



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 2.6.7 – The Doctrine of God

The Attributes of God: Love, Mercy, Grace

We have already talked about God's love. It is hard to speak about God without speaking of His love, for God is love. In this lesson we bring together some of the different aspects of God's love, focusing finally on God's love for us in Christ.

God loves all of His creatures. That is why He takes care of them as He does. Psalm 104 says that God provides food and drink to all creatures. He provides **"wine that makes glad the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread which strengthens man's heart"** (Psalm 104:15). He also takes care of the trees, the hills, the cliffs, the seas and all that live in them: **"These all wait for You, that You may give them their food in due season. What You give them they gather in; You open Your hand, they are filled with good"** (Psalm 104:27-28). The Lord God rejoices in all His works. He **"gives food to all flesh, for His mercy endures forever"** (Psalm 136:25). Jesus said: **"Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them... Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these"** (Matthew 6:26-29).

God has a special love for mankind. He made in His own image, originally holy and righteous like Himself. Even after the fall into sin, God cares for all mankind. Jesus said: **"He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust"** (Matthew 5:45). He made the whole universe for the benefit of mankind. Even the commandments He gave were intended for man's benefit, as Jesus said: **"The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath"** (Mark 2:27). Not only did God create the world for man; He preserves the world for man's benefit. **"He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness"** (Acts 14:17).

In particular God shows His love for mankind by providing a Savior from sin for the whole world: **"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved"** (John 3:16-17). **"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"** (1 John 4:9-10). **"He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world"** (1 John 2:2). **"For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us"** (1 Thessalonians 5:9-10). **"God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"** (Romans 5:8).

The Bible also speaks of a special bond of love and affection between God and those whom He has brought to faith in His Son. For example, Psalm 147:11 declares: **"The LORD takes pleasure in those who fear Him, in those who hope in His mercy."** The prophet Isaiah gives us this message from God for His believing Israel: **"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are Mine... I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior... Since you were precious in My sight, you have been honored, and I have loved you"** (Isaiah 43:1-4). Isaiah compares the love of God for His people with the love of a mother for her infant child: **"Can a woman forget her nursing child,**

and not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; your walls are continually before Me” (Isaiah 49:15-16).

The special bond of love that God has for His people is shown us by the love Jesus had for His closest followers. John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, says of his Master: **“Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end”** (John 13:1). In His private conversation with His disciples on the evening before His death, He said: **“He who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him... If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him”** (John 14:21-23).

Likewise, the apostle Paul assured the believers in Corinth that the Holy Spirit also was living within them: **“Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God?”** (1 Corinthians 6:19). Paul wrote: **“You are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.’ Therefore ‘Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.’ ‘I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty”** (2 Corinthians 6:16-18). Those who believe in Jesus are God’s family whom He loves dearly. **“Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God”** (1 John 3:1).

The Bible uses other terms to express God’s love in its many manifestations. In his letter to Titus, the apostle Paul uses four different words in one sentence to describe the love of God: **“But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life”** (Titus 3:4-7).

God’s kindness is His willingness to cancel the punishment we deserve: **“Oh, how great is Your goodness, which You have laid up for those who fear You, which You have prepared for those who trust in You!”** (Psalm 31:19). In Romans 11:22 we have God’s goodness and severity presented side by side: **“Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.”** We must teach both God’s goodness and His severity.

The term **“mercy”** is God’s love as He sees our misery and has compassion on us. This is illustrated in the story of the Good Samaritan, who had compassion on the wounded man lying by the roadside. The apostle Paul praises God for His mercy and compassion, saying: **“Blessed be the God and Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation”** (2 Corinthians 3:3-4). We are given a glimpse of God’s mercy and compassion in Jesus’ ministry to the sick and grieving. **“Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need”** (Hebrews 4:16).

It seems the apostle Paul’s favorite word to refer to God’s love is the word **“grace”**. Grace can be defined as God’s undeserved love for sinners, as revealed in the words and works of Jesus Christ. The righteousness of God is God’s gift to mankind because of Christ, as Paul says: **“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”** (Romans 3:23-24). Our justification, or righteousness before God, is a free gift because of Jesus’ life and death in our behalf. Paul compared our sin and God’s grace by comparing Adam and Christ: **“For if by the one man’s offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many... For if by the one man’s offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ... The law entered that the offense might abound. But**

where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 5:15-21). Adam brought sin into the world, so that all are sinners. Jesus Christ brought God’s grace to the world. God’s undeserved love forgives sinners because of Christ’s work of redemption, and those who receive this gift by faith are given the gift of eternal life.

Grace and merit are opposites that cannot stand together: **“And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no more grace”** (Romans 11:6). The world teaches that we saved by our own works in obedience to God’s laws. But the Bible teaches that we saved by grace, that is, by God’s undeserved love without any merit or worthiness in us : **“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast”** (Ephesians 2:8).

God’s love is not in conflict with His perfect holiness. God’s holiness is evident on the cross of Jesus: in His hatred of sin He punishes His own Son because He is burdened with the sin of the world. God’s grace is evident on the same cross: through Christ’s suffering in our place, God has established a righteousness that covers all the sin of the world. God offers this salvation to all as a free gift. God’s holiness and God’s love meet on the cross.

Questions

1. What does God do every day out of love for all of His creatures?
2. What does God do every day out of love for those created in His image?
3. Why did God send His Son into the world of sinners as a Savior?
4. Why is it important for our comfort that Jesus died for all sinners?
5. What special bond exists between God and those who believe in Jesus?
6. Where does the Bible teach that God lives in us?
7. Which four terms for love does Paul use in his letter to Titus?
8. If your native language is not English, what is the equivalent of these four terms in your native language?
9. What is the slight difference in meaning between God’s mercy and God’s grace?
10. Explain what this means: “Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more”?
11. Explain how God’s holiness and God’s love meet on the cross.