

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.  
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height  
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight  
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.  
I love thee to the level of every day's  
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.  
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;  
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.  
I love with a passion put to use  
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.  
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose  
With my lost saints, -- I love thee with the breath,  
Smiles, tears, of all my life! -- and, if God choose,  
I shall but love thee better after death.<sup>1</sup>

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) penned these words in what is now known as Sonnet 43 of one collection of her poems. Born in County Durham in North East England, she began writing at young age. Once published, her poems attracted the writer Robert Barrett. They courted and married in secrecy out of fear of her father's disapproval. When the marriage was discovered, she was disinherited. So they moved to Italy and she died in Florence at the age of 55 in 1861. Yet this poem has endured as one of her most famous. It speaks of a depth of love that goes beyond the simple "I love you" statements. She references her faith and one writer notes that her work carries a religious theme. She read and studied Milton's Paradise Lost and Dante's Inferno. She says in her writing, "We want the sense of the saturation of Christ's blood upon the souls of our poets that it may cry through them in answer to the ceaseless wail of the Sphinx of our humanity." She believed Christ's religion is essentially poetry – poetry glorified."

Perhaps that's why Sonnet 43 has endured with its description of numerous ways in which she loved her beloved.

It's a great blessing to be on the receiving end of someone else's love. Today we think of love on Valentine's Day. It is name for a priest named Valentinus. The story goes that a Roman Emperor forbid soldiers to marry until they had completed their military service. The Emperor did not want them distracted from their duty. But Valentinus would secretly perform for soldiers while they were still in the service. Somehow word got out that these secret ceremonies

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/how-do-i-love-thee/>

took place. So the Emperor had Valentinus arrested. He was apparently executed on February 14. So this day became Valentine's Day remembering the priest who offered this service for young lovers.<sup>2</sup>

Now it has morphed into an opportunity to express love to those we cherish. I think it can serve as a good reminder of the importance of expressing and showing love to those around us. But there's some of us here today that don't have a romantic love in our lives. Or the loved one we once shared life with is gone.

But whether you are together with someone or alone, there is still one who loves you in multiple ways. If you're a Christian, you have received the greatest love anyone could ever receive. God loves us. God showed His love for us through the cross. The Bible even tells us that God IS love. But what does it mean when we say "God loves you?" God cares about you? God affirms you just as you are and will be your eternal cheerleader? God has romantic feelings towards you? God will give Himself up for you? God will always be there for you? God wants to kiss you? God thinks you're hot?

One challenge in talking about God's love is our tendency to project onto Him our own understanding of love. Or we may apply to Him our favorite form of love. So if we like the more emotional side of expressing love, we can conclude that God must emotionally express love like we do. Maybe we are less emotional and more practical. We could have gotten the Valentine's Card that cost 20\$ but there's a deal over here where you can get some cards on clearance for 2\$. Even though they say "Merry Christmas," you can scratch that out to say "Happy Valentine's Day." So you've killed 2 birds with one stone – you gave a card and you saved \$18. So you conclude God must be like that. He expresses love by being practical and shows love by providing and doing the hard work of the cross, but none of this emotional stuff.

If we have only one angle that we take on how God loves, we could have a distorted view of His love. Or we could miss the many ways God loves us. So today we are going to look at several ways the Bible talks about God's love. This message is based on a little book I read a few weeks ago called "The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God" by D. A. Carson.<sup>3</sup> The title of this book intrigued me. We think we understand God's love? That's what God is all about after all. But Carson pointed out how the common understanding of God's love can be strikingly different than the Bible's

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.who2.com/bio/saint-valentine;>

<sup>3</sup> Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God, DA Carson; Crossway; Wheaton; 2000

description. So I'm thankful to Carson for his work and sensed the need to capitalize on Valentine's Day with a focus on God's love.

So today, we are going to take a journey to discover how God loves us. We're going to ask the Bible to count the ways. Once we have those, we will ponder do we relate to and respond to a God who offers us love in so many ways? Then we'll conclude with an opportunity to receive God's love and express our love to Him at Jesus' table.

So let's begin. **What are some different ways the Bible speaks of the love of God? 1) God's Inter Trinitarian Love - The peculiar love of the Father for the Son and of the Son for the Father.** The New Testament paints a picture of a close, special, loving relationship between God the Father and God the Son. John's writings especially emphasize this. ( I can't help but wonder if Jesus' closeness with John enabled more discussion about the nature of love between God the Father and the Son.)

So in John 3:35, Jesus says "The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand." Or John 5:20 – "For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing." At the last supper in John 14:31, Jesus says, "I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father."

We saw this close relationship between Jesus and the Father a few weeks ago in Matthew 11:27. That verse describes the relationship between God and Jesus. Jesus said, "All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." We talked about this exclusive relationship between Father and Son – not in the sense of excluding others so they can just focus on themselves. But it is exclusive in that no one comes close to knowing the Father and Son like they know one another. The Father and Son have a deep loving relationship.

Carson notes this inter Trinitarian love of God marks off Christian monotheism from all other monotheisms. Monotheism is a belief in one God. Mono – one; Theism – belief in God. Three major religions believe in one God – Judaism, Islam and Christianity. But Christianity is the only one with a trinity – God in three persons. In Christianity, we discover this unique love between Father and Son. That's one way the Bible talks about God's love.

Another is **2- God's providential love over all He has made.** Providence is foresight or far sightedness. Providential with respect to God refers to his divine care and watch over creation. Providential includes the word provide. So this describes God's providing love for the world and the people in it.

Now there is no Bible verse that says “God providentially loves all He has made.” But God’s action towards His creation looks a lot like love. From Genesis 1 we see God create everything before there is sin. He pronounces this creation good. It’s the work of a loving Creator. Jesus describes God’s providing love in Matthew 6 as a reason not to worry. Matthew 6:26 – Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. . . . Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin yet I tell you even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you O you of little faith?” There isn’t a sparrow that falls to the ground without God’s knowledge. Jesus uses this aspect of God’s love to encourage us. If God extends a providing love to such small creatures, He will provide for us – not always what we want but what we need. As the apostle Paul says in Philippians 4:19 – My God will supply all your needs according to his riches in glory.

The third way the Bible talks about God’s love is by far, the most popular. **3- God’s yearning love toward His fallen world.** Carson describes this a little more technically – It is God’s salvation stance or posture towards the world. The most famous verse for this love comes when Jesus speaks to the religious leader Nicodemus. In John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world, that He gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” World here does not refer to planet Earth. John uses “world” in his Gospel to describe fallen people – sinners – everyone.

So the power of this verse, Carson states, is not that God’s love is extended to so big a thing as the world, the planet Earth. The power and magnitude of God’s love is that He extends love to so bad a thing as the world. In John 3 It’s not about God’s love extended to so many people but so wicked a people.

Yet John also talks about the extent of God’s love to so many people in 1<sup>st</sup> John 2:2 – Jesus is the propitiation – the sacrifice of atonement – for our sins and not our sins only but also for the sins of the whole world.” Before we came to Christ, we were part of the fallen world. God loves that world. God has always had a yearning love for sinners. It has existed throughout human history. Ezekiel 33:11 states “As surely as I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evils ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?” Here is the heart cry of someone who desires deeply for lost people to be found; for the sinner to be saved; for the drowning to be rescued. If you’re a Christian, God reached out with His yearning love to you so that you might be found.

So we've seen God's intra-Trinitarian love, God's providential love towards creation, God's yearning love to His fallen world. Then we come to number 4. If number 3 was the most popular of God's love, number 4 is the least popular. **4 – God's selecting love towards the elect.** We talked a little about this a few weeks ago regarding Matthew 11:27 where Jesus says "No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal." We noted election is found throughout Scripture. The elect may be the entire nation of Israel or the church as a body or individuals. In each case, God sets his affection on his chosen ones in a way that he does not set his affection on others.

And before we get too hard on God and accuse him for his unfairness, let's think about how we act. Parents, imagine it's time for the Christmas program at your kid's or grandkids school. When all the kids are up there singing or performing, who do you look for? Oh, you appreciate other kids. But there's something special about seeing your own child or grandchild. We set our affections on our kids or grandkids in a way that we don't set our affections on others. God does the same in His selecting love.

So let's see this in Scripture. Deuteronomy 7:6-8 – to Israel – "For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt."

Deuteronomy 10:14-15 – "Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the Lord has set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples as you are this day." God's selection had nothing to do with how great or cool Israel was as a people. It was nothing more than His love. So God's love is directed towards Israel in a way that it was not directed towards other nations. Yet it had nothing to do with personal or national merit. It is nothing other than the love of God. You and I need to maybe think of God's love this way – God directs His love towards us in a way that He doesn't towards those who have rejected Him or ignored Him.

The electing nature of God's love surfaces frequently. In Ephesians 5:25, we read "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. Jesus will save *his people* from their sins - Matt. 1:21 – Not everyone. Titus 2:14 - Christ gave

himself for us, to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

If you are interested more in the “election” debate, and I’m not talking about Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton, but the debate between those who call themselves Arminians and those who call themselves Calvinists, here is Carson’s position. *I argue then that both Arminians and Calvinists should rightly affirm that Christ died for all, in the sense that Christ’s death was sufficient for all and that Scripture portrays God as inviting, commanding, and desiring salvation for all, out of love. (#3)*

*Further, all Christians ought to confess that in a slightly different sense, Christ Jesus, in the intent of God, died effectively for the elect alone, in line with the way the Bible speaks of God’s special selecting love for the elect. (#4)* If that means nothing to you and you just wish Armenians and Calvin Klein could just get along, you can pass over all that language. But recognize that there is this electing love of God and it is a good thing to receive it.

The last way the Bible talks about God’s love is **5 - God’s disciplining love towards Christians**. God’s love is sometimes directed towards His own people in a conditional way. So God exhorts His people to remain in His love or stay in his love. Jude 20-21 – “But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God.” In John 15:9, Jesus says “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide or remain in my love.” So there’s some way that we Christians can remain in Jesus’ love or we can step out of Jesus’ love.

This does not mean that we have stepped out of His saving love or electing love. But we’ve stepped out of that relational love with Christ through disobedience. Such actions result in God’s correcting or disciplining love to be directed toward us.

It’s like a father or mother’s love for their children. In one sense our love for them is unchanging. We love them regardless of what they do. But there is another sense where our children know they must remain in our relational love. If they don’t, they will experience a different kind of love – bawling out; restrictions – but it is ultimately out of love in a desire for protection and teaching.

We see a couple of examples of this kind of love exercised or talked about in the Bible. In Paul’s first letter to Timothy, Paul instructs him to wage good warfare holding faith and a good conscience. But then he talks about a couple of dudes who forgot this. So 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 1:19-20 – “By rejecting this (holding onto the faith and keeping a good

conscience) some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander.” So these guys had wandered from God to the point that their faith was shipwrecked. But they weren’t lost because listen to what Paul has done with respect to them. “I have handed them over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.” So Paul has exercised some sort of discipline on these two. He has released them to Satan’s influence and destruction as a last resort attempt to get them to return to life in good relationship with God.

Psalm 103:17-18 says “But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.” The most extensive passage on God’s disciplining love is found in Hebrews 12 – but especially verses 5-6 which quote Proverbs 3:11-12. My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the ones he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” This love comes from a Father who cares enough about His kids that He corrects them or builds boundaries to protect them when they stray.

So how does God love? Let us count the ways. 1- God offers a unique love to His Son. 2 - God offers providential love to His creation. 3 – God expressing yearning love to a lost world. 4 – God exercises a selecting love to the elect. 5 – God will act as a loving Father with a disciplinary love to his children.

These ways to love are not independent and compartmentalized pieces of God’s character. Nor does one love rule over the others. That’s the mistake we talked about at the beginning of this message where we can latch onto one aspect of God’s love and conclude that’s how He loves all the time or that love is supreme to all the others. Our world has latched onto God’s yearning love which is very inviting but then taken it to mean God affirms you and will be your eternal cheerleader no matter what you do in life and no matter whether you recognize as Lord. All of these ways are held in perfect tension in God’s character.

That’s the nature of our transcendent God – a God who exists above time and space – above or outside of the created order with its limitations. That’s the nature of our Sovereign God who is all knowing and all powerful and reigns over the universe. But how do we relate to a God like this who offers such a varied, deep, profound love to us?

Well, we need to recognize that despite God’s vastness and supreme authority, He does have emotions. Yet His emotions are not like ours in the sense that they flare up and rage out of control. His passions are displayed with the fullness of all his other perfections. So, when God says “I love you,” what does He mean?

Let's try this example that Carson writes so masterfully. I've adapted it to a Canadian context. Imagine a young dating couple named Cody and Brianne. They go for a wonderful skate at Hawrelak Park in Edmonton. It's a mild night. The snow reflects the colored lights. They stop for a hot chocolate. Cody looks deeply into Brianne's deep brown eyes and says, "Brianne, I love you, I really do." What does he mean?

If he's a decent guy, the least he means is "Brianne, you mean everything to me right now. I can't live without you. Your smile stuns me from across the room. Your beautiful eyes, lovely voice, the scent of your hair – everything about you transfixes me. I love you!"

He doesn't mean "Brianne, you have such a massive case of bad breath that you would embarrass a herd of unwashed, garlic-eating elephants. Your nose is so bulbous, you could wake up and smell the coffee in Brazil. Your hair is so greasy, it could lubricate an 18 wheeler. Your knees are so disjointed that you would make a camel look elegant. Your personality makes Atilla the Hun and Genghis Khan look like wimps. But I love you." No.

But when God comes to us and says "I love you." Does he mean, "You mean everything to me? I can't live without you. Your personality, your witty conversation, your beauty, your smile – everything about you stuns me. Heaven would be boring without you. "I love you!" That is what some therapeutic approaches to God spell out. We must be pretty wonderful because God loves us. And dear old God is pretty vulnerable, finding himself in a dreadful state unless we say yes to his love.

When God says He loves us, does He not rather mean something like "Morally speaking, you are the people with bad breath, a bulbous nose, the greasy hair, the disjointed knees and the abominable personality. Your sins do bring an ugly factor. But I love you anyway because it is my nature to love." I will provide for you, I yearn for you, I adore you. I choose you, I care enough about you to bring a disciplinary love to you.

This is the God sent His Son out of love for us. The Son out of love for the Father obeyed and went to the cross for us. Think of God's providing love for you. He lovingly provides for us in everyday life. He called out to us in yearning to rescue us out of the world. He loves us in a way that He does not love those outside His people. He loves us enough to correct us or intervene when we go off track. How does God love us? We have counted some of the ways. Now let's receive and remember more of His love at Christ's table and respond to the love we remember there.