

Behold, What Manner of Love

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“Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure” (I John 3:1-3).

With the word “behold” the inspired apostle appropriately commands our earnest attention to the enthralling theme of the Father's love. Though the subject of the greatness of God's love exceeds all human comprehension, he, nevertheless, here exhorts us to look at it, to ponder it, to study it, to weigh it, to meditate upon it, to marvel at it, to seek to grasp the full meaning of it, and to rejoice in it; because out of the mercy of God through our Lord Jesus Christ we have already experienced upon ourselves the bestowal of it.

With such an engaging subject presented for our meditation, let us gladly and without further delay, comply with the divine exhortation, breathing a prayer that the Holy Spirit may open to us this great love which the apostle seems so eager that we should understand.

THE MANNER OF GOD'S LOVE

Allow me to suggest, to begin with, that the greatness of God's love is seen in *the manner of that love*. What kind of love is this? This love is not the general kindness of the Creator which in His wise providence He mercifully exercises towards all His creatures. It is clearly evident that God cares for all His creatures in that He gives life and being to all, grants them strength and health, and shows His kindness in providing fruitful seasons as well as many other unmerited gifts. This is what may be called “common grace,” and for this common grace even all the ungodly are obligated to praise Him.

John, however, is writing of something more than God's mere providential care of His creatures (though that is certainly no small blessing) which all men without exception enjoy from His good hand. Rather He is setting before us the Father's love. There is a great difference between God's dealing with us as *Creator* and His dealing with us as *Father*, you see. Beautifully and effectively did our Lord point out this significant difference to His disciples when He used the illustration of the fowls which neither sow nor reap, and affirmed, “yet your heavenly Father feedeth them” (Matt 6:26). Of course, He is not the Father of the birds; He is their Creator. Neither is He the Father of all men. Though He, nevertheless, is the Creator of all men and all men are under His providential care. But He is the Father of all those who have been born again and who have truly believed in His Son. He is the Father of only these and none others.

What, then, is the *manner* of this love of which John speaks? It is that love which God peculiarly exercises in regard to His own children and is distinguished by at least twelve things.

First, it is His **free love**. It is that love which finds all its springs in God and in which there is no other cause outside of Him. He expressed it to Moses in this way, “I will be gracious to whom *I will be gracious*” (Exo 33:19). *Because there is everything in us to move God to hate us, therefore His love for us is free to us and thus without any cause of merit on our part. All praise then, “Unto him that loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood!”* (Rev 1:5). “Behold, what manner of love!”

Second, it is an **everlasting love**, that is, without beginning and without end. “I have loved thee with an everlasting love” (Jer31:3). Our Lord said the Father loved us as He loved Him (John 17:23) and added, “Thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world” (v24). Now ponder that carefully—we unworthy ones are loved with a love which had no beginning and will have no ending. What manner of love!

Third, it is an **unchanging love**. This is so because the Lover is unchangeable. “I am the Lord, I change not” (Mal 3:6), He declares, and then assures us that in Him there is not the slightest degree of turning (James 1:17). If out of His grace He has set His love upon you, He will always love you and nothing will ever be able to separate you from that unchanging love.

Paul lists 17 things which cannot separate a believer from the love of Christ. See Romans 8:35-39: (1)tribulation, (2)distress, (3)persecution, (4)famine, (5)nakedness, (6)peril, (7)sword, (8)death, (9)life, (10)angels, (11)principalities, (12)powers, (13)things present, (14)things to come, (15)height, (16)depth, nor

(17)any other creature. If these cannot separate you from that love, nothing can, for nothing else exists outside of this list. What manner of love!

Fourth , it is a **providing love** , because from eternity and out of His free and unchanging grace the Father appointed His Son to be our Savior. “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (I John 4:10). What manner of love!

Fifth , it is His **electing love** . If we would know the manner of God's love to us and ponder the depth of it, we must not ignore this wonderful though mysterious aspect of it. His love towards us is distinguished by being electing love. Our Father has not tried to hide this truth from those whom He loves, for He has written about it plainly in His word. Consider what He says in the letter to the Ephesians: “According as he hath *chosen us* in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love”(1:4). Again, the Scripture says, “But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren, *beloved* of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning *chosen you to salvation...* (2 Thess 2:13). Now, of course, in the face of this great truth all you can do is just lie there before your Father “lost in wonder, love and praise.” Behold, what manner of love!

Sixth , it is a **regenerating love** . John says in our text, that we are “called sons of God” and he also says, “now are we the sons of God.” The Father in love has made us His children through the grace of regeneration, granting us the new birth whereby we have been brought into His holy family and made partakers of the divine nature. What manner of love!

Seventh , it is a **redeeming love** . This love could not allow us to lie under the curse and bondage of our sins exposed to the penalty of the Holy Law. Neither did this love merely pitch us a line with the instructions to grab hold and try to reach safety the best way we could. Nor did He simply stand and plead, exhort, warn and teach us how we might attempt to save ourselves. No, thank God, we would have all perished had this been the case. What did He do? Out of infinite love the Sacred Record declares—“Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree” (Gal 3:13). What manner of love!

Eighth , it is an **adopting love** . We are sons by adoption, God “having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself according to the good pleasure of his will” (Eph 1:5), and has sent forth his Spirit into our hearts, crying “Father” (Gal 4:6). We're in the holy family by the grace of adoption as well as by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. What manner of love!

Ninth , it is a **reconciling love** . God has reconciled us to Himself by His Son, as it is written, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them” (2 Cor 5:19). There is a world that has been reconciled to God. This does not mean everybody however. It means the world of the redeemed, the elect, or the world of God's children. It includes every true believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. What manner of love!

Tenth , it is a **communicating love** . All the subjects of this love have imparted to them the gift of eternal life. “The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 6:23). The Father gave His Son the authority to give salvation to certain ones. Here is how our Lord expressed it in His prayer in John 17:2, “As thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him.” What manner of love!

Eleventh , it is a **justifying love** . How we should marvel at the divine challenge, “Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?” and its divine answer, “It is God that justifieth!” (Rom 8:33). Our sins having been pardoned through the blood of Christ, we stand before God justified in His righteousness, which is imputed to us by faith. What manner of love!

Twelfth , it is a **sanctifying love**. All those who in redeeming grace experience the Father's great love are from day to day brought to know the meaning of progressive sanctification in their new life. The abiding presence of the Holy Spirit with all His strengthening, guiding, and purifying graces ever making effectual to each believer the blessed benefits of redemption, assures the constant growth in true holiness of every one of them. Furthermore, the prayer of Christ to the Father requesting Him to—“Sanctify them through thy truth,” is sure to be answered in every believer's experience. Oh, What manner of love!

THE OBJECTS OF GOD'S LOVE

The greatness of God's love is further shown in *the objects* which that love embraces. Who are the objects? Let the text answer, "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us ." Those who are included in the pronoun *us*— and only those—are the objects of this great love. It is a sad mistake as well as a dangerous twisting of Scripture to make this passage refer to everybody in general. We can by no means read every son of Adam into this text, and though we are aware that we shall certainly lay ourselves open to the charge of being narrow and uncharitable in our interpretation, we are forced, regardless of this, by the plain facts to say—and say it with emphasis—that this passage clearly limits the love of God to His chosen ones.

God is sovereign over all things and must, therefore be allowed to bestow His great love upon whom He wishes, because whether you or I allow it or not will make not the least difference. We must come to realize that He is a God who does as He pleases, and the plain truth of the matter is that all of us deserve nothing but His wrath and damnation and none of us deserves the least of His favor.

Moreover, this great love will never be viewed by us in its proper setting until we have been brought by divine mercy to realize what terrible sinners we are. Then, and then only, shall we stand in wonder that God didn't consign the entire lot of us to eternal perdition. Then and only then shall we find ourselves utterly amazed that a holy God should so condescend as to be willing to take upon Himself the task of saving any from their ruin of sin. Then, even more than that, the thing that will forever clasp us in holy astonishment, is to discover that such sinners as we, were included in that number to be the everlasting objects upon whom He would bestow His Sovereign love. "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us!"

To behold the objects of His love is to apprehend something of the greatness of His love. Those objects were corrupt in their nature, corrupt in their affections, corrupt in their practice; sinners by birth, rebels against Heaven in their works and haters of God in their minds. "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." What love! What a mercy to be the object of it! Look, then, as the Spirit of God exhorts us, "Look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged." You who are objects of this love were once in darkness and spiritual death, walking according to the course of this world, children of wrath and disobedience and, like the cast out infant of Ezek. 16, unwashed, uncut, unloved, bloody and covered with the filth of your sin and guilt. "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us!"

THE NATURE OF IT

Another aspect of the greatness of this love may be viewed if we will take time to consider the nature of it . This love exceeds and excels all loves for it is the Father's love—Divine love, out of free and Sovereign grace bestowed upon unworthy sinners such as we are as a gift—not earned or deserved.

It is the Father's love. "Oh, yes," says someone, "I understand that because it is His nature to love." Well, I have heard that too and I agree with it, but we must ask ourselves a question about that. What? is it God's nature to love... *sinners*? That is what I also was taught. The Bible however teaches that it is God's nature to love righteousness and truth and to hate all the workers of iniquity. It is His nature to hate sin, and He warns sinners of the terrible judgment they are coming into. He even says that He will not clear the guilty. All are therefore admonished to flee from the wrath to come. God Himself is a flaming fire to all outside of Christ. "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon" (Isa 55:6,7). "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us!"

THE PURPOSE OF IT

Again, in order to help us grasp the meaning of the greatness of our Father's love, we must consider *the purpose* of His love. What is the purpose? It is "that we should be called the sons of God." We see the purpose of this love fulfilled when sinners are made sons of God, when rebels against heaven are made children of the heavenly Father and when the enemies of God are by divine grace transformed and brought into the blessed family of our Redeemer. "Called sons." Who calls us so? There are six beings who acknowledge that we are the sons of God.

The *Father* calls us sons. This is brought out in the text. It is the Father's love which has made us sons. It is the wonderful bestowal of His love upon us "that we should be called the sons of God." He delights to acknowledge us as His sons.

The *Son of God*, our Lord, calls us sons. In fact, He summons all to "Behold I and the children which God hath given me" (Heb 2:13). In this our Lord acknowledges His redeemed ones as the gift of His Father and calls upon the whole universe to witness it.

The *Holy Spirit*, the third person of the Trinity, calls us sons. "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God" (Rom8:14). All the children of God have these two things. They have both the leadership of the Spirit and the witness of the Spirit.

The *angels* call us the sons of God. "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?" (Heb 1:14). In ministering to the heirs of salvation the angels happily acknowledge every child of God. None but the Father's children are "heirs." The angels know who they are and are therefore assigned the task of not only ministering to their every need, but also of separating them from their imitators (Matt 13:36-43) before casting those into the fire.

The *apostles* call us sons. Search through this first letter of John and take careful notice of how the apostle speaks of and identifies us as the sons of God. No less than thirteen times in his five short chapters does the beloved John refer to us as sons of God. Twice in our text he calls us "sons of God" (3:1,2). Twice he addresses us with the endearing term, "My little children" (2:1; 3:18). Seven times he designates us as "little children" (2:12-13,18,28; 3:7; 4:4; 5:21). And twice we are called "children of God" (3:10; 5:2).

And the *saints* call us the sons of God. They do so by professing spiritual kinship with us through our Lord Jesus Christ, by loving us with that new love which the Holy Spirit has shed abroad in their hearts and with which they love all the children of God, which, incidentally, is a sure evidence of their having passed from death unto life (I John 3:14). Besides all this, they acknowledge us and one another to be the sons of God by forsaking their idols and uniting with us in the worship of the one true God, our heavenly Father.

With all these, dear friends, calling us sons of God, what care we about the names that others may call us? If we know that the Father has chosen and owns us as his sons, that our Lord has redeemed us with His own precious blood, that the Holy Spirit has effectually called us, that the holy angels are ever watching over us as our ministers, that the inspired apostles through their writings assure us of our sonship and that all the saints of God on earth and in heaven are our brothers and sisters in Christ, and then put on top of all that the blessed assurance within whereby we know that we are the sons of our heavenly Father—What more can we want? What manner of love is this!

THE THREEFOLD EFFECT OF THIS LOVE

We may go a little further in our attempt to comprehend the greatness of this love by a consideration of its *threefold effect*.—Let us consider them:

The first effect of our Father's love is, that right now we are in reality *sons*. "Beloved, *now* are we the sons of God." We have talked about this, but just let me emphasize in passing that we are not just "*called* sons;" we are now, presently, the sons of God. By the grace of regeneration and adoption we have been given the divine nature and have been brought into the family of God.

The second effect of our Father's love is mentioned in v.3. It is that all the sons purify themselves. "And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself." They are first made pure by the redeeming blood of Christ applied to their hearts by the Holy Spirit. Then they by God's grace purify themselves by confessing and turning from sin, hating the works of darkness, walking in the light and loving righteousness. They know what it is to have the "washing of water by the word" (Eph 5:26). They evidence their need of purifying by their use of the means of prayer, study of the word, and their regular attendance upon a Bible ministry.

But there is yet another effect of this love. "Therefore" John says, "the world knoweth us not." The world is entirely unaware of the happy state of a genuine Christian, his position, privileges, possessions and of his real dignity and destiny. These as well as all the other things of the Spirit are foolishness to the worldling. Being spiritually dead he has no capacity to appreciate and enjoy them.

As the world did not know the Lord Jesus Christ, does not know Him now and does not want to know Him, so it will not know a true Christian. Why does not the world know us? You have the answer in the

text...“because it knew him not.” What does that mean? We may say that there are five ways in which the world knew Him not.

First , the world was ignorant of Him. “He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not” (John 1:10). The world knew not the Creator though He walked in their presence. The great crime of their not knowing Him, of course, lies in the world's wilful ignorance of Him. They had proof enough, but they desired not the knowledge of God. You will go to hell for not knowing God, because your ignorance is a sin against light (II Thess 1:8; Rom 1:21) and there is no excuse for it.

Second , the world would not believe on Him. “He came unto his own, and his own received him not” (John 1:11). Why would the world not believe on Him? For the same reason it doesn't believe on Him now. The Lord Jesus Christ was the light come into the world “and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). The world gives many excuses for its unbelief, but the real reason for its not knowing Christ or believing on Him is that it loves its sin; and therefore the wrath of God abides on it.

Third , the world knew Him not in that it hated Him without a cause, as our Lord Himself pointed out (John 15:24-25) and declared: “But now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father.” Ah, my beloved, why did the world hate the Lord Jesus? What had He done? What crime did He commit that He should be so hated? The word of God stands: “They hated me without a cause.” There were absolutely no grounds for their hellish hatred. Therefore the world is on its way to hell.

Fourth , the world knew Him not in that it despised His witnesses. Christ said to Nicodemus, “Ye receive not our witness.” The world did not even receive the witness of the Son of God! In His warning cry when He pronounced the doom of Jerusalem, our Lord spoke of how they had treated His witnesses. He charged that they had killed the prophets and stoned them which God had sent unto them. Witness how they treated His forerunner and all those whom He has since sent into the world. Therefore the world is on its way to eternal hell.

Finally , the world knew Him not in that it hung Him on a cross. This is the crime of all crimes. Make a list of all the crimes which men have committed since the beginning of history, and all of them in their sum total would not equal one-thousandth of the heinousness of this crime. Men talk about the world being “good.” Beloved, do you realize that this world crucified the Lord of glory, the Son of God? Why did it do that? Because it would not know Him; it loved its sin and darkness and hated righteousness and light. Therefore, the world is rushing headlong on its way to hell.

Now there are the five ways this world knew not Christ, knows Him not now and will not know Him. And the word of God says, “Therefore,” or for this reason, “the world knoweth us not!” You don't need any more explanation for the world's hating you than that you belong to Him. As one upon whom the Father has chosen to bestow His great love in making you a child of His, you must not expect the world to know you. Look not then any more for the world's love, approval, promotion, or friendship. Never forget that the Scripture has said, “Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.”

The Father knows His children and they know Him and we are not in this world to be pampered and promoted by it, but rather to show forth the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvellous light.

THE WONDERFUL ISSUE

Once more, if we are to come to appreciate the Father's great love as we should, we must not ignore the wonderful issue of His love. There are two things here. First, “we shall be like Him,” and second, “we shall see Him as He is.”

“We shall be like him.” This is salvation —finally, completely, and fully “like Him.” Yes, we shall be. We are not much like Him now even though we are presently the sons of God. Though we are saved, we are yet far from what we shall be. True we are now in a state of grace and making progress day by day by the grace of God. We are, however, far from perfection. The glory of this wonderful issue of His love is that we shall yet be brought into a state of glory—“like Him.” That's more than being saved from hell. That is salvation—“to be conformed to the image of His Son.” What manner of love!

“We shall see him as he is.” This is when we shall finally and fully realize that for which we have been redeemed. When out of the abundant mercy of our Great God we are permitted to lay our eyes upon our

glorified Savior, then we will be like Him, perfectly pure, with no desire nor inclination to sin, and made all glorious without as well as within. Paul puts it like this, “For our citizenship is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself” (Phil 3:20, 21). What manner of love is this? It is the Father's love bestowed upon us.

CONCLUSION

Let us never forget the source of this great love. It speaks of our relationship to Him. His very name speaks of love, of tenderness, of understanding, of strength, of comfort, and of satisfaction. It is easy to trust our Father—our heavenly Father. Therefore, “Cast all your care upon Him for He careth for you.” Rest content in Him. He cannot fail.

And let us remember the obligation such great love places upon us to be ever grateful, to walk as sons of God, to be content with our lot while we are in this world, and, out of love to Him, to hallow His Name, love His kingdom, and do his will. “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us that we should be called the sons of God!”

Great Father of Glory, how rich is Thy grace! What wonderful love is displayed in Thy face!
In Jesus Thine image with brightness we view, And hope to be formed in that likeness anew.
The world knows us not, but in this we rejoice; To God we're no strangers, but objects of choice.
His love from eternity gave us a home, Where now we are hoping in safety to come.

—*J. Stevens*