

## THE LOVE OF GOD FOR HUMANITY<sup>1</sup>

John F. MacArthur, Jr.  
President and Professor of Pastoral Ministries

*John 3:16 declares God's love for the whole world, but in recent times some have insisted that God does not love everyone. The OT and the NT repeatedly indicate that God's love extends to everyone. The immediate context of John 3:16 supports this fact. Further, no grounds exist for questioning God's sincerity in showing mercy to the non-elect. Though difficult for humans to understand, God can love and be the Savior of those whom He does not save. His love for the elect may be somewhat different from that for the non-elect, but His love for the latter is still genuine. God demonstrates His love for all people in four ways: through His common grace, through His compassion, through His admonitions to the lost, and through His gospel offer to them.*

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Perhaps you have noticed that someone shows up at almost every major American sporting event, in the center of the television camera's view, holding a sign that usually reads "John 3:16." At the World Series, the sign can normally be spotted right behind home plate. At the Super Bowl, someone holding the sign inevitably has seats between the goalposts. And in the NBA playoffs, the ubiquitous "John 3:16" banner can be seen somewhere in the front-row seats. How these people always manage to get prime seats is a mystery. But someone is always there, often wearing a multicolored wig to call

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<sup>1</sup>The source of this essay is the recently released volume entitled *The Love of God* (Dallas: Word, 1996). It is adapted and used here by permission.

attention to himself.

A couple of years ago, one of the men who had gained some degree of fame from displaying these John 3:16 signs barricaded himself in a Los Angeles hotel and held police at bay until he was permitted to make a statement on television. It was a surrealistic image—here was someone who felt his mission in life was declaring John 3:16, and he was waving a gun and threatening police, while spouting biblical slogans. His career of attending major sporting events ended when police took him into custody without further incident.

As I watched the sordid episode unfold on television, I was embarrassed that someone whom the public identified as a Christian would so degrade the gospel message. It occurred to me that I was watching someone whose approach to "evangelism" had never really been anything more than a quest for publicity. This stunt, it seemed, was nothing more than a large-scale attempt to get himself into the camera's eye once more. Sadly, he brought a horrible reproach on the very message he was seeking to publicize.

I also realized while watching that episode that John 3:16 may be the most familiar verse in all of Scripture, but it is surely one of the most abused and least understood. "God so loved the world"—waved like a banner at a football game—has become a favorite cheer for many people who presume on God's love and who do not love Him in return. The verse is often quoted as evidence that God loves everyone exactly the same and that He is infinitely merciful—as if the verse negated all the biblical warnings of condemnation for the wicked.

That is not the point of John 3:16. One has only to read v. 18 to see the balance of the truth: "He that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (AV). Surely this is a truth that needs to be proclaimed to the world at least as urgently as the truth of John 3:16.

### **DOES GOD LOVE THE *WHOLE* WORLD?**

Nevertheless, though acknowledging that some people abuse the notion of God's love, we cannot respond by minimizing what Scripture says about the extent of God's love. John 3:16 is a rich and crucial verse. Perhaps a closer look at this subject is warranted. I am encountering more and more Christians who want to argue that the

only correct interpretation of John 3:16 is one that actually limits God's love to the elect and eliminates any notion of divine love for mankind in general.

Arthur Pink's argued that "world" in John 3:16 "refers to *the world of believers*" rather than "*the world of the ungodly*."<sup>2</sup> This notion seems to have gained popularity in recent years. A friend recently gave me seven or eight articles that have circulated in recent months on the Internet. All of them, written and posted in various computer forums by Christians, deny that God loves everyone. It is frankly surprising how pervasive this idea has become among evangelicals. Here are some excerpts taken from these articles:

- The popular idea that God loves everyone is simply not to be found in the Scripture.
- God does love many, and those whom He loves, He will save. What about the rest? They are loved not at all.
- *Sheer logic alone* dictates that God save those whom He loves.
- If God loved everyone, everyone would be saved. It is as simple as that. Clearly not everyone is saved. Therefore God does not love everyone.
- Scripture tells us that the wicked are an abomination to God. God himself speaks of hating Esau. *How can anyone who believes all of Scripture claim that God loves everyone?*
- God loves His chosen ones, but His attitude toward the non-elect is pure hatred.
- The concept that God loves all humanity is contrary to Scripture. God clearly does not love everyone.
- All who are not keeping the Ten Commandments of God can be certain that God does not love them.
- Not only does God *not* love everyone, there are multitudes of people whom He utterly loathes with an infinite hatred. Both Scripture and consistent logic force us to this conclusion.

But neither Scripture *nor* sound logic support such bold assertions.

I want to state as clearly as possible that I am in no way opposed to logic. I realize there are those who demean logic as if it were somehow contrary to spiritual truth. I do not agree; in fact, to

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<sup>2</sup>Arthur W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1930) 314.

abandon logic is to become irrational, and true Christianity is not irrational. The only way any spiritual matter is understandable is through applying careful logic to the truth that is revealed in God's Word. Sometimes logical deductions are necessary to yield the full truth on matters Scripture does not spell out explicitly. (The doctrine of the Trinity, for example, is implicit in Scripture but is never stated explicitly. It is a truth that is deduced from Scripture by good and necessary consequence—and therefore it is as surely true as if it were stated explicitly and unambiguously.)<sup>3</sup> Certainly nothing whatsoever is wrong with sound logic grounded in the truth of Scripture; in fact, logic is essential to understanding.

But surely "*sheer logic alone*" may lead to a conclusion that runs counter to the whole thrust and tenor of Scripture. Applying logic to an incomplete set of propositions about God has often yielded the bitter fruit of false doctrine. Logical conclusions need checking by comparison with the more sure word of Scripture. In this case, the notion that God reserves His love for the elect alone does not survive the light of Scripture.

Scripture clearly says that God *is* love. "The Lord is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works" (Ps 145:9). Christ commands Christians to love even their enemies, and the reason He gives is this: "In order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt 5:45). The clear implication is that in some sense *God* loves *His* enemies. He loves both "the evil and the good," both "the righteous and the unrighteous" in precisely the same sense He commands Christians to love their enemies.

In fact, the second greatest commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31, cf. Lev 19:18) is a commandment to love *everyone*. It is certain the scope of this commandment is universal, because Luke 10 records that a lawyer, "wishing to justify himself . . .

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<sup>3</sup>This is the formulation of the Westminster Confession of Faith with regard to the sufficiency of Scripture: "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in scripture, *or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture*: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men" (1:6, emphasis added).

said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29)—and Jesus answered with the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The point? Even Samaritans, a semi-pagan race who had utterly corrupted Jewish worship and whom the Jews generally detested as enemies of God, were neighbors whom Jesus commanded to love. In other words, the command to love one's "neighbor" applies to *everyone*. This love commanded here is clearly a universal, indiscriminate love.

Consider this: Jesus perfectly fulfilled the law in every respect (Matt 5:17-18), including this command for universal love. His love for others was surely as far-reaching as His own application of the commandment in Luke 10. Therefore surely He loved *everyone*. He *must* have loved everyone in order to fulfill the Law. After all, the apostle Paul wrote, "The whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal 5:14)—and, "He who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law" (Rom 13:8). Therefore Jesus must have loved His "neighbor." His definition of "neighbor" in universal terms demonstrates that His love while on earth was universal.

Is it possible that Jesus as perfect man loved those whom Jesus as God does not love? Would God command Christians to love in a way that He does not? Would God demand that Christian love be more far-reaching than His own? And did Christ, having loved all humanity during His earthly sojourn, then revert after His ascension to pure hatred for the non-elect? Such is unthinkable; "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever" (Heb 13:8).

Those who approach John 3:16 determined to suggest that it *limits* God's love miss the entire point of the verse's context. No delimiting language is anywhere in the context. Nothing relates to how God's love is distributed between the elect and the rest of the world. It is a statement about God's demeanor toward mankind in general. It is a declaration of *good* news to the effect that Christ came into the world on a mission of salvation, not a mission of condemnation: "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him" (v. 17). To convert it into an expression of divine hatred against those whom God does not save is to turn the passage on its head.

John Brown, the Scottish Reformed theologian, known for his marvelous studies on the sayings of Christ, has written,

The love in which the economy of salvation originates, is love *to the world*. "God so loved the world, as to give his only begotten Son." The term "world," is here just equivalent to mankind. It seems to be used by our Lord with a reference to the very limited and exclusive views of the Jews. . . .

Some have supposed that the word "world" here, is descriptive, not of mankind generally, but of the whole of a particular class, that portion of mankind who, according to the Divine purpose of mercy, shall ultimately become partakers of the salvation of Christ. But this is to give the term a meaning altogether unwarranted by the usage of Scripture.<sup>4</sup>

B. B. Warfield takes a similar position:

Certainly here "the world" and "believers" do not seem to be quite equipollent terms: there seems, surely, something conveyed by the one which is not wholly taken up by the other. How, then, shall we say that "the world" means just "the world of believers," just those scattered through the world, who, being the elect of God, shall believe in His Son and so have eternal life? There is obviously much truth in this idea: and the main difficulty which it faces may, no doubt, be avoided by saying that what is taught is that God's love of the world is shown by His saving so great a multitude as He does save out of the world. The wicked world deserved at His hands only total destruction. But he saves out of it a multitude which no man can number, out of every nation, and of all tribes, and peoples and tongues. How much must, then God love the world! This interpretation, beyond question, reproduces the fundamental meaning of the text.<sup>5</sup>

Warfield continues and makes the crucial point that the primary concern in interpreting the word "world" in John 3:16 should not be not to limit the *extent* of God's love, as much as to magnify the rich *wonder* of it:

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<sup>4</sup>John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990 reprint) 1:34.

<sup>5</sup>B. B. Warfield, *The Saviour of the World* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991 reprint), 114.

The key to the passage lies . . . you see, in the significance of the term "world." It is not here a term of extension so much as a term of intensity. Its primary connotation is ethical, and the point of its employment is not to suggest that it takes a great deal of love to embrace it all, but that the world is so bad that it takes a great kind of love to love it at all, and much more to love it as God has loved it when He gave His Son for it.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, if the word "world" holds the same meaning throughout the immediate context, v. 19 cannot refer to the "world of the elect" alone: "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." About this, Robert L. Dabney wrote,

A fair logical connection between verse 17 and verse 18 shows that "the world" of verse 17 is inclusive of "him that believeth" and "him that believeth not" of verse 18. . . . It is hard to see how, if [Christ's coming into the world] is in no sense a true manifestation of divine benevolence to that part of "the world" which "believeth not," their choosing to slight it is the just ground of a deeper condemnation, as is expressly stated in verse 19.<sup>7</sup>

So the context of John 3:16 requires the verse to speak of God's love to sinful mankind in general. Calvin's interpretation is worth summarizing here. He saw two main points in John 3:16: "Namely, that faith in Christ brings life to all, and that Christ brought life, because the Father loves the human race, and wishes that they should not perish."<sup>8</sup>

A fresh look at John 3:16 helps to absorb the real sense: "God so loved *the world*," wicked though it was, and despite the fact that nothing *in* the world deserved His love. He nevertheless loved the

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 120-21.

<sup>7</sup>R. L. Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982 reprint) 1:312.

<sup>8</sup>John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 reprint), 123.

world of humanity so much "that He gave His only begotten Son," the dearest sacrifice He could make, so "that *whoever believes in Him* should not perish, but have eternal life." The end result of God's love is therefore the gospel message—the free offer of life and mercy to anyone who believes. In other words, the gospel—an indiscriminate offer of divine mercy to everyone without exception—manifests God's compassionate love and unfeigned lovingkindness to all humanity.

And unless one ascribes unrighteousness to God, His offer of mercy in the gospel is sincere and well-meant. Surely His pleas for the wicked to turn from their evil ways and live must in some sense reflect a sincere desire on God's part. As indicated below, however, some deny that this is the case.

### **IS GOD SINCERE IN THE GOSPEL OFFER?**

Of course, people who assert that God's love is exclusively for the elect will usually acknowledge that God nevertheless shows mercy, longsuffering, and benevolence to the unrighteous and unbelievers. But they will insist that this apparent benevolence has nothing whatsoever to do with *love* or any sort of sincere affection. According to them, God's acts of benevolence toward the non-elect have no other purpose than to increase their condemnation.

Such a view appears to impute insincerity to God. It suggests that God's pleadings with the reprobate are artificial and that His offers of mercy are mere pretense.

Often in Scripture, God makes statements that reflect His yearning for the wicked to repent. For instance, in Ps 81:13 He says, "Oh that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways!" Ezekiel 18:32 says, "'I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies,' declares the Lord God. 'Therefore, repent and live.'"

Elsewhere, God freely and indiscriminately offers mercy to all who will come to Christ: "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light" (Matt 11:28-30). "And the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes [whosoever will—AV] take the water of life without cost"



(Rev 22:17).

God Himself says, "Turn to Me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other" (Isa 45:22). And, "Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost" (Isa 55:1). "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the Lord, and He will have compassion on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon" (v. 7).

Some flatly deny that such invitations constitute a sincere offer of mercy to the non-elect. As far as they are concerned, the very word *offer* smacks of Arminianism (a name for the doctrine that makes salvation hinge solely on a human decision). They deny that God would "offer" salvation to those whom He has not chosen. They deny that God's pleadings with the reprobate reflect a real desire on God's part to see the wicked turn from their sins. To them, suggesting that God could have such an unfulfilled "desire" is a direct attack on His absolute sovereignty. God is sovereign, they suggest, and He does whatever pleases Him. Whatever He desires, He does.

To be completely honest, this poses a difficulty. How can unfulfilled desire be compatible with a wholly sovereign God? For example, in Isa 46:10, God states, "My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure." He *is*, after all, utterly sovereign. Is it not improper to suggest that any of His actual "desires" remain unfulfilled?

This issue was the source of an intense controversy within some Reformed and Presbyterian denominations about fifty years ago. It is sometimes referred to as the "free offer" controversy. One group denied that God loves the non-elect. They also denied the concept of common grace (God's non-saving goodness to mankind in general). And they denied that divine mercy and eternal life are offered indiscriminately to everyone who hears the gospel. The gospel offer is not free, they claimed, but extends to the elect alone. That position is a form of hyper-Calvinism.

Now let's acknowledge that Scripture clearly proclaims God's absolute and utter sovereignty over all that happens. Scripture says He declared the end of all things before time even began, and whatever comes to pass is in perfect accord with the divine plan.

What God has purposed, He will also do (Isa 46:10-11; Num 23:9). God is not at the mercy of contingencies. He is not subject to His creatures' choices. He "works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph 1:11). Nothing occurs but that which is in accord with His purposes (cf. Acts 4:28). Nothing can thwart God's design, and nothing can occur apart from His sovereign decree (Isa 43:13; Ps 33:11). He does all His good pleasure: "Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps" (Ps 135:6).

But that does not mean God derives pleasure from every aspect of what He has decreed. God explicitly says that He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek 18:32; 33:11). He does not delight in evil (Isa 65:12). He hates all expressions of wickedness and pride (Prov 6:16-19). Since none of those things can occur apart from the decree of a sovereign God, the inevitable conclusion is that there is a sense in which His *decrees* do not always reflect His *desires*; His *preferences* do not necessarily dictate His *purposes*.

The language here is necessarily anthropopathic (i.e., ascribing human emotions to God). To speak of unfulfilled desires in the Godhead is to employ terms fit only for the finite human mind. Yet such expressions communicate some truth about God that human language cannot express otherwise. God uses anthropopathisms in His Word to convey truth about Himself that no other means can represent adequately. To give an example, consider Gen 6:6: "The Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart." Yet God does not change His mind (1 Sam. 15:29). He is immutable; "with [Him] there is no variation, or shifting shadow" (Jas 1:17). So whatever Gen 6:6 means, it cannot suggest any changeableness in God. The best way to approach such an anthropopathism is try to grasp the essence of the idea, then reject any implications that lead to ideas about God that are unbiblical.

That same principle applies when grappling with the question of God's expressed desire for the wicked to repent. If God's "desire" remains unfulfilled (and in some cases it does—Luke 13:34), it is wrong to conclude that God is somehow less than sovereign. He is fully sovereign; it is impossible to understand why He does not turn the heart of every sinner to Himself. Further, speculation in this area is futile. It remains a mystery the answer to which God has not seen fit to reveal. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God"; only "the

things revealed belong to us" (Deut 29:29). At some point, finite humans join the psalmist in saying, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is too high, I cannot attain to it" (Ps. 139:6).

### **CAN GOD REALLY LOVE WHOM HE DOES NOT SAVE?**

I realize, of course, that most have no objection whatsoever to the idea that God's love is universal. Most were weaned on this notion, being taught as children to sing songs like, "Jesus loves the little children; all the children of the world." Many may never even have encountered a person who denies that God's love is universal.

Yet dwelling on this issue is necessary because it poses a perplexing difficulty to combine it with other aspects of God's revealed truth. Frankly, the universal love of God is hard to reconcile with the doctrine of election.

Election is a biblical doctrine, affirmed with the utmost clarity from beginning to end in Scripture. The highest expression of divine love to sinful humanity is evident in the fact that God set His love on certain undeserving sinners and chose them for salvation before the foundation of the world. There *is* a proper sense in which God's love for His own is a unique, special, particular love determined to save them at all costs.

It is also true that when Scripture speaks of divine love, the focus is *usually* on God's eternal love toward the elect. God's love for mankind reaches fruition in the election of those whom He saves. And not every aspect of divine love extends to all sinners without exception. Otherwise, all would be elect, and all would ultimately be saved. But Scripture clearly teaches that *many* will *not* be saved (Matt 7:22-23). Can God sincerely love those whom He does not save?

British Baptist leader Erroll Hulse in dealing with this very question has written,

How can we say God loves all men when the psalms tell us he hates the worker of iniquity (Ps. 5:5)? How can we maintain that God loves all when Paul says that he bears the objects of his wrath, being fitted for destruction, with great patience (Rom. 9:22)? Even more how can we possibly accept that God loves all men without exception when we survey the acts of God's wrath in history? Think of the deluge which

destroyed all but one family. Think of Sodom and Gomorrah. With so specific a chapter as Romans [1,] which declares that sodomy is a sign of reprobation, could we possibly maintain that God loved the population of the two cities destroyed by fire? How can we possibly reconcile God's love and His wrath? Would we deny the profundity of this problem?<sup>9</sup>

Yet Hulse realizes that when taking Scripture at face value, he cannot escape the conclusion that God's love extends even to sinners whom He ultimately will condemn. "The will of God is expressed in unmistakable terms," Hulse writes. "He has no pleasure in the destruction and punishment of the wicked (Ez. 18:32; 33:11)." Hulse also cites Matt 23:37, where Jesus weeps over the city of Jerusalem, and then says, "We are left in no doubt that the desire and will of God is for man's highest good, that is his eternal salvation through heeding the Gospel of Christ."<sup>10</sup>

It is crucial to accept the testimony of Scripture on this question, for as Hulse points out:

We will not be disposed to invite wayward transgressors to Christ, or reason with them, or bring to them the overtures of the Gospel, unless we are convinced that God is favorably disposed to them. Only if we are genuinely persuaded that he will have them to be saved are we likely to make the effort. If God does not love them it is hardly likely that we will make it our business to love them. Especially is this the case when there is so much that is repulsive in the ungodliness and sinfulness of Christ-rejecters.<sup>11</sup>

Biblically, it is an inescapable conclusion that God's benevolent, merciful love is unlimited in extent. He loves the *whole* world of humanity. This love extends to all people in all times. It is what Tit 3:4 refers to "the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind." God's singular love for the elect quite simply does not rule out a

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<sup>9</sup>Erroll Hulse, "The Love of God for All Mankind," *Reformation Today* (Nov-Dec 1983) 18-19.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 18.

universal love of sincere compassion—and a sincere desire on God's part to see every sinner turn to Christ.

Mark 10 relates a familiar story that illustrates God's love for the lost. It is the account of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus and began asking Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"—a great question. Scripture tells us,

And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments, `Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother'" (vv. 18-19).

Jesus designed every aspect of His reply to confront the young man's sin. Many people misunderstand the point of Jesus' initial question: "Why do you call Me good?" Our Lord was not denying His own sinlessness or deity. Plenty of verses of Scripture affirm that Jesus was indeed sinless—"holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens" (Heb 7:26). He is therefore also God incarnate (John 1:1). But Jesus' reply to this young man had a twofold purpose: first, to underscore His own deity, confronting the young man with the reality of who He was; and second, to chide gently a brash young man who clearly thought of *himself* as good.

To stress this second point, Jesus quoted a section of the decalogue. Had the young man been genuinely honest with himself, he would have admitted that he had not kept the law perfectly. But instead, he responded confidently, "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up" (v. 20). This was unbelievable impertinence on the young man's part. It shows how little he understood of the demands of the law. Contrast his flippant response with how Peter reacted when he saw Christ for who He was. Peter fell on his face and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" (Luke 5:8). This rich young ruler's response falls at the other end of the spectrum. He is not willing to admit he has ever sinned.

So Jesus gave him a second test: "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (Mark 10:21).

Sadly, the young man declined. Here were two things he refused to do: he would not acknowledge his sin, and he would not

obey Christ's command. In other words, he shut himself off from the eternal life he seemed to be seeking so earnestly. As it turned out, some things were more important to him than eternal life. His pride and his personal property took priority in his heart over the claims of Christ on his life. So he turned away from the only true Source of the life he thought he was seeking.

That is the last we ever see of this man in the NT. According to the biblical record, he remained in unbelief. But notice a significant phrase, tucked away in Mark 10:21: "Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him." Here is an explicit statement that Jesus loved an overt, open, non-repentant, non-submissive Christ-rejector. He loved him.

Other Scriptures also speak of God's love for those who turn away from Him. In Isa 63:7-9 the prophet describes God's demeanor toward the nation of Israel:

I shall make mention of the lovingkindnesses of the Lord, the praises of the Lord, according to all that the Lord has granted us, and the great goodness toward the house of Israel, which He has granted them according to His compassion, and according to the multitude of His lovingkindnesses. For He said, "Surely, they are My people, Sons who will not deal falsely." So He became their Savior. In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them; in His love and in His mercy He redeemed them; and He lifted them and carried them all the days of old.

Someone might object that the passage talks about God's redemptive love for His elect alone. No, this speaks of a love that spread over the entire nation of Israel. God "became their Savior" in the sense that He redeemed the entire nation from Egypt. He suffered when they suffered. He sustained them "all the days of old." This speaks not of an eternal salvation, but of a temporal relationship with an earthly nation. How do we know? Look at verse 10: "But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit; therefore, He turned Himself to become their enemy, He fought against them."

That is an amazing statement! Here we see God defined as the Savior, the lover, the redeemer of a people who make themselves His enemies. They rebel against Him. They grieve His Holy Spirit. They choose a life of sin.

Now notice verse 17: "Why, O Lord, dost Thou cause us to stray from Thy ways, and harden our heart from fearing Thee?" That speaks of God's judicial hardening of the disobedient nation. He actually hardened the hearts of those whom He loved and redeemed out of Egypt.

Forward one chapter in Isaiah's prophecy are these shocking words in Isa 64:5: "Thou wast angry, for we sinned, we continued in them a long time; and shall we be saved?"

How can God be Savior to some who will not be saved? Yet these are clearly unconverted people. Verses 6-7 which begin with a familiar passage read,

For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. And there is no one who calls on Thy name, who arouses himself to take hold of Thee; for Thou hast hidden Thy face from us, and hast delivered us into the power of our iniquities.

These are clearly unconverted, unbelieving people. In what sense can God call Himself their Savior?

Here is how He can do it: God revealed Himself as Savior. He manifested His love to the nation. "In all their affliction He was afflicted" (Isa 63:9). He poured out His goodness, lovingkindness, and mercy on the nation. That divine forbearance and longsuffering should have moved them to repentance (Rom 2:4). But instead they responded with unbelief, and their hearts were hardened.

Isaiah 65 takes it still further:

I permitted Myself to be sought by those who did not ask for Me; I permitted Myself to be found by those who did not seek Me. I said, "Here am I, here am I," to a nation which did not call on My name. I have spread out My hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in the way which is not good, following their own thoughts.

In other words, God turned away from these rebellious people, consigned them to their own idolatry, and chose a people for Himself from among other nations.

Isaiah reveals the shocking blasphemy of those from whom God turns away. They considered themselves holier than God (v. 5); they continually provoked Him to His face (v. 3), defiling themselves (v.4), and scorning God for idols (v. 7). God judged them with the utmost severity, because their hostility to Him was great, and their rejection of Him was final.

Yet these were people on whom God had showered love and goodness! He even called Himself their Savior.

In a similar sense Jesus is called "Savior of the world" (John 4:42; 1 John 4:14). Paul wrote, "We have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers" (1 Tim 4:10). The point is not that He actually saves the whole world (for that would be universalism, and Scripture clearly teaches not all will be saved). The point is that He is the only Savior to whom anyone in the world can turn for forgiveness and eternal life—and therefore He urges all to embrace Him as Savior. Jesus Christ is proffered to the world as Savior. In setting forth His own Son as Savior of the world, God displays the same kind of love to the whole world that was manifest in the OT to the rebellious Israelites. It is a sincere, tender-hearted, compassionate love that offers mercy and forgiveness.

### **IN WHAT SENSE IS GOD'S LOVE UNIVERSAL?**

What aspects of God's love and goodwill are seen even in His dealings with the reprobate? God manifests his love universally to all people in at least four ways:

***Common grace.*** Common grace is a term theologians use to describe the goodness of God to all mankind universally. Common grace restrains sin and the effects of sin on the human race. Common grace is what keeps humanity from descending into the morass of evil that would exist if the full expression of man's fallen nature had free reign.

Scripture teaches that people are totally depraved—tainted with sin in every aspect of their being (Rom 3:10-18). People who doubt this doctrine often ask, "How can people who are supposedly totally depraved enjoy beauty, have a sense of right and wrong, know the pangs of a wounded conscience, or produce great works of art and



literature? Aren't these accomplishments of humanity proof that the human race is essentially good? Don't these things testify to the basic goodness of human nature?"

The answer is no. Human nature is utterly corrupt. "There is none righteous, not even one" (Rom 3:10). "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick" (Jer 17:9). Unregenerate men and women are "dead in . . . trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1). All people are by nature "foolish . . . disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending [their lives] in malice" (Tit 3:3). This is true of all alike, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23).

Common grace is what restrains the full expression of human sinfulness. God has graciously given humans a conscience, which enables them to know the difference between right and wrong and which to some degree places moral constraints on evil behavior (Rom 2:15). He sovereignly maintains order in human society through government (Rom 13:1-5). He enables people to admire beauty and goodness (Ps 50:2). He imparts numerous advantages, blessings, and tokens of His kindness indiscriminately on both the evil and the good, the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt 5:45). All of those things are the result of common grace, God's goodness to mankind in general.

Common grace *ought* to be enough to move sinners to repentance. The apostle Paul rebukes the unbeliever: "Do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?" (Rom 2:4). Yet because of the depth of depravity in the human heart, all sinners spurn the goodness of God.

Common grace does not pardon sin or redeem sinners, but it is nevertheless a sincere token of God's goodwill to mankind in general. As the Apostle Paul said, "In Him we live and move and exist . . . for we also are His offspring" (Acts 17:28). That takes in everyone on earth, not just those whom God adopts as sons. God deals with all as His offspring, people made in His image. "The Lord is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works" (Ps 145:9).

If anyone questions the love and goodness of God to all, he should look again at the world in which we live. Someone might say, "There's a lot of sorrow in this world." The only reason the sorrow and tragedy stand out is because there is also much joy and gladness. The

only reason the ugliness is recognizable is that God has given so much beauty. The only reason a person feels disappointment is that there is so much that satisfies.

An understanding that all of humanity is fallen and rebellious and unworthy of any blessing from God's hand helps give a better perspective. "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail" (Lam 3:22, NIV). The only reason God ever gives anything to laugh at, smile at, or enjoy is because He is a good and loving God. If He were not, His wrath would immediately consume humanity.

Acts 14 contains a helpful description of common grace. Paul and Barnabas were ministering at Lystra, when Paul healed a lame man. The crowds saw it and someone began saying that Paul was Zeus and Barnabas Hermes. The priest at the local temple of Zeus wanted to organize a sacrifice to Zeus. But when Paul and Barnabas heard about it, they said,

Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you in order that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them. And in the generations gone by *He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness* (vv. 15-17, emphasis added).

That is a fine description of common grace. Though allowing sinners to "go their own ways," God bestows on them temporal tokens of His goodness and lovingkindness. It is not saving grace. It has no redemptive effect. Nevertheless, it is a genuine and unfeigned manifestation of divine lovingkindness to all people.

**Compassion.** God's love to all humanity is a love of compassion. To say it another way, it is a love of pity. It is a broken-hearted love. He is "good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon [Him] (Ps 86:5). "To the Lord our God belong compassion and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against Him" (Dan 9:9). He is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger,

and abounding in lovingkindness and truth" (Deut 34:6). "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16).

Of course, nothing in any sinner compels God's love. He does not love sinners because they are lovable. He is not merciful to them because they in any way deserve His mercy. They are despicable, vile sinners who if not saved by the grace of God, will be thrown on the trash heap of eternity, which is hell. They have no intrinsic value, no intrinsic worth—there's nothing in them to love.

I recently overheard a radio talk-show psychologist attempting to give a caller an ego-boost: "God loves you for what you are. You *must* see yourself as someone special. After all, you are special to God."

That approach misses the point entirely. God does *not* love people "for what we are." He loves them *in spite of* what they are. He does not love them because they are special. Rather it is only His love and grace that give their lives any significance at all. That may seem like a doleful perspective to those raised in a culture where self-esteem is the supreme virtue. But it is, after all, precisely what Scripture teaches: "We have sinned like our fathers, we have committed iniquity, we have behaved wickedly" (Ps 106:6). "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away" (Isa 64:6).

God loves because He *is* love; love is essential to who He is. Rather than viewing His love as proof of something worthy in mankind, people ought to be humbled by it.

God's love for the reprobate is not the love of value; it is the love of pity for that which *could* have had value and has none. It is a love of compassion. It is a love of sorrow. It is a love of pathos. It is the same deep sense of compassion and pity humans feel when they see a scab-ridden derelict lying in the gutter. It is not a love that is incompatible with revulsion, but it is a genuine, well-meant, compassionate, sympathetic love nonetheless.

Frequently the OT prophets describe the tears of God for the lost:

Therefore my heart intones like a harp for Moab, And my inward feelings for Kir-hareseth. So it will come about when Moab presents

himself, when he wears himself upon his high place, and comes to his sanctuary to pray, that he will not prevail. This is the word which the Lord spoke earlier concerning Moab (Isa 16:11-13).

"And I shall make an end of Moab," declares the Lord, "the one who offers sacrifice on the high place and the one who burns incense to his gods. Therefore My heart wails for Moab like flutes; My heart also wails like flutes for the men of Kir-heres. Therefore they have lost the abundance it produced. For every head is bald and every beard cut short; there are gashes on all the hands and sackcloth on the loins" (Jer 48:35-37).

Similarly, the NT gives the picture of Christ, weeping over the city of Jerusalem: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling" (Matt 23:37). Luke 19:41-44 gives a more detailed picture of Christ's sorrow over the city:

And when He approached, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, "If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you when your enemies will throw up a bank before you, and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation."

Those are words of doom, yet they are spoken in great sorrow. It is genuine sorrow, borne out of the heart of a divine Savior who "wanted to gather [them] together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings," but they were "unwilling."

Those who deny God's love for the reprobate usually suggest that it is the human side of Jesus here, not His divinity. They say that if this were an expression of sincere desire from an omnipotent God, He would surely intervene on their behalf and save them. Unfulfilled desire such as Jesus expresses here is incompatible with a sovereign God, they say.

That view has problems. Is Christ in His humanity *more* loving or *more* compassionate than God? Is tenderness perfected in the

humanity of Christ, yet somehow lacking in His deity? When Christ speaks of gathering the people of Jerusalem as a hen gathers her chicks, is this not deity speaking, rather than humanity? Do not these pronouncements of doom necessarily proceed from His deity as well? And if the words are the words of deity, how can anyone assert that the accompanying sorrow is the product of Christ's human nature only, and not the divine? Does not intuition dictate that if God is love—if His tender mercies are over all His works—then Jesus' words *must* be an echo of the divine?

**Admonition.** God's universal love is revealed not only in common grace and His great compassion, but also in His admonitions to all sinners. God is constantly warning the reprobate of their impending fate, and pleading with them to repent. Nothing demonstrates God's love more than the various warnings throughout the pages of Scripture, urging sinners to flee from the wrath to come.

If God really did *not* love the reprobate, nothing would compel Him to warn them. He would be perfectly just to punish them for their sin and unbelief with no admonition whatsoever. But He does love and He does care and He does warn.

Anyone who knows anything about the Bible knows it is filled with warnings about the judgment to come, warnings about hell, and warnings about the severity of divine punishment.

God obviously loves sinners enough to warn them. Sometimes the warnings of Scripture bear the marks of divine wrath. They sound severe. They reflect God's hatred of sin. They warn of the irreversible condemnation that will befall sinners. They are unsettling, unpleasant, even terrifying.

But they are admonitions from a loving God who weeps over the destruction of the wicked. They are necessary expressions from the heart of a compassionate Creator who takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. They are further proof that God is love.

**The gospel offer.** The final proof that God's love extends to all lies in the gospel offer. The gospel invitation is an offer of divine mercy. The breadth of that offer is unlimited. It excludes no one from the gospel invitation. It offers salvation in Christ freely and indiscriminately to all.

In Matt 22:2-14 Jesus told a parable about a king who had a marriage celebration for his son. He sent his servants to invite the wedding guests. Scripture says, "They were unwilling to come" (v. 3). The king sent his servants again with the message, "Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast" (v. 4). But even after that second invitation, the invited guests remained unwilling to come. In fact, Scripture says, "But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them" (vv. 5-6). This was outrageous, inexcusable behavior! And the king judged them severely for it.

Then Scripture says he told his servants, "The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast" (v. 9). He opened the invitation to all comers. Jesus closes with this: "Many are called, but few are chosen" (v. 14).

The parable represents God's dealing with the nation of Israel. They were the invited guests. But they rejected the Messiah. They spurned Him and mistreated Him and crucified Him. They would not come—as Jesus said to them, "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; and *you are unwilling to come to Me*, that you may have life" (John 5:39-40).

The gospel invites many to come who are unwilling to come. Many are called who are not chosen. The invitation to come is given indiscriminately to all. Whosoever will may come—the invitation is not issued to the elect alone.

God's love for mankind does not stop with a warning of the judgment to come. It also invites sinners to partake of divine mercy. It offers forgiveness and mercy. Jesus said, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls" (Matt 11:28-29). And Jesus said, "The one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out" (John 6:37).

It should be evident from these verses that the gospel is a *free offer* of Christ and His salvation to all who hear. Those who question the free offer therefore alter the nature of the gospel itself and deny

that God's love extends to all humanity, thereby obscuring some of the most precious truth in all Scripture about God and His lovingkindness.

God's love extends to the whole world. It covers all humanity. Common grace demonstrates it, as do His compassion, His admonitions to the lost, and the free offer of the gospel to all.

God *is* love, and His mercy is over all His works.

That is not all there is to know about God's love, but it is a very significant aspect of it, especially in light of recent declarations to the contrary. Those who contend that God does not love everyone are unbiblical and illogical. Who God is requires that His love extends to all mankind.