

“Responding to Perfect Love”

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Review: Last week we began a new series on the theme of love.

The need for love is a powerful thing isn't it? I mean everyone needs love. Even the toughest of men who act as if they don't need anything or anyone still crave to be loved by someone. That is why every action film ever made always has a subplot of romantic love woven between all the scenes of martial arts, bullets, and bombs. We can't turn on the television, computer, or radio without being bombarded with the world's messages of love. Therapists even include it as one of man's basic needs. But you know, we don't need to site all the movies, music, and academic studies to prove man's need of love. We all know it, because it is inside of us. We feel it. There is no doubt that we all need and crave love. That is why this series is so important. There is an old song entitled, "Looking for love in all the wrong places." I think that is how most people feel. So where do we find love – perfect love? It will be found in the Bible – God's love letter to us – his most precious creation.

Last Sunday's message was entitled "finding perfect love." Phil took us to I John 4 where we saw three important truths. (1) the Person of love – God is love. (2) the purpose of love – so we can know & abide in Christ and so we can have confidence on the day of judgment (3) the power of love – it frees us from phobias, frees us from torment, and frees us from doubt.

Introduction:

Today's message is entitled "Responding to Perfect Love.

Last week Phil started us off with a question. He asked, "Do you love God?"

This morning, I want to start us off with another question: "Does God love you?"

You say, of course he does. Phil said so last week. Okay, but we need this head knowledge to transfer to our hearts as well. This is a truly fundamental question. It is one thing to say, "God so loved the world." That is a theological truth of John 3:16 and yes we are part of the world. But we need to make it very personal. Do you feel, do you sense, do you believe with absolute certainty that God loves you?

This week I asked my son Warrick, "Do you know that I love you?" He said, "Yeah, but not all the time. Sometime you are angry when I disobey and I think you hate me." I responded, "Yes, it makes me sad and angry when you disobey, but I will always love you no matter what. I will never, ever hate you." He smiled and went to bed with peace in his little heart.

Maybe when it comes to your relationship with God you feel a lot like Warrick. "Yeah, I know you say you love me God, but there are a lot of things in the Bible I

don't obey and sometimes when bad things happen to me I feel like you hate me." Have you ever felt that way? I think we all have. So the question today is, "Does God love you?"

This question is of the highest importance because if we don't believe that God loves us then we will never allow ourselves to receive his perfect love.

If you have been to this Bible study for any length of time, you have heard us speak about this perfect love of God. When we are presented with a message we then have to respond to it. Our goal and prayer is that each person who attends this Bible study will research the claim that God loves you and that each person will eventually come to the point where you choose to accept this love – to receive it – to make it your own. But people do not receive things that they think are fake. They may tolerate it. They may refuse it, but they don't receive it. So, today's question is very important for you.

Last week Phil closed our time by looking at 1 John 4: 19 "We love him because he first loved us." There is a cause and an effect. God's love for us causes us to love him. That takes us back to last week's question: Do you love God? I mean do you adore him. Does your heart crave him? Do you invest time in building a relationship with him? If not, it is likely that you do not fully grasp how much he loves you.

So many people have a misconception about Christianity. They think of it primarily as a religion – a list of do's and don'ts to gain the favor of a harsh, but all-powerful God. That is not what Christianity is all about! Christianity is primarily a relationship – a relationship between God and man. It is a relationship of love.

By the end of today I hope that you will be totally convinced that God LOVES you! I mean, that he is totally crazy about you! And I hope that by the end of the message today your heart will cry out – I want to love Him too! I hope you will come running to him saying, "This love that you offer me is the love I have looked for all of my life and nothing, absolutely NOTHING will keep me from this love."

First, let's be reminded of God's Perfect Love for us, but let's make this personal. God love's you! How do I know this? More importantly, how can you believe this? Because God demonstrated his perfect love for you (VIDEO: "Sacrifice" from BluefishTV.com)

1. God demonstrated his perfect love for you! Romans 5:6-8

6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. **7** For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— **8** but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

From this passage we see some amazing truths about God's love for you.

A. God pursued you when you were unlovely! Vs. 6-8a

None of us are naturally godly. None of us are naturally lovely. We are sinners who are difficult to love because of our own selfishness, and yet God loves us anyway.

B. God sacrificed for you! Vs. 8b

- 1) Jesus left the comforts and joy of heaven to come to the harshness of life on earth.
- 2) Jesus left the praise of angels to endure the accusations and mockery of those he came to save.
- 3) Jesus did the messy work that no one else could do.

What do I mean by that? Perfect love is not clean & sterile. That is romance. That is a pleasant emotion. It is a kind of love. It is pleasant and it is fun. But it is not perfect love. Perfect love is "Agape love," which Phil spoke of last week. Agape is one of 4 Greek words for our 1 English word "love." The essence of agape love is self-sacrifice. Agape love is not a feeling; it's a motivation for action that we are free to choose or reject. *Agape* is a sacrificial love that voluntarily suffers inconvenience, discomfort, and even death for the benefit of another without expecting anything in return. This is perfect love!

When Mandy and I were teenagers there was a man named Joshua Harris who wrote several excellent books on love. Here is what he said about perfect love: "The world takes us to a silver screen on which flickering images of passion and romance play, and as we watch, the world says, 'This is love.' God takes us to the foot of a tree on which a naked and bloodied man hangs and says, 'This is love.'"

Have any of you seen the movie, "The Passion of the Christ?" Well, that movie has put the price of God's love on display. Perfect love is messy! I am going to show you 2 photos on the next slide, but be warned. It is not pretty. If you can't handle the sight of blood you might want to close your eyes for just a second. (show photos). You see, perfect love is bloody. Perfect love is spoken of in beautiful words but demonstrated by painful sacrifice. This is the price of loving me. This is the price of loving you. It is the price that Jesus willingly paid to demonstrate the love of God - WHILE we were still sinners. This is perfect love.

Well, now that we've clearly seen the demonstration of God's love - I hope you are becoming more convinced that God loves you. But now...

2. You must recognize the barriers preventing perfect love.

As Nathan said last week during our worship time. Each of us was created with a void - a hole that only God could fill. He created us to crave a relationship with Him that no human being could ever satisfy. We have just seen the great lengths to which he went to prove his love. So the question we must ask is, "Why wouldn't a person respond by accepting it? Love is being offered! Why would you refuse it?"

Well, back in August 1996, a new family with 2 teenage girls came to visit the church I attended. I new how intimidating it could be to visit for the first time so I always went and greeted all visitors to try to help them feel welcome & fit in. One of those girls was Mandy, who is obviously now my wife. Now I have already asked her permission to share this information with you today, so don't worry. We won't have marital problems after this message. On that day when we first met I tried to be loving by welcoming her, but it was very obvious she didn't want anything to do with me...or anyone else at this church. The next day was the first day of our school year. As it turned out, she attended my school. Again, I wanted to help her feel welcome in a very large school. I tried being loving, but she made it very clear that she didn't want anything to do with me at church or at school. Well the weeks turned into months and the more we saw each other the more she could see that I was sincere and we became friends. Love had triumphed! It was during that time that I discovered she wanted to be a missionary to Africa, just as I did. Suddenly a new kind of love started working in my heart - I developed a romantic interest in her, but again it was obvious she wanted nothing to do with me in that way. I figured that our "friendship love" was as far as things would ever go. Still, I would occasionally test the waters to see if she might be interested. Time after time I was rejected and my suggestions of dating were shot down. It took about 18 months before she became open to that idea. Then we ended up going off to separate colleges. Our potential "romantic love" would have to wait another 12 months. Well, since we are married now, I think you know how the story goes from there. The point of that story is that there were many barriers that I had to overcome as I pursued a loving relationship with Mandy.

So too, there are many obstacles that Christ faces in each of our hearts as he pursues a loving relationship with us.

A. Fear in our hearts.

- 1) **Disbelief that such love exists/fear of disappointment.** Perhaps others have let us down. Perhaps we've seen bad examples in our families of people who professed love, but didn't live it out. Now this has caused us to be skeptical of God's love as well.
- 2) **Disbelief because of painful experiences in life.** You want to believe that God is loving, but you wonder how can it be when there is suffering in your life. You ask, "If God loves me then why did he allow my husband to get cancer?" "If he loves me then why did he

allow the thieves to come through and attack us before taking our things?”

- 3) **Fear of rejection** – Perhaps you believe such love exists, but you do not view yourself as worthy to receive it. You think you are too bad, that you have sinned too much for him to love you.

These fears are a major hindrance to receiving God’s love. But, there is another type of barrier.

B. Pride in our hearts

- 1) Don’t want to be seen as “needing this love.” Someone who feels this way might say things like...
- a) Christianity is a crutch. I am self-sufficient. To receive God’s love by putting faith in Jesus will be admitting I need someone other than myself.
 - b) I don’t want someone to save me. I want to save myself
 - c) I am a good person. I don’t need to be “forgiven.” I’m insulted that he thinks I need forgiveness. If I become a Christian it first means I must admit I am not the good person I have always thought of myself as being. It means I admit I am a sinner who has offended a holy God and I need to apologize. I need to ask forgiveness and I need to repent of (turn away from) the sins I enjoy.
- 2) Don’t want love from this person -“Jesus”
- a) I admit I need love.
 - b) I admit I am a sinner
 - c) But I don’t want Jesus. I don’t want “this God.” I want one that is more fashionable. I want one that serves me. I want one that let’s love be a one-way street. He loves me. He serves me. He exists for my happiness and therefore will not require any love in return. Here’s the problem with that. You are describing a slave, a servant, a genie in a bottle – but you are not describing God. By very definition, God is the all-powerful creator worthy of worship. He has every right to demand love and service from us. We don’t have the right to demand it of him. He could make it a one-way street flowing from us to him, but in his love and mercy and grace he has made it a two way street.

To really drive this point home, let’s read Romans 5:6-8 again, but this time make it personal by replacing the word “we” with our own names.

“6 For while “Jamie” was still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly “Jamie”. 7 For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— 8 but God shows his love for “Jamie” in that while “Jamie” was still a sinner, Christ died for “Jamie”.”

Did you insert your name there? It is true. His expression of love is that personal and that real.

We have now, seen these are the barriers that hinder us from experiencing the love we crave. Each of us face barriers to God’s love. Before we move on, I want you to identify which one is the one that is a hindrance to your relationship with God.

Now, let’s quickly address the solutions:

- A. Fear - 1 John 4:18 “Perfect love casts out fear.”
- B. Pride - James 4:8-9 “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God and he will draw near to you.”

Now, with our barriers being identified let’s be reminded that God has demonstrated his love for us. He continues to demonstrate it in a millions ways from the moment of our birth. Everyday he shows kindness. Every day he gives us blessings we don’t deserve. Everyday he patiently, kindly waits for us to look past all the negative experiences of life to see just how much he loves us. He started his pursuit of you the very day Adam & Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden for committing the first sin. He intensified that pursuit the day he was born as the baby in Bethlehem. He then demonstrated it in the clearest way possible as he hung on the cross. He now keeps exposing you to his daily love and kindness waiting for you to respond to his love. He is offering you a relationship of love with Him – the creator of the world – but he will not force it upon you. It has to be your choice. He knows all the love he wants to pour out on you. He has paid your debt. He has made his proposal. Now he awaits your response.

3. **You Must Respond to God’s Perfect Love for you.** Acts 17:30-34

30 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, **some mocked.** But **others said, “We will hear you again about this.”** 33 So Paul went out from their midst. 34 But **some men joined him and believed,** among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

In that passage we see the three possible responses we can give God today.

- A. Refuse him – vs. 32a
- B. Research him more vs. 32b
- C. Receive him – vs. 34

Earlier we said that God has been pursuing you because he wants a relationship with you. Some of you may have chosen to refuse Christ earlier in your life, but God has continued to gently lovingly pursue you. He knew that moving too far too fast

ends up pushing you away, but he has been pursuing you and maybe you are reconsidering his offer. Some of you have been coming here to the Bible study for a long time. You had bad experiences before maybe at another church that reduced Christianity to a list of do's and don'ts. But you have been researching Jesus more and you are convinced he is all he claims to be. You have heard of his offer of salvation from Phil, from Nathan, and from Dave. Now you are ready, but you wonder if the offer of entering a relationship with him still stands if you have waited too long. The answer is no. It is available to you today. Perhaps you are ready to receive him.

Earlier I told you about how I pursued Mandy because I desired a relationship with her. Well, when I was absolutely convinced she was the right one and I believed she felt the same way I took the biggest risk of my life. I asked her if she would marry me. It was in June of 2000 and it happened right here in Zambia at Victoria Falls. That day I confessed again my love for her and then asked her to make a decision. Would she spend the rest of her life with me letting me love her, care for her, provide for and protect her. Thankfully she said yes. Today, Jesus is asking you that same question. Will you spend the rest of your life in a relationship with him – letting him love you, care for you, provide for you, and protect you. Well, here is how you respond if you want to receive him as your Savior.

Romans 10:9-10, 13

9 "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. **10** For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.

13 For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Conclusion:

As we come to a close today, I would like to do something just a bit different. I want to give you some time before leaving here to think through what you have just heard. I want to give you an opportunity before leaving here to respond to God's perfect love. I am going to play a song as background music while you take this opportunity to reflect on what you have heard today and spend some time talking to God in prayer. Perhaps this is your opportunity to respond to God and accept his perfect love. Perhaps you need to keep researching him and his claims. Perhaps you are already a Christian but you want to thank him for his great love that we have been reminded of today. Whatever your response, let's spend some time talking to him before we dismiss.