

THE SUN IS SHINING
A Message for Mother's Day – Topic: Love
Passage: 1 John 4:8-9

I was thinking about Mother's Day, and what to do with it on Sunday morning. It is something of a conundrum because it is a totally made up quasi-holiday. There is no doubt that in my personal life, even though the moms in my life are very undemanding and have no expectations, if I just ignored the day it would be hurtful. So while we may downplay it some, it is still important that I acknowledge the moms in my world and honor them. When it comes to church it's kind of the same deal. It doesn't feel good to just ignore the day. At the same time, like I said, it is kind of an artificial creation of our culture, and it has no biblical roots. Nevertheless, the Scripture tells us to honor our parents, and this is one way to do it. But what do I do with it? It occurred to me that moms are known for loving their children. So I thought perhaps I could honor the moms by addressing the topic of love from a biblical perspective today.

Back in 2014 the *Journal of Advanced Research* published a study that documented an odd fact. There has been a quantifiable decline in references to love in popular music. It has been replaced by references to sex. A similar trend can be seen in movies. An article in the *Washington Post* not long ago declared that the romantic comedy genre in films is dead. Many film critics now even say that popular love stories are actually predatory tales about sexual harassment!

This is a bad trend, because people are desperate to be loved. Studies have shown that infants who do not receive attention and love in their first two years do not fare well. In fact, they have a high mortality rate, and if they survive, have a high rate of suffering from significant developmental deficits. But it is not just infants. All of us need love.

The Butterfly Effect is a podcast that shows interviews, many of them with people in the entertainment industry. One of them told a story of a couple that makes boutique custom pornography. People pay them to create videos according to scenarios they request. That the business even exists says something depressing about our culture, but also the state of human nature. They received a rather unusual request. A man wanted them to make a video in which an actress would sit, fully clothed, look at the camera and say, "You are loved. Things are bad now, but they won't always be. Suicide is not the answer." They responded to the man, but never heard from him again. They decided to go ahead and make the video. The actress who played that part can't even talk about it without breaking into tears. The absence of love destroys us.

Elon Musk, fabulously successful and wealthy entrepreneur, gave an interview to *Rolling Stone* magazine two years ago. At one point he addressed the state of his personal life as a now-divorced, single man. He said, "Being in a big empty house, and no footsteps echoing through the hallways, no one ever there...How do you make yourself happy in a situation like that...When I was a child there was one thing I said, 'I never want to be alone.'" Then in a whisper he repeated, "I never want to be alone." We all are desperate for love.

Moms have a profound impact because they bring love into our world, and that is what we need more than anything else. But today I want you to think with me about what love really is and where it ultimately comes from. We will get some crucial reminders from 1 John 4:8-9.

PREMISE: GOD IS LOVE

Verse 8 tells us that God is love. He is the very embodiment of love. In our new age influenced culture they interpret that to mean something along the lines of love is God. Love is what rules all. Or they explain it as meaning that love is all there is to God. It is all that matters.

The Scriptures tell us that while God is love, that is not all he is. In the Psalms you will see that the most common description of God is that he is holy. You will also see lots of references in the Bible to his justice, his righteousness, his goodness and his wisdom. You will even come across references to his wrath. So, by all means, God is love, but love does not totally describe who he is. What then does it mean for God to be love?

LOVE IS DEFINED BY GOD

There is considerable confusion in our culture about what love actually is. It is commonly interpreted today to mean something that has no moral component whatsoever. If we love someone we applaud what they are and what they do no matter what it may be. This is, of course, nonsense. No one “loves” everyone like that, nor do they think they should. If we love children and they insist on being ugly, demanding, selfish and violent toward other kids, do we applaud that behavior because we love them? I hope not. If a man we know commonly makes inappropriate comments to women and makes unwelcome advances toward them, do we applaud that behavior because we love him? I certainly wouldn’t. Clearly that cannot be what love is.

I recently saw a clip from the movie *Intolerable Cruelty*. In it George Clooney played a highly successful, wealthy, powerful, hard-nosed, cynical divorce lawyer named Miles Massey. At one point Miles, against all odds, falls madly in love and gets married on the spur of the moment. The next day he gives the keynote address at a convention of divorce lawyers and says he stands before them vulnerable, humbled by love. He makes the statement that love is good, saying they don’t need to avoid this “emotion.”

Right there is the problem. Is love an emotion? Is it something we feel, something that can overwhelm us one day, but almost completely disappear the next as emotions sometimes do? If so, then that makes God a dangerous being. He is all powerful. Nothing can defy or stop him. If he feels love for me one day, but the next day that feeling changes, because that’s how feelings and emotions are, then he may suddenly feel very different about me, and I may be totally at his mercy.

Another common way of thinking of love is that it is something you earn, that it really is a kind of transaction. If I do what you want me to do and I please you, then you will love me, and if I don’t then you won’t love me. And the same goes for how I relate to you, so it ends up being a sort of “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours” kind of deal. This makes “love” a tension filled thing

because at any moment someone might decide that I'm not keeping up my end of the bargain and therefore I no longer am earning their "love."

Fortunately, this verse tells us that God is love. He is the epitome of it. He is what love really is. He is the very definition of love. If we want to know what love is and how it acts, then we can know by looking at God. What is he like? What does he do? How does he behave? When we look at God we are seeing what love is like, we see what it does and we understand how love behaves. And fortunately for us, we see that it is not a fleeting emotion that can change in an instant nor is it a transaction. It is something far more constant than that.

God's love is unconditional.

There is no greater summary of this truth than Romans 5:8, which says, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." The term "sinners" is seen as archaic in our culture today. Don't get hung up on it. Just get that it means "totally undeserving." We were failed human beings, yet God loved us so much that Jesus died for us to rescue us. He did that when what we earned was the complete opposite of love.

God's love is not engendered by the endearing qualities of those he loves. The source of his love is not something outside himself, it comes from within him. In other words, his love is not caused by the object being loved in any way. In his book, *God As He Longs For You To See Him*, Chip Ingram wrote, "We don't provoke, trick, convince, earn, or win God's love. He doesn't love us because of who we are but because of who he is." In *Gleanings In The Godhead*, theologian Arthur Pink wrote, "The love of God is uninfluenced...it is free, spontaneous, uncaused." G. K. Chesterton wrote of the "furious love of God" and said "He has a single relentless stance toward us: He loves us."

Pastor and writer Craig Brian Larson makes an interesting observation about the most famous verse in the New Testament, John 3:16. That verse says, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." The interesting part is what John meant by the term "the world." Larson wrote, "He meant people who did not believe in and follow God. He meant people doing their own thing...God loves people who don't love him back, people who take him for granted, avoid him, ignore him or don't care about him." God loved those people so much that he gave his son to save them.

God's love is never fickle or fluctuating. It is always there, always constant, no matter how frustrating or undeserving we might be. On this Mother's Day think for a moment of how amazing a mother's love is. Right now we are watching our daughter, Carissa, go through her first pregnancy. She went through feeling sick and awful pretty much every day for three months. She has gotten some better, although that comes back every now and then. But then she started hurting. Her body is being contorted to make room for the baby, and it causes her pain. The latest fun thing is that things are pushing on her urinary tract, causing that to be an adventure. And she's half way done. I know she's thinking, "Okay, how bad is this going to get?" and she's a bit fearful. She is going to go through all of that, and then the baby is going to be born. And the baby will want to be fed every two hours so she will forget what a solid night's sleep feels like. And the baby will at times cry and she

will have no idea what the problem is and what to do about it. The baby is already making life difficult for her, and that will continue for a long time. And she loves and will love that baby intensely. Despite all that the baby is doing to her and will do to her, she will always love that child. Even when it is fully grown that child will always be her beloved baby, because that's how mothers are.

So I want you to pay attention to what God says to his people in Isaiah 49:15. "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you." It is almost inconceivable that a mother would forget her child, not have compassion for it. Almost, but not totally. We know that has happened. But it will never happen with God. He will always love us, always have compassion for us. Remember two huge truths about God. First, he loves because of who he is. He loves us because of what is in him and for no other reason. Second, God never changes. Hebrews 13:8 says he is "the same yesterday, today, and forever." 2000 years ago God loved us so much he gave his Son to die in order to rescue us. Yesterday he loved us as much as he did when he gave his Son. Today he loves us that same amount, which is as much as it is possible to love. Tomorrow, regardless of who we are and what we may or may not do, he will love us the same. And he will love us that same amount every tomorrow until the end of time and then beyond that into eternity. He will never change, never stop loving us. Romans 8:38-39 says nothing in all that exists will ever separate us from his love.

There are times when it feels like God doesn't love us. That usually happens in two ways. One is we become so discouraged by ourselves, we feel so unworthy, so failing, that it feels impossible that God loves us. It doesn't feel possible. The other way it happens is that our circumstances go sideways so badly, such crummy things happen to us, that it doesn't seem possible that God loves us. If he did, surely he would do something to make life at least a little easier on us. I've watched a few of you face extremely a difficult circumstance, and as we're praying for a little divine help, two more hardships get piled on top of the first. We think, "Uh, hey, a little help here, please?" But God seems nowhere to be found. Has he stopped loving? Scripture claims he has not stopped loving for even a nanosecond. He loves us at every moment and never stops.

You all have had the experience that we have of flying out of San Diego on a trip. It is quite common when you leave on a morning flight that you are taking off in overcast conditions. The marine layer has rolled in and it is foggy everywhere. You trust that the pilots know where they are going, so the plane takes off and is quickly enveloped in clouds, the ground disappears. But soon as you continue to climb you break out of the cloud cover into magnificent sunshine. The thing I want to ask you is, when you were under the marine layer had the sun stopped shining? No, the sun was shining all along. You just couldn't see it. But that didn't mean it wasn't shining. There will be times in our lives when we don't see the love of God, but it is still being poured out into our lives anyway. It is still shining, even if we don't see it.

This unstoppable, constant love of God speaks to one of the most common problems most everyone has. Andrew Garfield is an award-winning actor who has starred in movies such as *Amazing Spider Man 1* and *2* as well as *Hacksaw Ridge*. In an article in *America Magazine* two years ago he talked

about how he prepared for the role of a priest in one of his movies. He repeatedly read the Gospels, and he said in the process he fell in love with Jesus. He said, “The main thing that I wanted to heal, that I brought to Jesus...was this feeling of not enoughness ...That wound of feeling like what I have to offer is never enough.” We all feel that, because what we have to offer is not enough. If we have to earn the love of God we will never heal that wound, because what we have to offer never will be enough. But God doesn’t love like that. He just loves, and nothing will ever stop him from loving. So that wound that we all carry around can finally be completely healed. We are loved by God. God loves because it is his nature to do so.

God’s love is individual.

Yes, I get that God so loved the world. He loves everybody. I saw this commercial for Motel 6 that shows a band that is on tour, and, of course, staying in Motel 6’s everywhere they go. But each night they end their concert and say something along the lines of “Thank you, Nashville. We love you.” “Thank you, Dallas, we love you.” We know exactly how that works. We’ve seen people do that. And I always have a problem with it. Yeah, maybe they have grateful, positive feelings they describe as love toward the audience. We love you, San Diego. The problem is, they don’t know me from Donald Trump. Well, maybe they know me from him, but they don’t know me individually, and they don’t love me individually. They don’t value and cherish me as an individual person. They just have warm fuzzies toward everyone who bought a ticket to their concert and cheered them on. But they don’t really love me at all.

We kind of feel like that’s how it is with God. Yes, he loves the world. He loves the church. But when it comes to me individually, I suspect we think either he doesn’t really even know us and maybe doesn’t much care, or he does know us and because we are so faithless he barely tolerates us because he has to. That’s what he signed up for when he took on the God job, so he grudgingly puts up with us, but man is he frustrated with us.

Galatians 2:20 says, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Did you hear those words? The Son of God “loved me and gave himself for me.” Paul understood that, yes, Jesus loved the world and sacrificed for the world, but he also loved Paul and sacrificed for him. If Paul had been the only fallen human being in all of creation, Jesus would have loved him and died for him.

Have you ever felt like people are nice to you, but they generally don’t want to be your good friend, don’t love being with you? Do you think if they really knew you they wouldn’t want anything to do with you, so you work hard to look better than you really are? A lot of us feel that. I do. What do you think that does to us when it comes to God? No way he could love who I am. But he does. He is the God who loves me and gave himself up for me. He delights in you.

When we took care of our granddaughters recently one evening Laurie got dinner ready for them. She had made macaroni and cheese. What kid doesn’t like macaroni and cheese? And Laurie makes the best macaroni and cheese ever. It’s kind of in the class of her apple pie because it has ruined

other macaroni and cheese for me. I eat at restaurants where people rave about the macaroni and cheese and I can barely eat it because it is a pale imitation of Laurie's. Anyway, Laurie put the food out for the little girls. Cara just ignored the macaroni and cheese, but Ella became an emotional Vesuvius. She was practically hysterical. Laurie couldn't at first understand what was wrong. She calmed her down and said, "Just tell me calmly what is wrong and I will take care of it." Finally Ella became calm enough to explain that apparently macaroni and cheese is satanic. She didn't want to be in the same room as the foul stuff. Laurie took it away and provided her with more acceptable fare. That was not one of Ella's finer moments. Do you think it made Laurie want to be with her less or to love her less? No, she adores that little girl, with all of her quirks and unfortunate moments, and can't wait to be with her again. And that is how God thinks about you. Not you as a group, but you as an individual child whom he loves.

God's love is sympathetic

There is an incident in the life of Jesus that says something huge, but it's easy to miss. Matthew 8:2-3 says one day, "A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, 'Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.' Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said, 'Be clean!' Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy." So Jesus had compassion on the guy and healed him.

Compare that with Luke 17:12-14. "As he (Jesus) was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, 'Jesus, Master, have pity on us.' When he saw them, he said, 'Go, show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went they were cleansed."

Do you notice anything interesting in the difference between those incidents? In the second one the lepers never got close to Jesus, but he was able to heal them nevertheless. In the other incident the leper got close to Jesus. You certainly know that in that day people made sure to stay as far from lepers as possible. They didn't understand the disease process, but knew it was contagious. So they avoided touching lepers the way you and I would avoid touching someone who has the ebola virus. Yeah, maybe you'd get close to them if you had a biohazard suit on, but that's the only way.

So what jumps out at me is when the guy in Matthew 8 asked Jesus to make him clean, Jesus "reached out his hand and touched the man"! We know from the story in Luke that he didn't have to touch the guy to heal him. He healed the other lepers from a distance. So why did he deliberately reach out and touch the man? It was because no one had done that for a long time. People wouldn't touch him, and Jesus knew that hurt. He had compassion on him. He cared about the pain in his life, so even though he didn't need to do it to heal him, Jesus started by touching him to let him know he cared.

Hebrews 4:15 says, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but he have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet he did not sin." He empathizes with us!

I was surprised when Laurie once told me that when she took chemistry in high school she had some struggles at times, but her father mostly did not help her with it. Her dad was a chemist for the EPA! Part of the reason for that was he had difficulty empathizing with her. What she was doing was so obvious to him that he couldn't understand why she didn't get it, thus wasn't able to help her. We might think Jesus would be like that. Why do you struggle with these things the way you do? Why don't you trust the Father more? But he has been through all the struggles we will ever face and knows them from the inside out. He feels them with us, and can help us.

We know almost nothing of Jesus' childhood. But we can be fairly sure it wasn't all that easy. What we know is that he went through all the trials that we all go through growing up. As an adult he had to face opposition and even hatred from the most influential people in his culture. He was part of an oppressed people group. He knew the discouragement of telling people the truth and having them either not get it or reject it. He knew loneliness. He felt rejection even from his own family. Eventually he was unfairly and falsely accused, became the victim of total injustice, was mocked, tortured, abandoned and executed. He knows hurt, loneliness, sadness and pain of all sorts not in an intellectual way but through first-hand experience. He cares about us and all of our hurts, hardships, disappointments and losses because he knows what it feels like.

That's an important thing about love. If a person doesn't really care about what another individual is going through when that person is hurting, is that really love at all? We have a friend who has been dealing with some difficult dental issues. A few years ago, Laurie had to go through getting a dental implant. That sounds like a simple thing, but it was a long, sometimes trying process that took up the good part of a year. It was something of an ordeal. This has made both of us very empathetic to our friend's situation, both because we love her and we understand what she is going through. And that is how God loves us. He cares and he understands, and that makes a big difference.

LOVE DRIVES GOD

Love is behind everything that God does. Everything he has done for us, everything he is doing in our lives and in the world, everything he allows to happen in our lives, is driven by his love for us. He does not do even one thing that is not motivated by love.

How do we know that? Think about 1 Corinthians 13:1-3. Paul wrote, "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal." He says if we don't have love as the motive in what we do, no matter how great the thing we do might be, all we end up doing is becoming like that cell phone that starts ringing in the middle of an important scene in the movie you are watching in the theater. You are really annoying.

So my question for you is this: do you believe that God is ever like that annoying person and his cell phone? I'm going to go with no on that one. If that's true, then that must mean that God loves in everything he does, because if he didn't, he's that cell phone.

This has some implications for us. One of those has to do with something I see in Laurie often. We have a plant by our kitchen window that has some beautiful flowers. It is a hibiscus plant, but the

flowers are unique. They are multi-colored, with reds, oranges and yellow in them and they are spectacular. At one point Laurie was looking at them through the kitchen window, talking about how much she liked them, and she said, “I am so thankful that God has given us these beautiful flowers. They lift my spirit. They are a gift from him.” On another occasion we were out for a walk. It was a lovely sunny day. Laurie was enjoying the beautiful blue sky and she said, “It’s so cool that God has given us this day with that spectacular sky.” On these and other similar occasions she sees these things as gifts from God.

She is right. Why did God create the universe? His motive is always the same. It was because of love. Why does he give us days with brilliant blue skies and why does he give us glorious flowers, and sunsets, and music and food and all the rest of it? It is because he loves us. We should always see the many things we enjoy, the many beautiful moments in this world as expressions of his love for us, for that is what they are.

The principle applies to the other side of the coin as well. Last year I had a hernia and had to have hernia surgery to repair it. It wasn’t a big deal. Lots of people have that and it’s routine. But it wasn’t routine for me. I had to let someone knock me unconscious with some drugs so someone else could cut me open with a knife and mess around inside my body. Then I had to recover from that experience. I would rather have just passed on the whole thing. But why did God allow that in my life? I don’t know the specific reason, but I know that whatever it was, love was behind it. I know that because love is behind everything God does.

Sometimes we feel like God must not love us because he seems to allow things to happen to us that we don’t think would occur if he really loves us. So we doubt. Does he care at all? Is he even there? We must always remember what verse 9 tells us: “This is how God showed his love among us: he gave us everything we want and made sure that nothing we think is bad or disappointing ever happens to us.” Oh, wait, that’s the Rick Myatt Perversion. Maybe we should check a different translation. What did John say was the way God loved us? “He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.” The final evidence of God’s love cannot be found in any circumstance we go through, because we don’t have the eternal perspective necessary to understand those. What we know is God loves us more than we can imagine because he gave his one and only Son for us. He made a sacrifice infinitely greater than any we will ever make or even witness, to rescue us. That was the greatest act of love creation will ever see. So we must never question the depth and intensity of God’s love for us.

This attitude will completely change how I see the world. Knowing (though I may not understand it) that everything that happens in my life is allowed there because God loves me, I can accept it. In fact, I can do more than accept it. I can embrace it.

LOVE IS DERIVED FROM GOD

There is a verse right before the two we are looking at today that says something we must never forget. 1 John 4:7 says, “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God.” Pay attention to that last phrase. Love comes from God. Not only is God the very definition of love, he is

the source of it. This makes sense because James tells us that every good thing is a gift from God. Love is the best thing we will ever experience, so it should be no surprise that it is from God.

The fact that your mother loves you is a gift from God. If you have a spouse who loves you, that's from God. If your children love you, that's from God. If you have friends that actually love you, that all comes from God. He is the source of every ounce of love in this world.

I know you've heard this until you are sick of it, but I have to tell you again that I am totally confounded by the fact that Laurie loves me. One day this week I was at home working in my study upstairs and Laurie was downstairs. She often has to work on songs that she is going to teach to one of her voice students or sing at a wedding. Sometimes she just plays and sings to keep in practice. She was working on several songs and for an hour she played the piano and sang. It was beautiful. It filled our house with wonderful music. I again marveled at the fact that Laurie loves me.

The thing is, that love that brings such joy to me is a gift from God. Were it not for God, such love would never have existed. It was as I thought about this that I finally figured out why Laurie married me. God made her do it. But do you see the point? Every bit of love that we receive ultimately comes from God. It was all his idea, and he created it. It is all a gift from him that we should never, ever take for granted. Love is essential to our souls. Without love they become horribly distorted, full of pain, and ultimately they die. But God has given us many streams of love.

Here's the thing about love. It is always a gift. Love is never deserved. If love is deserved or earned, then it is actually an obligation. But to be real love, it must be freely given. So every bit of love is a gift that we have not earned, and ultimately it comes from God. Laurie's birthday was Thursday. She always gets sort of short changed because her birthday and Mother's Day kind of blend into one. On second thought, she doesn't really get short changed since her view of her birthday is somewhat expansive. She feels that the way it's supposed to work is we celebrate her birth month, so May is just one long party of celebrating Laurie. But this week I thought about the former days when our kids were little. The birthday-Mother's Day complex really pushed me because I wanted to get her a birthday card from me and one from the kids, Mother's Day card and one from the kids, presents from me and from the kids for both days. For a guy like me, one with an awfully narrow bandwidth, this was a lot to manage. The problem was the kids couldn't go to the Hallmark store and pick out cards, and then go shopping for just the right presents for Mom. So it fell on the shoulders of Mr. Narrow Bandwidth to get all that together. So on her birthday the kids would give their card and their present to Mom, then they'd repeat that on Mother's Day, as I would. The cards and gifts from the kids were genuine expressions of love for Mom. They really wanted to give to her. But Laurie knew that while they did want to express love and give to her, all of it really came from me. And so it is with the love we experience. Love from other people is genuinely from them, but ultimately it comes from God. Just as Laurie cherished those gifts from the kids and enjoyed them, but also appreciated the love that came from me, so we cherish the love we receive from others, and thank God that he is the one who really makes it all possible.

APPLICATION

BELIEVE GOD LOVES YOU

As we will see later when we return to Ephesians, one of the most important things we can do is be grounded in the fact that God loves us. We need to make that the fundamental truth of our lives. Our primary identity should be that we are people loved by God. We don't have to deal any more with the persistent need to feel like we're good enough. God's unconditional love has taken that completely out of the equation. Whether we are good enough is as much a factor in God's love for us as how tall we are is for what our grade point average was when we were in school. It's totally irrelevant and unrelated, so we can rest in God's unconditional love.

LOVE GOD BACK

What is the natural response to love, especially to undeserved, unlimited love? It is both gratitude and then loving back. That is how we should love God. We should thank him, and we should express our love to him by giving him our devotion and our worship. And we can love him by striving with all our might to do what makes him happy. He tells us the thing that makes him most happy is when we let his unconditional love flow through us to other people.

DON'T FEAR

Later in 1 John 4 we see a reminder of something we easily forget. In verse 18 John wrote, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment." The primary meaning of this verse is that we need have no fear in the presence of God. His perfect love eliminates fear. We have nothing to fear!

But there is a broader effect of fear. Love is the antidote to fear in many ways in our lives. The fact that God loves us means we have nothing to fear. At every moment of every day we can live with courage and freedom because our loving Father is with us. Little Ella went through a phase recently where she was waking up in the middle of the night crying. One thing would help. If Mama or Dadda were with her then she could be calm and rest. She knew they love her. So she was safe. As we go through life our God is with us and he loves us, so we are safe. God's perfect love drives out fear.