, "upon the man who runs or the man who wills but on God who shows mercy."

Then we drew some conclusions. God's mercy is a manifestation of his goodness, we saw that from a number of Old Testament texts. Then we saw expressions of God's love and compassion are always unmerited. When God shows this mercy, when God expresses his love and compassion and mercy, it is always unmerited. Merit and mercy are mutually exclusive terms and realities. You cannot merit mercy. The corollary to that is that expressions of God's love and compassion are also unexpected. As you read Ephesians 2:1 to 3 and you conclude with that foreboding statement, "and we were children of wrath even as the rest," you would expect to see, "and God brought forth hell from heaven." You would expect to see, "God poured forth his wrath." But no. Mercy is always unexpected. We were dead in trespasses and sins but God being rich in justice. Mercy. Mercy. Always unexpected.

Then we looked at this expression "rich." I would like to see "rich or riches of wealth" as an actual attribute of God reflecting the idea of limitlessness, inexhaustibility and it's equivalent to the idea of abounding, overflowing lovingkindness. God's mercy, his chesed, is overflowing, it's boundless, it's limitless. We sang it this morning in terms of our grace, grace that is greater than all our sin. What that means is that no sinner is beyond the reach of God's mercy, no sinner is beyond the realm in which God can reach out with covenant love and bring a lost and dying sinner unto himself, and here's the good news of the gospel: God himself delights to show mercy.

Now we're still looking at God. That's what we're going to be doing throughout all of the endless ages, so let's not get tired of it here. We are looking at God. We are looking at who God is and what he is like, examining, exploring this infinitely majestic subject matter, God. God who is rich in mercy. God who has loved us with great love. We saw rich in mercy, today we're going to look at this little expression that he loved us with his great love. The text reads, "because of His great love with which He loved us."

Now as we come to this expression or this phrase in verse 4, I need to point out to you that we have two words that are related, one is the noun and one is the verb of the same word, that we often hear much about. The text reads "because of His great agape with which He agapao-ed us." Agape and agapao, and those are two great and glorious words that describe for us the love of God.

Now as I approached this subject of the love of God, I thought that it might be very helpful for us to look at the fact that the love of God is so grossly misunderstood today. Don Carson in his very excellent little book, "The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God,"

isn't that interesting, the difficult doctrine of the love of God? We might expect, as Carson says in the intro, the difficult doctrine of predestination, or the difficult doctrine of sovereignty, but no, it's the difficult doctrine of the love of God. Carson says nowadays if you tell people that God loves them, they are unlikely to be surprised. "Of course, God loves me. He's like that, isn't He? Besides, why shouldn't He love me? I'm kind of cute, or at least, at least as nice as the person next door. I'm okay, you're okay, and God loves you and God loves me." My friends, sadly to say, that is about the extent of most people's understanding of the love of God.

There are a number of common misunderstandings. Let me just give you a few of them. These are just the ones that came to my mind without any help from anybody else. Common understandings of the love of God. 1. God loves people more than anything. Wrong. You should know this by now, what does God love more than anything? Himself, his own glory. God loves people more than anything. 2. God loves all people the same, in the same way and to the same degree. 3. This is really very common: God's love is always unconditional. Then, of course, with little help from the Beatles, what the world needs now is love, sweet love.

Well, those make some of the common understandings, or shall we say misunderstandings of the love of God. Most people's concept of the love of God makes God's love – listen to my words – indiscriminate because, of course, God would never discriminate because everybody knows discrimination is against federal law. Most people's concept of God's love is that it's indiscriminate, sentimental, it's just gushy, sloppy agape. And although they'd never say it, you have to add this, ineffectual. Ineffectual. He loves you just enough to leave you as you are. And of course, all of this, indiscriminate, sentimental, ineffectual love makes us all feel so warm and fuzzy.

Here's the great question that I want to ask you today. Is this the kind of love that the Bible speaks about, and more particularly, is it the kind of love that Paul is talking about in Ephesians 2:4 when he says "and with His great love with which He loved us"? Just think about it in your own head. Don't answer out loud, please. Is the love of God conditional or unconditional? Is it universal or is it particular? Is it discriminate or is it indiscriminate? Now as I put those questions out in front of you, what I want you to do is I want you to listen to these texts that I'm going to read to you with those questions in mind. I am trying, I'll tell you what I'm doing right from the top, I'm trying to create a problem in your head to show to you that the doctrine of the love of God is not as simple as most people think it is.

All right, remember the questions: conditional/unconditional, universal/particular, discriminate/indiscriminate. Listen to these texts. Everybody's favorite, "God is love. In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us. We love because He first loved us. The Lord did not set His love on you or choose you because you were more in number than any other people's, for you were the fewest, but because the Lord loved you." That's a fascinating statement, isn't it? The Lord loved you because the Lord loved you. Jesus with the rich young ruler, listen to this passage. "Looking at him, Jesus felt love for him and said to him, 'One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to

the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.' For God loved the world in this way, that He gave His only begotten Son so that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. God demonstrates His own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." The psalmist says, "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, great in lovingkindness. The Lord is good to all and His mercies are over all of His works."

As we listen to those texts and we think to ourselves conditional/unconditional, universal/particular, discriminate/indiscriminate, we hear these things, "We love because God first loved us. God loved the world in this way." But listen to these texts. Listen to these texts. Oh, I'm sorry, kids, in the kids' notes I said write down the passages that Pastor Brian reads and I didn't tell you where any of those were, did I? I'll do better on this round.

John 14:21, "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me," now listen, "and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him." Now I don't know about you but that sounds a lot different to me than Romans 5:8. How about this one? Jesus says in John 14:23, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him." What about this? John 15:10, "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love." Did you hear that? If you keep his commandments, you will do, what? You will abide in his love. That sounds much different than we love because he first loved us. Or what about this? Jude 1:20 and 21, "But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God." Well, how does that relate to John 3:16? Psalm 86:5, "For thou, Lord, art good and ready to forgive, abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon thee." Psalm 103, "Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion," covenant love, "on those who fear Him."

Now as you have listened to those texts, I hope that you see that we have a little problem. Some of those texts sound very unconditional, and other of those texts are undeniably conditional. Some of those texts sound very particular and others of those texts sound completely universal. So what do we do? Well, someone is sitting there thinking, "Don't you know anything about agape love? That's the answer. Obviously those first sets of texts you read about God loving us unconditionally, those things that sounded like that, that must be agape love. I bet that's where agape was used and then those other texts that sounded rather conditional and depressing, God must use a different word there because, of course, you know that agape love," the argument goes, "is the God kind of love that, of course, is void of feeling and is always unconditional. Obviously that first set of texts is agape love, the God kind of love, God's benevolent disinterest to do me good."

Well, I will tell you, words are funny things. Words are funny things. Just out of curiosity, how many have you ever heard that idea that agape is God kind of love, unconditional, so forth? I mean, you haven't heard it here but, I mean, how many of you have heard it in other places? Okay, quite a number of you. Let me throw another wrench into the machinery here. Do you mean the kind of agape love that's used in 2 Samuel 13

where it says that Amnon loved Tamar? The word's agape. Of course, you remember the end result, don't you? Amnon raped his half-sister. And then the text amazingly tells us "and the hatred with which Amnon hated Tamar was greater than the love with which he loved her," agape. Or maybe you're thinking about the kind of agape love that's used in 2 Timothy 4:10, "and Demas, having loved," agape, "this present world." That doesn't fit either, does it? Or how about this, "Do not agape." Hm, do not agape. I thought we should always agape. "Do not agape this world nor the things in this world, for whoever agape's this world, the agape of the Father is not in him."

Well, let me put the issue a little differently. We can't settle it just on the word "agape" at all. Let me just put it a little differently. Let me ask you a few questions. Did Jesus, for instance, love Peter in exactly the same way that he loved Judas? You'd better certainly hope not. Let me ask it another way. Did God love the Canaanites as much as he loved the Israelites? All right, let me ask it a different way. Did God love Esau in the same way that he loved Jacob? The Bible tells us, Romans 9:13, "Jacob I have loved, Esau I didn't care for." No, no, no, "Jacob I loved, Esau," my friends, look at it in your own Bibles, "Esau I hated." Now some of you are sitting there thinking, "Man, you sure know how to take all the warm fuzzies out of my bumper sticker theology. What are you trying to do to me?" Beloved, let me just tell you what we're trying to do, we're trying to get ourselves to think biblically about the great and glorious truth about God's love.

You know, the old writers had it right. They took seriously the whole variety and spectrum of passages that spoke so differently about the love of God and, in fact, most of the older theologians saw a threefold distinction in the love of God, or as Francis Turretin put it, three degrees of the same love. I'm going to give you those categories. I want you to think about these. Many of the old writers said there's a threefold distinction or three degrees of God's love. First, there is what is called the love of benevolence. You know what benevolence is, it's the desire to do good to somebody. That's benevolence. And many of the writers said that God's love, first of all, is a love of benevolence where God wills the good of creatures from all eternity. The second, the love of beneficence. If benevolence is the desire to do good, beneficence is actually doing the good. So the writers would tell us that there was a love of God that was a beneficent love and that was where God actually does good in time and space to his creatures according to his own will. Then the third one is the love of complacency. Now if you know the word "complacency," by and large that has negative connotations today. If you say that a person is complacent, what that means is they're self-satisfied and pleased with themselves, but when the old writers talked about a complacent love or a love of complacency, what they meant was this, the love by which God delights himself in the creature on account of the rays of his image seen in them. The love of complacency is God's love that flows from him being pleased with the creature, right? Francis Turretin summarized it and he said this, "By the love of benevolence, He loved us before we were. By the love of beneficence, He loves us as we are. And by the love of complacency, He loves us when we are. By the first, He elects us. By the second, He redeems and sanctifies us. And by the third, He gratuitously rewards us as holy and obedient." My friends, if you think of those three categories and then look up all the passages with the

love of God, there's not one single passage that falls out of sight of any of those three categories.

So here's the question: does God love everybody? Now some of you who are visiting, you think to yourself, "What in the world is this guy talking about? Does God love everybody? Of course God loves everybody." My friends, then answer Romans 9:13. Does God love everybody? J. I. Packer gives us a penetrating statement that I think encapsulates the biblical doctrine. He says this, "God loves all men in some ways, and some men in all ways." Did you get that? God loves all men in some ways, and some men in all ways. Now listen to me carefully, please. Yes, indeed, we can tell a sinner that God loves them and God desires their good for them without in the least compromising the particularity and discriminant nature of God's love in the gospel. We can offer with a good conscience the loving forgiveness of God to sinners in Christ alone to everyone who will repent and believe. Why? Because God does, indeed, love all in some ways, and the fact that his common grace is over all indiscriminately, and the fact that his common grace is over all unconditionally, we can say with full biblical warrant that God does, indeed, love all men in some ways and we can affirm God's desire to save sinners. "Why will you die, O house of Israel? I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, therefore turn and live." That is the word of the living God who loves all of his creatures in such a way that he earnestly and sincerely desires their repentance and their life.

God loves all men in some ways but, my friends, more gloriously he loves some men in all ways. "Just as He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, having predestined us in love." Here is where so many people stumble and they ask themselves, "How can God love one person in all ways and another person only in some ways?" My friends, don't you see how wrongheaded the question is? Don't you see how wrongheaded it is to argue against the clear testimony of Scripture that God loves some in all ways? Well, why is that wrongheaded? Because it is God's prerogative as Almighty God to love whomever he loves. If you don't like the character of God, you take it up with God. My friends, there are people that rail and despise the idea that God does love only some in all ways, but I would remind you that it is his prerogative.

The second reason why that is such a wrongheaded question and objection is because it's not the, the amazing thing is not, is not that he hated Esau, the amazing thing is that he loved Jacob. Don't get hung up over, "Esau I hated." Marvel, "Jacob I have loved." You know about Jacob. You know he was a rascal, heel-catcher, a swindler. I've said many times I'd much rather would have had Esau as my neighbor than Jacob. My friends, the question should not be why doesn't he love all in all ways, the question should be why should he love me at all?

Don Carson has a marvelous illustration for us. He says picture Charles and Susan walking down the beach hand in hand at the end of an academic year. The pressure of the semester has dissipated in the warm evening breeze. They've kicked off their sandals and the wet sand squishes between their toes. Charles turns to Susan, gazes deeply into her large hazel eyes and says, "Susan, I love you. I really do." What does he mean? Well, if we assume even a modicum of decency, let alone Christian virtue, the least he means is

something like this, "Susan, you mean everything to me. I can't live without you. Your smile poleaxes me," like get hit in the head with a poleaxe, one of those medieval weapons, "at 50 yards. Your sparkling good humor, your beautiful eyes, the scent of your hair, everything about you transfixes me. I love you." What he most certainly does not mean is something like this, "Susan, quite frankly, you have such a bad case of halitosis," by the way, kids, that means bad breath, "you have such a bad case of halitosis, it would embarrass a herd of unwashed, garlic-eating elephants. Your nose is so bulbous, you belong in the cartoons. Your hair is so greasy, you could lubricate an 18 wheeler. Your knees are so disjointed, you'd make a camel look elegant. Your personality makes Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan look like wimps, but I love you."

Carson goes on. So now God comes to us and says, "I love you." What does he mean? Does he mean something like this, Carson says, "You mean everything to me. I can't live without you. Your personality, your witty conversation, your beauty, your smile, everything about you transfixes me. In fact, heaven would be boring without you, therefore I love you." That, after all, is pretty close to what some therapeutic approaches to the love of God spells out. We must be pretty wonderful because God loves us and dear old God is pretty vulnerable finding himself in a dreadful state unless we say yes. When he says he loves us, does not God rather mean something like this, "Morally speaking, you are the people of halitosis, the bulbous nose, the greasy hair, the disjointed knees, the abominable personality. Your sins have made you disgustingly ugly but I love you anyway, not because you are attractive but because it is My nature to love." And in the case of the elect, God adds, "I have set My affection on you from before the foundation of the universe, not because you are wiser or better or stronger than others, but because in grace I chose to love you. You are Mine and you will be transformed. Nothing in all creation can separate you from My love mediated through Jesus Christ."

Oh, my friends, does God love you? Better believe he loves. Here is the amazing reality going back to the image of chapter 2, verses 1 to 3, dead in trespasses and sins, walking according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience, living according to the desires of the flesh, doing the lusts of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath even as the rest. But God because of his great love with which he loved us. Great love. That's what the text says. Great love, and of course, parallels rich mercy, limitless love, inexhaustible love, abounding love.

There is something in the text that we need to see. The last line in verse 3 is, "and were by nature children of wrath even as the rest." Children of wrath and then, "the great love with which He loved us." And here's the question: how in the world can this just, holy, perfect and righteous God who has wrath with the wicked every day also love us with great love? That is the most important question in all of God's created universe. If you have not come to wrestle with the fact how can this God, this holy God, this majestic God, this righteous God, this perfectly just God, how in the world can that God do anything to me except judge me, how can that God do anything to me except be angry with me and condemn me forever, how can that God do anything to me other than bring the fierce wrath of the Almighty upon me, how in the world can he do anything else

seeing he's holy and just and perfect and I am not, false and full of sin, I am? Here it is. Do you want to see the wrath of God? Look at the cross. Do you want to see the love of God? Look at the cross. In the cross, the wrath and the love of God come together. "In this is love not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Oh, that is such strange language, love and propitiation. Why? Because propitiation, which is probably not a word you used even this week, propitiation assumes something and what does propitiation assume? Wrath. Wrath.

"Herein is love, not that we loved Him but He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Do you want to see the wrath and the love of God coming together, my friends, look to the old rugged cross. What happens there? Propitiation happens there. What in the world is propitiation? My friends, it's not a very difficult word, it means to appease and turn away wrath. To appease and turn away wrath. And here is the picture: you and I are children of wrath even as the rest, worthy of wrath, worthy of condemnation, deserving of God's full and fierce judgment. That's what we deserve by nature and so here's God who is perfect and just with a whole heaven of wrath filling and billowing as we sin more and more, his wrath, Romans 2:6-8 tells us virtually, compounds daily. And then in a moment of time, the Lord Jesus Christ, the perfect spotless Lamb of God is nailed to an old Roman cross, and in those hours upon which he hung, there was something that took place that absolutely is unfathomable and is absolutely undescrivable. In those hours that he hung there, wrath and love joined together and God himself, as an act of divine substitution, poured out upon his own spotless sinless Son all of the wrath that we deserve so that that wrath would be turned away from us, placed on Jesus so that God himself in free and sovereign love can embrace us without killing us.

Do you want to see the wrath, do you want to see the love? Look at the cross.

"Here is love, vast as the ocean,  
Lovingkindness as a flood.  
When the Prince of Life, our ransom,  
Shed for us His precious blood.  
Who His love will not remember?  
Who can cease to sing His praise?  
He can never be forgotten  
Throughout heaven's eternal days.

On the Mount of Crucifixion,  
Fountains opened deep and wide;  
Through the flood-gates of God's mercy  
Flowed a vast and gracious tide.  
Grace and love like mighty rivers  
Poured incessant from above;  
Heaven's peace and perfect justice  
Kissed a guilty world in love."

Oh beloved, considering our plight, considering our dreadful condition, why would God act? Because he is rich in mercy and has great love for us. Oh to be loved by God. Don't you see the most important thing in your life is to know that you are loved by God, particularly, discriminately, and both unconditionally and conditionally.

Some of you know that a person has written a critical book about the kind of love that I'm describing, in fact, the title of the book asks and could even ask of this particular sermon, what love is this? Well, let me tell you. Every question needs an answer. It is amazing love. It is wondrous love. It is God-glorifying love. It is God-honoring love. It is God-exalting love. It is redeeming love that really redeems. It is a love that really rescues, not leaving it up to me and to my own choice. I in turn, ask what kind of love would it be for God to leave the eternal destiny of fallen, wicked, corrupt, foolish man into his own hands? What love is that? What love is it for God to say, "Okay, perverted, twisted, depraved sinner whose will loves to do evil, I'm going to stand back and here's My love for you, you choose." No, no, no, amazing love, wondrous love reaches down from eternity past and reaches out and grabs us. It is eternal love, immutable love, omnipotent love. It is love that is free, love that is sovereign, love that is gracious. It is love, great love without which we could not be redeemed.

"Amazing love! how can it be  
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?  
Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were present far too small.  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my life, my soul, my all.  
O the deep, deep love of Jesus!  
Vast, unmeasured, boundless, free."

My friends, here is the good news: our only hope for this dreadful condition is the rich mercy and the great love of God.

If you are not a Christian today, and I don't mean, I'm not asking whether you've been baptized, I'm not asking you whether or not you belong to a church or are a member of a church, I'm not asking you if you've jumped through sacramental hoops, I'm not asking you any other question other than this: are you in Christ? For those of you who cannot answer yes, for those of you who do not know God and have not obeyed the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, here's what you need to know today: the God of heaven desires your repentance; more than that, the God of heaven commands your repentance. Paul says God has commanded all men everywhere to repent. What you need to know is that the God of heaven desires you to come into eternal life, and on the sole basis of God's goodness, on the sole basis of his common grace to all, I offer to you the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ wherein sinners of all stripes and all degrees and all ages can find a river of pardon and forgiveness through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. If you are not a Christian today, I compel you, go to the Lord Jesus Christ who is rich in mercy and has great love, and you will not be disappointed.

Some of you think I'm an absolute schizophrenic. He's talked about election, he's talked about discriminate love, and now he's telling sinners to repent and believe. You'd better believe it because it's in my Bible and that's all I need. I don't need the speculations and the philosophies of theologians who try to reconcile these two truths. What I want to tell you is if you are a sinner and do not know Christ, repent and believe today and you will be saved.

Let's pray.

*O Lord God, we pray that You would delight to save sinners today even in this place, even now. Open up blind eyes, open up dead hearts and grant faith and repentance. And Father, we pray that those who have been loved by You would revel in this great love and sing Your praise. In Jesus' name. Amen.*