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BECAUSE IT’S A HARDBALL

Romans 8:38-39

Laurie told me something this week about her life that I had never heard before. She was very young, just learning to swim, and she got into a situation where she couldn’t get to the side of the pool or the surface and she was out of air. She said it felt like she was going to drown and it was terrifying. She survived, but to this day one of her greatest fears is drowning. Have you ever had an experience where you couldn’t breathe? I’ve had that happen on a couple of occasions and would never care to repeat the experience. Not being able to get air creates a special kind of panic. Is there anything else in life that causes that kind of terror? Anything we need so badly that, like air, we cannot live without it, and to be cut off from it is unbearable? Yes, there is. We are going to learn something about this element today.

Years ago our family spent a month on vacation in Florida. We house sat for some family members in Coral Springs, a suburb near Ft. Lauderdale. It was in the summer, so it was hot and humid, but we loved it. It was a spectacular vacation, and we loved Florida. However, there is something about Florida that I didn’t like. It is that Florida is as flat as a pancake. There are no hills in South Florida anywhere. One reason I wasn’t crazy about that was you couldn’t see the ocean there until you were right on the beach.

Here in California it is quite different. When I graduated from college I began serving in a ministry to college students. One of the first things our ministry team did was we had a retreat to take time to get to know each other. The retreat was in Laguna Beach. One evening the team leaders took us to the home of some friends of theirs to have a dinner together. These friends owned a beautiful home in the hills. We drove a long way up in the hills to their home. When we walked into the living room the view took my breath away. We walked into the back yard where we had a view that was mind-boggling. We could see miles up and down the coast, and we could see the Pacific Ocean stretching off into the seemingly endless distance. The vista was almost overwhelming.

Today we have something like that as we come to the end of Romans 8. These verses are like climbing into the heights of the hills, then taking in an awe-inspiring view. This is a climax, a passage of breath taking power, beauty and inspiration. If we can grasp the true message of these verses, we will be changed forever. Let’s look at Romans 8:38-39.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

PREMISE: WE ALL HAVE A NEED FOR LOVE, ESPECIALLY GOD’S LOVE

The fact that we all need love is obvious. We were created to love and be loved. It is an essential part of being human. Being without love is devastating to us emotionally, mentally, spiritually and it can even affect our physical health. Love is that element that we cannot survive without. Most of us have no difficulty believing that to be true. The part that may not be so obvious is that we especially need to experience God’s love.

Laurie and I have been spending a lot of time recently with our grandchildren. We now have 5 of them, ranging in age from 2 weeks old to 6 years old. One thing we have learned is something everyone knows. It is that taking care of young children is exhausting. Part of the reason for this is that you are “on” all the time. If they are conscious you have to be alert and paying attention to them. They seem to have the ability to put themselves in potentially dangerous circumstances on a regular basis, so you must be ever vigilant that they don’t injure themselves.

But the other part of the reason for this constant need to be on the alert is that they want your attention. Not just for brief moments, they want your attention constantly. Our grandson, Wesley, is 100% boy. That means he has enough energy to power a large city. He is in constant motion. He loves to run. He’ll just run laps in the kitchen, or he loves to go in our backyard and will run back and forth. In the old classic movie *Chariots Of Fire*, one of the main characters, Eric Liddell, who is an Olympic sprinter, says at one point, “When I run, I feel God’s pleasure.” Wesley is like that. He gets great glee from running. But he needs you to watch him run. Recently he was running back and forth, and he said, “Bapaw, fast.” He means Bapaw needs to run fast with him. Then he ran from one end of the yard to the other and flopped on the ground. He laid flat on his back. He said to me, “Bapaw, down,” and pointed to the ground next to him. I had to also flop on the ground and lie on my back. Why was this necessary? Why did I need to run with him and lie on the ground with him? Because he longs for Bapaw to be with him in what he does. He wants to experience Bapaw loving him and joining with him in his life. Without that, it’s all kind of empty for him. What that’s really about is love. We never grow out of that. We may not be as demanding as 2 year olds, but we have that same desire for someone to enter into our life, love us and be with us in this life.

This isn’t news to anyone, but what people often miss is that no matter how much love they receive from other people, they somehow feel a need for more. There’s never quite enough. That’s because we are created with a built-in need for God’s limitless love. We have a need for love that no humans could ever fill. Romans 11:36 says of God, “from him and through him and for him are all things.” God made us for himself. In other words, he made us to live in relation to him. He created us to live in his love. Just like he has created us with a need for air, for water, for food and without them we die, he created us with a need for his love. Without it we die.

My son told me that this summer he is going to get a new truck. It is the new electric Ford F-150. Given that the way things are going, by the end of the year we will have to take out a mortgage to buy a tank of gas, this seems like a good idea. But let’s imagine that at some point his spiffy new truck’s battery runs out of juice. No problem. He can just put some gas in the truck, right? Wrong. No amount of gas will make that truck run. Its motor runs on electricity and only an electric charge will make it work. That’s what it’s made for. And we were made for God’s love. No amount of anything else will make us function properly.

HOW DOES LACKING GOD’S LOVE AFFECT US?

A short answer to that is without God’s love, we die. How long will you last without air? A few minutes. Without it you die in short order. Similarly, without a sense and experience of God’s love, our souls die. Maybe it’s more like food than air. How long will you last without food? People have lasted weeks without food. But eventually they starve to death. Without knowing God’s love our souls will also starve to death. It will be as certain as our bodies dying without food. But how is that death manifested?

When we aren’t confident that God loves us we try to convince him to do so. We try to win him over. There is an analogy with human relationships. We need the love of other people. It is crucial to being a whole human being. The love that is perhaps the one we seek more than any other is the love of that one other person with whom one hopes to share life, that special person, that soul mate.

Think about how it goes when a person has decided that there is one particular person that is the one they were meant for, the person they love and long to have as a soul mate, but they are not certain that the other person loves them the same way. Most, maybe all, of us have been in that position. What we try to do is to convince that person that they should love us. We try to look our best. All of a sudden, our appearance becomes a matter of great concern. We try to be on our best behavior, try to be the most witty and charming and interesting that we can be. We might even do things we might not otherwise do in order to wage the campaign to win that heart. Guys watch movies like *The Notebook* with that special woman, girls watch a football game with that guy. Laurie reminds me that I actually played some songs on the guitar and sang to her. That was a foolishly risky thing to do. It could have ruined everything. She married me in spite of that foolhardy endeavor, not because of it.

The problem is that when you are on a crusade like that, it involves a lot of uncertainty and stress. Typically, winning this person’s heart becomes the most important thing in your life, but you don’t know what that other person is thinking. There is that period where they could go either way. The beloved is not sold on you, but they haven’t sent you packing either, so there’s hope. That’s an uneasy place to be. That special person could crush your heart like a grape by telling you to get lost, and that would feel like the worst thing in the world. I remember being in that situation with Laurie. She could send my heart soaring, make my whole week, by telling me how much she liked me, or she could put me in the depths of despair by hinting that maybe the grass looked greener somewhere else. Every flaw, every mistake you might made felt almost life threatening.

It is not exactly the same with God, but it is similar. If we don’t know for a fact that he loves us, because we need his love there is a good chance we will try our best to convince him that he should. We will go on a crusade to prove to him how lovable, how love worthy we are. Many people don’t even know that it is God’s love they are lacking and need. They are not consciously aware of it, but that need is still there and it drives them. The problem is, as with that special person, this causes us to live with a trainload of uncertainty and stress. We try to be on our best behavior, but we’re never really sure if it’s been good enough.

One could live an entire life in that stressful, uncertain place. It is the farthest thing from peaceful and joyful. You will be discouraged, anxious and stressed. It is exhausting to live like that. What is worse is when we conclude that God does not love us. That injures our soul. All you need to do to understand the effect of this on us is to consider what happens when you realize that crusade you’ve been on to win that special person’s heart is hopeless. That person doesn’t love you, and never will. What does that do to you?

It hurts. It feels really bad. It is rejection of you in one of the worst ways possible. What is the natural response to hurt? It is anger. When we are hurt, we get angry. So what happens if that person that you think is the dream love you have longed for drops you like a hot potato? It hurts. Usually it hurts deeply and you don’t get over it for a long time. That festering pain usually leads to anger and bitterness toward that person. Laurie and I watch the *Magnum, P. I.* remake series on television. I think that’s mostly because of nostalgia for the original series that we loved, and because it takes place in Hawaii. Anyway, on a recent episode the two central characters, Thomas Magnum and Juliet Higgins, admitted to each other that they have romantic feelings for each other. They both said they were reluctant to admit this because they so valued their friendship and their business partnership. Why would that be a factor? Obviously because romance brings with it the possibility of a failed romance, which means badly hurt feelings and the resulting anger causing a broken relationship. We all understand that.

If we try to convince God to love us, and we live with all the stress and uncertainty of that endeavor, when we begin to suspect he’s never going to love us, it’s going to hurt. The result of that is we are going to resent him. We will get bitter toward him. Unfortunately, when you have bitterness down at the core of your soul, how much are you going to enjoy life? It won’t be much. Bitterness is life destroying. You will be a deeply unhappy person, and sadly, you likely will not even know why you feel the way you do. You’ll just know that there’s some unhappiness inside you.

Even the smallest hint of doubt about God’s love will introduce some of these negative elements into our lives. This definitely is not life to the fullest. All of this unhappiness will lead to some rebellion against God. You are bitter and resentful toward him, thus will live without any regard to what he says. You will also try to soothe that bitterness in your soul by filling your life with pleasure, possessions, accomplishments, but none of it will ever work because none of that is addressing the real problem.

It is possible that some people won’t worry about whether God loves them because they don’t believe he even exists. So that would seem to remove all that stress about somehow earning God’s love. But we were created with a built in need to be loved by God. Denying his existence or relevance doesn’t make the need go away. We end up trying to put gas in an electric truck. It won’t work. It leaves people with an unrest in their soul, a frustration that they feel an emptiness, a since there is something more, but it is always just out of reach.

WHAT MAKES IT HARD TO BELIEVE GOD LOVES US?

In verse 35 Paul asked, “What will separate us from the love of Christ?” The word translated “separate” meant to lop off, cut off or amputate. So the question is what can amputate us from God’s love? From God’s perspective there is nothing that can cut us off from his love. Nothing can stop him from loving us. But there are things that can cut us off from it in the sense of keeping us from believing in it. In fact, believing that God truly does love us is a struggle for many. What are the things that make it hard for us to believe?

There are internal forces that cause us problems. Chief among these forces are our own failures and flaws combined with the accusations of our enemy. We all struggle with sensing a gap between what we ought to be and what we are at a variety of levels. That’s why we carry around a certain amount of guilt.

Earlier this year the LAPD unveiled documents that explained the firing of Louis Lozano and Eric Mitchell, two former LA police officers. The documents revealed that they were supposed to respond to a call about a robbery in progress. But recordings from their squad car and body cameras showed that they waited 20 minutes before responding to the call. What caused the delay? They were occupied playing the Pokemon Go game. They protested the decision against them, claiming that recording their conversations was an invasion of their privacy. The city essentially responded by saying there was no excuse for such unprofessional behavior. I’d have to agree.

I have this nagging feeling that maybe I’m not totally different than those two. No, I’ve not done anything as irresponsible as that, but I feel like at times God has issued a call to me but I’m preoccupied with trivial selfish pursuits. I fear that’s how God might see me. We have a wireless printer that has developed an annoying tendency. I order it to print something, and nothing happens. My computer tells me there has been an error in printing. Well duh. I don’t need either Mr. Hewitt or Mr. Packard to tell me that. It’s not doing anything. That’s a pretty obvious error. I unplug the printer, then plug it back in, it goes through its normal startup routine, then finally it prints. I wonder if God isn’t annoyed that he has to reboot me at times to get me to do what he wants.

Given that we feel like we maybe aren’t what God wants us to be, we struggle to believe that he could really love us. I know that I’m not alone in this sense that I’m not being all I should be. A few years ago on the ESPN show *First Take*, sports commentator Will Cain discussed the fact that there are many people who don’t like Tom Brady and root against him. In explaining why he thinks this is so he said, “People dislike Tom Brady because most of us down deep are very weak. Most of us are unsatisfied with our failings…Tom Brady is a constant reminder of your own failings…Everything about him reminds you that he’s better than you. He’s a better guy that you are. It's not just that he’s great, it’s how he’s done it. He’s a 6th round draft pick. He’s self-made greatness. Everything you didn’t do right, Tom Brady did. His success is a constant reminder that you could have done better if you’d made the same sacrifices as Tom Brady did. And we can’t forgive him for that.” Most of us are unsatisfied with our failings. We know we are weak. There are many things we didn’t do right, and we know it. And that makes it difficult for us to believe that God actually could love us.

There are also external forces that cause us problems. Those external forces are the kinds of things Paul alludes to in this passage. There’s hardship, persecution, famine, danger and violence. There are so many difficult things that happen in life that cause us to question where God’s love is. If he loves us, would he let these things happen to us? It doesn’t feel like it.

You think of some of the things that happen in your life, you look around in our church and see what some are dealing with, you think about all the pain and grief and tragedy in the world, and that doesn’t look to you like God is loving us. We have challenges to believing in God’s love all the time in ways large and small. Laurie and I have had some huge tragedies that don’t feel like love. But we also encounter those hard things at a small level all too frequently. As I was thinking about this, I remembered one of those days that happened many years ago. I had a ton of things I needed to get done, but this day I also had to have a medical test. I don’t even recall what it was. But I drove to the facility where the test was to take place at the appointed time. When I got there, they told me I was at the wrong office. The doctor’s staff had sent me to the wrong place. The right place was a couple of miles away. I quickly drove to the correct location, but they told me I was now late, and as a result they couldn’t fit me into their schedule. I explained it wasn’t my fault, but it did no good. I had taken time from a jammed schedule and driven some distance to this place to accomplish nothing. As I started driving back home I told the Lord that I really didn’t need this because it made the pressure worse, so could he please enable me to get back and get things done quickly. But as I was driving suddenly my car just died. I coasted into the parking lot of a shopping center and parked. I tried to start it several times to no avail. I looked at the engine, but that was pointless. This was long enough ago that cell phones were not yet common. I figured if I could get to a phone I could call Laurie and she could come get me and we’d figure it out from there. I decided I should go in the shopping center and look for a pay phone. You older folks will remember what that was. When I walked into the shopping center I encountered some people I knew. After we greeted each other they asked what I was up to, so I explained the situation. They had a cell phone, so they let me use it to call Laurie. But she didn’t answer. This was frustrating because I knew she was supposed to be home. I didn’t know what to do. Finally after some delay I went back out to my car and in desperation tried to start it. It started on the first try. I headed home, but as I did so I had a conversation with the Lord. What was the point of all this? I had just spent the better part of the afternoon accomplishing exactly zero. I had no idea what was going on with my car or where Laurie was. It didn’t feel like a loving God was making my paths straight.

That was a miniscule incident. There are many more painful things that happen to us that make us question that God loves us, because it seems like if he did, things would go a lot better for us. Sometimes it feels like things are arrayed against us. How do you tell a person whose child has died that God loves them? How is a person whose spouse has just left them to believe that God loves them? How is one to believe God loves them when they are diagnosed with a terrible disease or they’ve lost a job, can’t get another one and are out of money?

Who hasn’t said at some point during difficult times, “Why do these things always happen to me?” There’s an old story about a guy named Rob who felt like things never seemed to go his way. Finally, one day he had a day like the one I had where one thing after another went wrong and he couldn’t take it anymore. In frustration he cried out to God, “God, why do you always make these things happen to me?” And then a loud voice thundered from heaven, “Because you bug me, Rob.” That’s sort of how it feels to us when life hands us lemons, and we make lemonade out of it, only the lemonade is the worst lemonade we’ve ever tasted. Enough disappointment and hardship can cause people to doubt God’s love seriously.

Of course, there is always just good old-fashioned doubt. Is God really there? If so, why isn’t he working and making himself known? Can he really love me? I feel like if he really knows me, he would not love me.

WHY SHOULD WE BELIEVE GOD LOVES US?

The contention of these verses is that God does love us. This passage claims that there is nothing in this physical realm, nothing in the spiritual realm, nothing in the past, nothing in the present, nothing in the future that can cut us of from God’s love. His love is like a tidal wave, sweeping aside all that’s in its path. It is unrelenting, powerful, unstoppable, eternal and unconditional. But why should we believe that?

First, because he tells us. The most familiar verse in the New Testament, John 3:16, begins with the words, “God so loved the world.” God loved us so much that he gave his own Son for us. In Jeremiah 31:3 God said, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.” This is what God says to us. He says his love is everlasting. It will never end. Nothing can ever cut us off from it.

Well, sure, God says he loves us, but we’ve all had people tell us they love us then fail to actively serve us, give to us or care for us, making their claims of love look empty. When life is as painful and hard as it often is, it kind of feels like God is saying he loves us, but he’s not actually loving us. Doesn’t God need to show he truly loves us? Yes, he does. We need to think about what love is. There is a lot of confusion about that. Many people in our culture think it is a feeling, an emotion. It’s feeling positively about a person, even feeling romantic about them in many contexts. But that’s not what love is.

The essence of love is a commitment to seek the good of the person loved. It is, at its core, a sacrificial commitment, for it is about seeking that person’s good no matter what. It means giving up self in order to bring about good for the other person. It means the commitment to seek that person’s good is unwavering and undying. That being the case, love will involve actions. Love will be proved by the person loving, serving and sacrificing for the one loved.

God has proven his love for us. He has sought our good. He has sacrificed to a degree that is beyond human understanding, in order to gain good for us. The good he has obtained for us is that we are forgiven all the stuff that we know is in us that we feel guilty about, that we are connected to him, that we gain the fullest life possible on earth, and that we have hope for eternity. He has worked to gain all this good for us at a cost to himself that we cannot even imagine.

We saw it in Romans 5:8. God has demonstrated his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. God has not just claimed he loves us, he has proven it by what he has done. To be forgiven, to be in a love relationship with God, to gain full life, to have eternal life, is worth more than anything else on earth, and it is impossible for us to get by our best efforts. What we could not do for ourselves, God has done for us, because he loves us. So we should never doubt for even a nanosecond that God loves us. He has shown it in the most graphic way possible.

Yes there will be times when because we live in the weed patch of a broken world that our circumstances won’t give obvious evidence of God’s love. In those times we need to remember one undeniable and unshakable truth. God has proven his love for us. He did so at the cross of Christ. Think of the cross as being like a lighthouse. Sometimes life feels like being at sea on a dark, storm tossed night with rocky shores near. That beacon shines in the light as a fixed point, one that sees us safely through the storm, that enables us to navigate safely home.

Furthermore God does not abandon us. He loves us by being with us, guiding us, comforting us, giving us strength to get through it all. And he gives us that most precious thing, hope. Hope makes us able to keep going, and it is a function of his love.

Yes, I can see that God has proven his love. But how could he continue to love me when I keep failing him? I even frustrate myself. I am ashamed of how far short I am of being what I should be. How could God possibly love that? The answer to that is found in 1 John 4:8. It is three little words. “God is love.” That says God’s nature is to love. It is his response to everyone and everything that happens because it is who he is.

In my younger years I have mentioned numerous times I spent several years in a futile effort to be a baseball player. In those years I was hit by baseballs several times. I got hit by pitches on a couple of occasions. While trying to field balls I took them off my hands, chest and legs. One of the most memorable was a time when I was in the process of fielding a ground ball when it took a bad hop. Instead of the expected bounce it popped up and smacked me right in the mouth. It really hurt. It gave me a fat lip that was swollen for several days. I got off better than Jerry. He had a ball bounce up and hit him over the eye and cut him open. He had to have stitches to fix the wound.

Here is the question. Why did the ball hurt me when it hit me? That’s because the nature of the ball is to be hard and solid. You may be aware of the fact that they call it a hardball. That’s because it is hard. It doesn’t matter what I might think or do, when that hard ball impacts me, because its nature is to be hard, it will hurt. Why am I talking about the nature of a baseball? Because it reminds us that God has a nature. His nature is to love. If a baseball wasn’t hard, it wouldn’t be a hardball. It’s not a baseball. It might be a ball, but it’s not a baseball. It will be a hardball no matter what it runs into or what goes on around it. That’s its nature. It doesn’t matter what I think, how I feel, what I do. If that ball hits me, it’s going to hurt, because that’s its nature. If somehow God would not love, he would not be true God, for his very nature is love. No matter what he runs into or what goes on, his nature is to love. He loves regardless of our failings.

In other words, we can believe that God loves us even when we don’t think we are deserving of being loved, because that is his nature. He always loves. Always. He cannot stop because its who he is. So we can believe that God loves us, because God is love, always. Psalm 36:5 says, “Your love, oh Lord, reaches to the heavens.” Picture David, who wrote that Psalm, sitting in the fields watching the sheep, looking up at the sky, seeing the clouds in the day and stars at night. He knew nothing of airplanes, satellites or traveling into space. He didn’t even know anything about space. No doubt he pondered the stars and the clouds. For him, they were way off in the distance, imponderably far away. God’s love reaching that high meant being as vast as it is possible to be. Nothing could exceed that love. Psalm 136:26 says God’s steadfast love endures forever. His love is loyal and will never end. This is the love God has for us.

CONCLUSION

In Ephesians 3:17-19 Paul wrote, “I pray that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power (may have the ability), together with all the Lord’s people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge, that you maybe filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

God’s love is infinitely wide, infinitely long, infinitely high and infinitely deep. It extends infinitely, eternally, in every direction. God loves you. He loves you more than you will ever be able to comprehend. Paul said his love surpasses knowledge. We have never known a love like his. No one has ever loved us with the intensity, the power, the depth of his love. No one has ever loved us with the determination and tenacity he has for us. No one has ever sacrificed like has for us. No one has ever loved us with the patience, kindness, tenderness, joy and delight he has for us.

He will never stop loving you. It is in living in the reality of his love that we will be filled up to the measure of the fullness of God.

Living by the Spirit begins with being grounded in and certain of God’s love. We saw how it will affect us when we fail to live believing that God loves us. But when we are rooted in his love, totally certain that he loves us with a mighty, unending love, we begin to be filled up to the measure of his fullness. It is in his love that we finally can be at peace, we find freedom, we can be secure, we experience joy, for there is no greater joy than to be loved.

Before we got married Laurie and I went through that period of uncertainty over what this relationship meant. I came to a place where I knew I loved her. There was no one like her. I wanted to spend my life with her. But she had questions, doubts, and they were quite reasonable. We reached a place where it was apparent that despite our feelings for each other, we needed to go our separate ways. The next morning, we ended up sitting in her car, a peach colored Mustang, and through a bizarre circumstance I asked her to marry me. As soon as the words were out of my mouth I wanted them back. It was the absolute wrong thing to say, and I couldn’t understand where those words had come from. I was about to say, “Strike that. Disregard that question” when she turned bright red and said, “Yes!” It was totally unexpected. I said, “Are you sure?” She insisted it was true. It was one of the most joy filled moments of my life. We both cut our classes that day because we were so excited, so happy, so filled with joy. There is nothing more joyful than being loved. My life has been filled with joy ever since, because she has loved me ever since. The lesson here, is that being loved by God is a source of unending joy as we live in the reality of it. In other words, that’s the key for being truly whole, experiencing true fullness of life, for becoming who God made us to be. It is where we find true peace, true joy, true love, true meaning, freedom and fulfillment.

Michael Gerson was a speechwriter for President George Bush. He has had a long battle with depression, at times so severe that he was hospitalized. In 2019 he preached a sermon at the Washington National Cathedral in which he talked about his depression. He said in this world there is lots of reason for despair and sadness. But then he said for a Christian there is “an experience of transcendence that we can’t explain. At the end of all our striving and longing we find, not a force, but a face…the face of Jesus. God’s purpose…is that even when strength fails, there is perseverance. And even when perseverance fails, there is hope. And even when hope fails. There is love. And love never fails.” He’s right. God’s love never, ever fails. There is not a nanosecond of your life that God’s love for you flickers even a tiny bit. Every step you and I take, every breath we draw, is bathed in God’s love. Believing this is true is the key to freedom, power, peace and joy in life. Never forget, God loves you, and his steadfast love reaches to the heavens.