

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Imitating a Personal God: Imitating the God who loves

*“Yoo--hoo--hoo
 I wanna be like you--oo--oo
 I wanna talk like you
 Walk like you, too--oo--oo
 You'll see it's true--oo--oo
 Someone like me--ee--ee
 Can learn to be
 Like someone like you.”*

So sang Mowgli, in the company of King Louie, in Disney's “*Jungle Book*”. Whilst we may not all wish to break out into this song this morning, it would be a wonderful thing if, as we start our series on imitating a personal God, we could all share its sentiment and have a genuine desire to walk like Him, and talk like Him and be like Him. For God has revealed Himself in the person of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, in part, so that we may learn how we ought to conduct ourselves if we choose to call ourselves Christian. It is no light thing to call God our Father. It bears a responsibility to act as His sons, representing Him in this world that still rejects His well beloved Son. So, this morning, we shall consider the God who loves us and see how this ought to mould us as we live our lives today. As we consider the character of God's love it is very much with the intention of looking for ways to replicate that sort of behaviour in our lives.

So often in the lives of young children, we are made to pause and think, as we see a particular action or manner of speaking, and realise that it is just like one of their parents. Sometimes it can be a very rude awakening! At other times, it is quite funny. But where and how have they learnt that behaviour? Usually it is not by deliberate teaching, but rather by quiet observation of their parent on a daily basis. So it ought to be for us. By spending time in quiet contemplation of the word of God and His person, we should learn to act in a way that is just like Him. Perhaps one of the reasons that the Bible has so few “dos” and “don'ts” is that they are not required. All we have to do is to spend time with Him and copy what we see. And we can hardly complain that we do not have sufficient example. The whole of the Bible reveals the One who we should imitate.

So let us consider the love of God in three ways this morning and pray that they will find a response in our lives.

God's love is proactive not reactive.

“In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” “We love Him, because He first loved us” 1 John 4:9, 10 and 19 “He who does not love does not know God, for God is love” 1 John 4:8.

I think the first lesson that we must learn this morning is that when God loves, He does so not because of anything the recipient of that love has done but because of the very nature of God. He is love. All that He ever does, He does because He is a loving God. Every action of His is an expression of that love. Every word is spoken in love. Every purpose of His designs is to express that love. This must be true, for when God made Adam and Eve, it could not possibly have been because of something they were or had done – they did not even exist! And yet the love of God acted so that His Son might not be alone but would one day have His bride. But His love was not just for humanity in general. It is for each one of us in particular. So in the purposes of God we have been chosen as the recipients of that love from before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4). He has decided to love me, not because of a particular characteristic in me that makes me lovable, but because He has chosen to do so. How different this is from human love. Someone is nice to me and so in return I am nice to them. Someone is horrible to me and I dislike them. I liked the look of the young girl who would one day become my wife and so I set out to get to know her better. In all these cases, the stirrings of my love, though maybe genuine enough, are reacting to an external stimulus. I love because someone has first loved me. Not so with God. As John could say, our love, not only for God, but indeed, our very capacity to love, is because He first loved us. And His love was in more than just word, for He sent His only begotten Son, to die on the cross, that we might be righteously forgiven. His is an active love, and what a good job too. Can you

imagine how I would feel, if a really horrible person killed my son, but for some legal technicality, walked free. That would be awful, but how much worse if he then bought the house next door. Every day there would be a reminder of my murdered son. It would drive me mad. Now imagine how God feels each time we talk to Him or come into His presence. What a daily reminder of how much He suffered in giving His Son. What a good job it is then, that His love for me does not rest on the fragile basis of my actions. Because He, of His own free choice decided to love me, irrespective of who or what I am, then I know that His love for me now and into the future rests upon a secure basis.

What a challenge to start off with then. That awkward neighbour, or the frustrating person in my local church, or the nasty family member. These are the people whom God would have me love, that they too might understand the kind of love that God has for them. Yes they will hurt me or do things that could make me angry. Naturally, my first instinct is to harden my heart to them and to protect my feelings. But that is not to imitate the God who loves us. As a first step, we need to make a list of all the people we know and then decide that we will always act towards them in a loving way. Some will inevitably take advantage of this, to make us look small or abuse that love. As we shall see shortly, love does not act as a doormat, but our hearts must never become hard to another or seek another's wrong. There must always be a desire on my part to enhance the lives of others irrespective of who they are or what they have done.

What a good thing it was that the creditor frankly forgave those two who owed him so much (Luke 7) or that the Samaritan came just where the man was (Luke 10). Nothing prompted them to demonstrate the love of God; they just got on and did it. May we this morning also act in just such a way towards those around about us. Imagine what a different place my neighbourhood would be or my place of work or even my family!

God's love is purposeful not sentimental.

"Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! ... Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is." "My little children, let us now love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth." 1 John 3:1-2 and 18 "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" 1 John 5:2-3.

Before we can truly imitate God's love, we need to understand what kind of love that is. No doubt 1 Corinthians 13 gives us a very clear description of the kinds of things that love does and we would be wise to emulate this sort of love in our own experience. The point we need to grasp this morning is that the love of God is very different from much of what calls itself love these days. In this world and age we confuse love with being nice and kind. We think that love is all red hearts and roses, sentimental pleasantries, grand gestures and indulgent forbearance. We think that a God who is all loving could never be angry with sinners or contemplate the reality of Hell. And yet it is so. God does not stop being a loving God, just so that He can talk about Hell and judgement. It is all a part of His essential being. There may not be anything inherently wrong with romantic love and niceness, but it falls far short of the totality of God's love. For God always has a definite purpose to His love, and if we are to imitate this then we need to think clearly about how this must represent itself in our lives. So we read at the beginning of 1 John 3, that the Father has lavished His love upon us. He has done this because we are His children, and it is with the express purpose that one day we should be like His Son. Now that is an awe-inspiring, wonderful thing to contemplate. Note it is the Father, rather than God, that has lavished His love upon us. This must be because as our Father, there will be times when the strictest discipline is needed to correct us when we go astray. When such times come into our lives, it is not that God has stopped loving us at all. Rather it is as an expression of that overwhelming love, that He will not tolerate something that is not for our ultimate good. So it is, in our own families, there are times when we need to discipline those we love. Indeed, not to discipline, is a sign of not loving. For sure, it is much easier to avoid conflict, to hope that all will work out one way or another, but if we are to say that we love our own families, or our spiritual family, then we ought not to shy away from discipline.

In 1 John 3:18, John makes it quite plain that love is something that is expressed not by words, but by actions. It must make God nauseous when he hears those who say they are believers singing all the wonderful songs of praise to Him, expressing in words their love for Him, and yet by their actions throughout the week, and by their disobedience to His word, utterly negate what they are saying. Each one of us ought to feel the challenge of this very much in our own lives. It is too easy to go to church on a Sunday morning and say or sing the right noises. It is quite a different thing to love in deed and in truth. Yet anything that is not in truth is not love! So, we might ask ourselves, how can I love my brothers and sisters in Christ? Well the answer may surprise us, and it is given at the beginning of chapter 5. It is not primarily by having them round for tea, or helping them when they are in trouble. No, John says in verse 2, that we know that we love them by loving God and keeping His commandments. The best way that I can show the love of God to you is by obeying the commandments of God as laid down in His Word! To imitate the love of God, first and foremost I need to do what is right by being obedient to His word. Then I need to show others that that is what I am doing, and then I need to encourage them to do the same by exercising a loving discipline. All too often we have gone

about things the wrong way round. We have tried to be nice to someone, but when it is not reciprocated we have then given up. Or perhaps we have tried to love someone, but when they do something that is not right, we have allowed them to do so, because we don't want to be harsh. God always wants the very best from us, and he may well lead us through the most trying of circumstances until we realise that His way is best. Too often we settle for second best, sometimes that may even be a good thing, but not the best. We ought to strive for the very best from ourselves and in the lives of those we say we love. We might say that God's love for us is a very calculating love. He knows what He wants from us, and He works to achieve that. Well in a similar way we need to be very purposeful in the way that we love. It is not as a result of others being nice to us, nor is it something to give us a warm feeling inside. It is because, having experienced the love of God for us, washing over us like a giant tsunami, we have set our minds to sharing that same kind of love with those around us, irrespective of who they are, but with the purpose of ensuring they are more like Jesus.

God's love is peaceful not fearful.

"You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." "Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgement; because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love." 1 John 4:4, 17 and 18

Naturally speaking, we are reluctant to love in case it all goes wrong and we get hurt. We protect ourselves by only cautiously giving our love to God or to others. And yet here we have the plain statement of Scripture telling us that perfect love casts out fear. Is this your experience this morning?

Perhaps like me, too often, you are caught in the no man's land of compromise between the now and the not yet. We know that a glorious future awaits when we are caught up to be with Jesus forevermore. But, doubting, we are afraid that we may miss out on something now, and so we are reluctant to fully commit ourselves to following Him. Fear cripples us, hindering our full commitment to Him and to putting into practice what we know to be right. What if I do and nobody else does? What if financially I miss out? What if others think less of me because I fully commit to Him? So many fears, so little love.

Perhaps you may doubt the security of your salvation, feeling that it in some ways depends upon your actions now. If I do not love Him enough, I may somehow be lost. How much, this morning, we need to imitate the love of God and recognise that, having once committed ourselves to Him, we are eternally secure in His keeping. I cannot imagine Jesus doubting in heaven, as it were saying to Himself, "I can see how this plan of salvation could work, but what if nobody believes – it will all be a waste of time." Rather, had not His Father set before Him this path and in perfect love, He would follow it. Oh that we could learn to love like this!

The love that we have for Him should be a love that sets us free to serve without fear or concern for the results. How often has our fear for the future, or my concern for the future of my local church, robbed me of the joy of serving Him today? The fear of doing something and it not working out may paralyse us. Now I am not condoning for one minute a half hearted attitude that is unconcerned, if I am unfaithful in the gospel and unsupportive of my local church. But when there is a genuine desire to follow Him, then love would have us serve with joy, unburdened by the weight of what will happen tomorrow. If He should choose not to outwardly bless my service that must be because He has some better plan in mind. It need not concern me now what that may be. He will reveal it in His time. Sufficient that today He has called me to serve Him here and now. We sometimes forget that it is His body, His church and feel that we are solely responsible for its spiritual health. Today, we need to learn to love Him in a way that is free from fear, knowing that He knows best.

Sometimes I lie awake at night, unable to sleep, worrying about the decisions that are made at work and what is going to happen. Other times, I worry about my local church and how things are going there. Perhaps there are things in your life that keep you awake at night. If only we could learn to truly love Him, trusting that He knows what is best for us. Yes we might say that we love Him, but what we do betrays our words. First of all, then, we need to learn to really love God. But then we need to love one another in the same way too. Perhaps I am afraid of the decisions my children may make when they are older. I may be concerned about how others may be behaving. So naturally, I tend to withdraw into myself and not to fully commit myself to someone else. However, we have a God who has lavished His love upon us – when we were alienated from Him, and enemies of all that He is. What a risk! If we are to imitate the God who loves us in loving one another, then we will need to take massive risks. Undoubtedly, there will be times when we find ourselves disappointed and hurt. At times like this the temptation to retreat into our own little world will be immense. But it is at just such times that He would have us carry on reaching out in love.

I am reminded of the children's story about the little nut-brown hare, who asked the question "How much do you love me?" His answers were always as big as he could imagine, but never as big as his fathers. In just such a way we need to learn the discipline of loving, but be aware that no matter how much we love, it will never be as much as He

loved us. To love like Him will take practice and conscious effort. It is not an emotion that we feel but a deliberate act of choice.

With apologies to William Shakespeare, "To love or not to love, that is the question". But if we are to "Be imitators of God as dear children" (Ephesians 5:1) then we must learn to imitate His love in our lives by actively loving others before they love us, by loving others enough to discipline them and with a purpose in mind, rather than in some slushy, sentimental manner and by not allowing the fear of loving in just such a way to keep us from doing what is right. Oh, that others would say of me; "he is just like his Father!"

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