**UNBOUNDED LOVE (Ephesians 3:14-21)**

As men, women and children, created in the image of God, each of us has one great need – one great desire – one great longing – and that is to be loved personally, intimately and deeply; to be known and accepted and cherished for who we are; to believe that our life has meaning and value to others and that our happiness and wellbeing is as important to at least one other person as it is to ourselves.

We desire to have people in our lives with whom we can trust to always be there for us, to never leave us nor forsake us**,** particularly in the difficult circumstances of life; people who in the sincere expression of their love for us make us feel special and important; people whose presence in our life brings us great joy and contentment as well as a strong sense of significance and security. This is what children look to their parents for, and what a man or women look for in a marriage partner.

We long for someone who will readily forgive our failures and foolishness, who will always seek reconciliation when there is inevitable conflict, and who always looks with great compassion on our pain and suffering.

It is such love that creates strong, stable families and forges true friendships. And it does so because true love, as God defines it, **(1 Corinthians 13**) involves putting the needs of others before our own, even at great cost to ourselves, and finding great joy and fulfillment in doing so, believing the eternal principle given by Jesus that it is more blessed to give than receive.

Such relationships in this world are the exception rather than the rule. And even where they do appear to exist, no matter how strong and satisfying they may seem, they ultimately are fragile and temporary in nature, mutable - subject to change. This could occur through the physical death or debilitating disease of the one who loves us, or through the changing of their affections and intentions toward us wherein they may for a time say and act like they love us and then abandon us physically or emotionally; even abuse or exploit us. This latter experience is most clearly seen in our world today wherein marriage vows are broken with regularity and children are abused and neglected by the very people who should love them the most.

I have worked in the field of social work for over 30 years. Social work is one of man’s institutions for addressing the social, personal and interpersonal problems that are inherent to a fallen, sinful world.

Over those 30 years I have worked with myriads of people; adults, adolescents and even children who had become involved in behaviors and lifestyles that brought sorrow and suffering and destruction to their own lives, to the lives of others, and most tragically to those who actually did love them.

And in listening to their stories - their beliefs about why they were behaving in such a way, I learned that much of the anger, frustration, depression and fear/anxiety that was motivating their destructive/self-destructive behaviors was related to them having been, or feeling that they had been betrayed and abused and rejected by those who *should* have loved them.

Many felt abandoned, alone in this world, worthless and unloved; powerless to do anything about it, with no hope of their loneliness being abated and emptiness in their heart ever being filled by someone who genuinely loved them. In response, they acted out the related hurt and anger, bitterness and despair in ways that further hurt themselves and others.

This is not an excuse for sinful, criminal or self-destructive behavior; it is just a context for understanding it.

All of us, even in the context of what is considered a loving relationship with another person, still at times feel alone – empty, unfulfilled and even unloved. And we do so because our need and longing for love extends far beyond that which can be provided through a relationship with another fallen sinful human being who is just as needy, just as desperate as we are for true and lasting love; and thus they ultimately really have nothing to offer us that will truly satisfy the deepest needs and desires of *our* heart.

Aurelius’ Augustine - one of the earliest and greatest Christian theologians and thinkers in church history, understood this; and in his autobiography *Confessions* he expressed his understanding in this short but extremely insightful prayer:

***“Thou hast made us for thyself O Lord, and our heart is restless, until it finds its rest in thee.”***

What Augustine is saying here is that the love that produces in us a rest from our desperate search for it (mostly in all the wrong places); as well as the joy and satisfaction, the significance and security we expect to find in such love, can only be found in the love of God - a love that has been devalued and distorted and even despised by the vast majority of men and women who presently live in a world that is void of true and lasting love.

And thus we live among and are part of a grieving, restless and angry world of people who are mostly governed by the lusts of men rather than by the love of God; a world where many pursue their own private happiness through manipulation and exploitation of their neighbor rather than in the love of their neighbor.

Augustine, again in his classic book **City Of God**, would strongly contend that it is the unwillingness of men and women to pursue and embrace, to rejoice and rest in the love of God above all other loves that leads to both the discontent and restlessness that resides in our hearts and the intractable social problems of our society.

We live in a world that has little if any faith or trust in the love of God and even less love *for* God. And the Bible as well as human history reveal that as long as we continue to live like this we will all, to varying degrees, continue to struggle with the loneliness and emptiness, with the feelings of worthlessness and meaninglessness and boredom that are the direct result of our rejection of God’s purpose for and rule over our lives, resulting in our alienation from the glorious life with God for which we were created, a life of unbounded love.

However, despite mankind’s rejection of God’s rule over our lives, and even in the midst of God’s just anger and judgment toward men and women who live in this way, God repeatedly in scripture, in the course of human history and in the course of our lives, reveals Himself as a passionate lover of people; people whom He created to know and love and be loved by Him; people to whom He offers reconciliation and redemption if we would only turn our hearts to Him.

This love is illustrated throughout the Old Testament in God’s relationship with Israel, which provides a historical example of God constantly reaching out to a people whom He had called to Himself in love, but who had disdained that love repeatedly in their rebellion and their sin.

In the Old Testament, we see how God, the infinitely glorious creator of the universe, lovingly, compassionately and tenderly reaches out to a nation of people who are living in abject misery, slaves for the past 400 years to the most powerful and wicked nation on earth at that time, Egypt. Israel was chosen by God to be the nation, the people to whom He would first directly and personally reveal the height and depth and length and breadth of His love; and through whom He would one day reveal that love to all the nations of the world in the person and work of Jesus.

In extraordinary displays of great power and might over all of nature and the hearts of men; God, through the leadership of Moses, frees them from slavery to Egypt, with the people of Egypt giving them all of their riches and valuables (essentially their back wages) as they leave.

After demonstrating in His miraculous deliverance of the nation from Egypt that He is infinitely worthy of their honor, trust, obedience and love, God initiates a relationship with them – a relationship that no other single nation on the earth had or would ever have with Him.

He establishes a covenant with them; promising that He would be their God and they would be His people, a people He would bless above all the nations of the earth, providing abundantly for all their needs in a land free from the hardships and calamities that had come upon all the world because of sin.

He gives them laws and commandments to not only ensure their good, but to test their trust in His love and their love for Him which would be evidenced in their willing obedience to those commandments.

In God’s relationship with Israel, we see a love that is both passionate and compassionate in His care for them; overwhelmingly generous in His expression of His goodness and overpowering in its expression of His mercy and grace toward a people who will prove throughout history to be totally unresponsive to it and unappreciative of it.

In **Exodus 34** we have God reintroducing Himself to Moses and to the nation of Israel. This is immediately after they have blatantly rebelled against Him, building and worshiping an idol out of the gold they received from the Egyptians; an act for which they deserved the fullness of His justice and judgement, and yet as a nation received mercy and grace.

In **verses 5-7** Moses writes; *“Now the Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him (Moses) there and proclaimed the name of the Lord.****6****And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth,****7****keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation*.”

In this passage, God proclaims that He is first and foremost a God of love, who longs to be good and kind and gracious to His people, but that He is also a God of justice, who will not tolerate those who through their disobedience to His laws and defiance of His commands, interfere with, interrupt and diminish the infinite joy and pleasure and satisfaction God created mankind to enjoy in Him.

Israel will continue though, to exploit and presume upon God’s love in their twin sins of idolatry and ingratitude. And although God will discipline them at times, He continues to display great patience and compassion, calling them to repent and turn their affections and desires and longings away from this world and the things of this world that have become their idols, and to pursue Him alone as the object of their deepest love and the source of their greatest joy; that they may not become His enemies, the objects of His wrath, but remain as He called them to be, the objects of His unbounded love. We see God’s expression of His faithfulness, patience and compassion toward Israel in the following:

**Hosea 11:1 “***When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son.”* Here God references their former rescue from Egypt that marks the origin of His covenantal love relationship with Israel. God will express in the next six verses His grief regarding their unfaithfulness in the midst of God’s love toward them and how their estrangement – their willful rejection of and rebellion against God - has exposed them to His justice and wrath.

However, in **verse 8** God expresses His deep desire for reconciliation*. “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? And how can I make you like Adamah? How can I set you like Zeboiim? My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred. I will not execute the fierceness of My anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim. For I am God, and not man. The Holy One in your midst; and I will not come with terror.”*

In this passage we have a true heartfelt expression of God’s love in that He, like any true lover of another, cannot endure the thought of separation from His beloved. He wants to give them every opportunity to reconcile – to repent of living a life of distrust in His love, disdain for His truth and disobedience to His law, and return to Him as the lover of their souls.

And yet Israel, over a period of about 700-800 years, will consistently disregard God’s overtures of love and warnings of judgement given through the prophets; continuing in their sin and disdain for His love to where they finally make themselves the objects of His judgement and wrath.

This sets the stage for the revelation of God’s ultimate and final offer of His invaluable love, first to Israel and then to the nations of the world. That offer is made in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ, God the Son, the promised Messiah; who at great cost to Himself would save from God’s righteous judgement all who would embrace Him as the ultimate expression of God’s invaluable love. At the same time, He would grant them as a gracious gift, eternal life, restoration to the glorious life with God for which they were created (**Romans 6:33).**

The Apostle Paul in **Romans 5:6-11** tells us that God demonstrated His great love – His extraordinary love – His infinitely valuable love for us at the point of our greatest need; while we were yet sinners – enemies of God, incapable of doing anything ourselves to escape His judgement, thus destined for an eternity in Hell. But God the Son, Jesus Christ, who is rich in mercy and abounding in grace, because of His great love for us, became a man and as a man died an unjust and agonizing death on a Roman Cross, wherein while on that cross He would experience all of the horrors and terrors and torments of Hell in **His** body and soul that those who would come to trust in His love had deserved to experience in their body and soul throughout eternity.

**Ephesians 2** tells us why; - so that in the ages to come He could demonstrate the exceeding riches of His grace and goodness; all that an infinitely good, wise and powerful Heavenly Father longs to give to and do all who would trust in His love as it is demonstrated in the person and work of His beloved Son, Jesus Christ.

In Jesus Christ, God reveals Himself as He did in **Exodus 34;** as the Lord who abounds in mercy and grace, lovingkindness and faithfulness to those who would trust in and rejoice in His love, and as a compassionate and merciful seeker of those who would not; as He would persistently, through the preaching of the Gospel, call all men to repent of their opposition to His rule over their lives and be reconciled to the eternal love relationship with the God for which they were created. **(Acts 3:19-21)**

The Gospel is the *Good News* of what God has done in the ultimate and eternal expression of His invaluable love to rescue sinful men, women and children from the Hell all mankind deserves and qualify them for a Heaven no one (except the man Jesus) could ever deserve. We are told in **1 John 4:9-11** **“***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.****10****In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation (atoning sacrifice) for our sins.”*

Jesus, the eternal Son of God, out of obedient love for the Father and compassionate love for fallen mankind, *willingly and gladly* came into this sin corrupted world to accomplish everything necessary to save us from our sins. He would come in the form of a man so that He could, on behalf of all who would believe in Him, live the perfectly obedient/sinless life required to enter God’s presence. In His unjust death on the cross, He would experience the full wrath and judgment of God we deserved for our sin on Himself. He did this so that all who will believe and trust in this ultimate and defining expression of God’s love would be forgiven of all of their sins and reconciled to God as their Father; spiritually adopted to be His beloved sons and daughters, no longer the objects of his wrath and judgment, but now, within their relationship with His eternally beloved Son, the objects of His everlasting and unbounding love.

 There are no limits to this offer of salvation. It goes out to all people of every ethnic group, every age and every socio-economic category. Most importantly, it goes out to every type and degree of sinner, from gossips to mass murderers, rapists to adulterers, disobedient teenagers to dirty old men, heroin addicts to video game addicts. “For *God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever will believe in him should not perish (in Hell) but have eternal life*.” **(John 3:16)**

It is only in our trusting in, embracing and receiving by faith the infinitely valuable, all sufficient and all satisfying love of an infinitely Holy God, defined and displayed for all eternity in the person and work of Jesus, that we can finally rest and feel secure in the reality that we are deeply, fully, unconditionally and eternally loved by One who can and will one day satisfy the deepest needs and desires of our heart and fulfill the most noble longings of our soul in ways we cannot even begin to imagine while in this world.

However, there may be some reading this to whom it may not be immediately obvious to them how Jesus’ sinless life and sacrificial death and miraculous resurrection are a demonstration of the greatness of God’s love toward you.

After all, there are many things that God could give and do for us that might seem to be a more relevant and valuable expression of His love. If the Bible said, God so loved the world that He gave us a cure for cancer – a prescription for ending all war – a formula for winning the lottery, and several other ways we might think of that God could demonstrate His infinite love for us, we might get really excited.

Thus, for many , even those of us who call ourselves Christians, the love of God in Jesus Christ is seen as no big deal. The attitude of many is one of, *Jesus loves me this I know, cuz the Bible tells me so – Ho Hum – whatever*.

**Arthur Pink** writing on the infinite value of God’s love notes that “*the love of God cannot be just some indiscriminate sentimental notion – something we take for granted and feel entitled to - and thus value no more and sometimes less than we value and rejoice in being loved by a man or women”.* He notes that the greatness of the love of God that is ours in Jesus Christ, when truly known and valued and embraced, becomes that which we stake our whole life on – that which we pursue our greatest joy and pleasure and satisfaction in – **that** is our anchor in the midst of the storms of this life. Pink goes on to make a case for how the love of God should dominate our thoughts and affections, impact all of our decisions, and relieve us of all of our anxieties and fears.

When we have truly been saved, truly believed the Gospel, truly entrusted our lives to Jesus, God the Holy Spirit comes and reveals to our heart and mind through the Word of God the infinite value, desirability and boundlessness of God’s love as it is demonstrated in the person and work of Jesus Christ. And He does so to produce in us great joy, excitement and anticipation in being the objects of that love forever; so that instead of a life of indifference - of “ho hum/whatever” to the love of God, we live our lives singing from our hearts each day – “Hallelujah what a Savior!”

If you have not entrusted your life to Jesus Christ, or even if you are a Christian and are at any time tempted to wonder if God really, really loves **YOU**, look to the cross and contemplate the wounds and sufferings of Jesus. Then reflect on the fact that this was all done for **you;** His life, death and resurrection is for you if you will receive it; and He wants you to receive it and trust in it – and rejoice in it and rest in it - and strive through the course of your life to come to know and experience and put all of your faith and hope in the height and depth and width and length of the love of God that is yours and mine in Christ Jesus our Lord; so that you and I like the Apostle Paul in **Galatians 2:20**, can say with great joy and assurance “*I have been crucified with Christ, therefore I no longer live, but Christ lives in me, and the life I live now in this body I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved ME, and gave His life for ME.”*

**JVN**