

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, February 21, 1993, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

1 JOHN 4:16

“We know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love.”

GETTING TO KNOW GOD

(8) Let God Love You

A minister friend of mine told me recently of how he met a man some years ago, and as they got into conversation, my friend happened to tell him that he was a pastor. The man immediately said, “Well, I don’t believe in God. I’m an atheist”; to which my friend replied by saying, “Oh really! Well, would you describe for me the kind of God you don’t believe in?” So, he began to describe this kind of God, and when he got through, my friend said, “Well, that makes me an atheist too because I don’t believe in that kind of God either!”

Now for the past eight weeks we’ve been in this series on “Getting to Know God”. The sad fact is that many people reject God before they even know Him. We’ve looked at different attributes or characteristics of God, and I think it’s very appropriate that we conclude the series and speak about the love of God on this day when we meet our risen Lord at His Table.

Our text, 1 John 4:16 says, “We know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love.” Now, without question, the most talked about attribute of God is His love; and it is perhaps the most misunderstood,

In the first place, I want you to make a clear-cut distinction. Our text says that “God is love”. It does not say that “love is God.” Many liberals today would tell us that love is divine, but that is not so. There’s a crucial difference between saying, “My dog is a girl”, and saying, “My girl is a dog”!

When we say that “God is love”, it also does not mean that God lets me get away with murder; that I can do anything I want to do because God loves me.

When we say that “God is love”, we mean that God wants what is best for you. God is for you; He’s not against you. Now, if that is true, and it is, why then do so many people avoid God like the plague? The reason they do that is because of fear. They are afraid of what might happen if they give their life to God. Let me give you three common fears that I’ve heard dozens of times; and they are reasons why people avoid God and don’t get to know Him.

1. Fear #1. “I’m afraid that I’ll have to give up my fun.” In other words, to become a Christian means “the party’s over”. To be spiritual is to be miserable! People are very interested in having fun these days. We turn on the T.V., and it says, “You only go ‘round once in life, and you better do it with gusto”. Make it count – have all kinds of fun.

Now, T.V. has given us a particular image of fun. Which sounds like more fun to most

Americans – “Miller Time” or “Sunday School Time”? T.V. has sold us a lie that says, “If you buy our product, you will be happy.” But, people soon find that the superficial thrill wears off very quickly. Do you know the T.V. commercial that irks me the most? It’s that one where those guys are sitting by the lake drinking beer, and one guy says, “Boys, it don’t get any better than this!” I want to stand up and shake my fist at them and say, “Wrong! You’re dead wrong!” It does get better. There are a lot of better things than guzzling that golden liquid until you end up with a beer belly. If you know God, it is so much better than that. Those are only “artificial sweeteners”, and they don’t last.

People are frantically looking for “fun fixes”, and what they get is “the law of diminishing returns”. They spend more time, more money, more energy to get less and less of a thrill. So many people are looking for love in all the wrong places, and they’re looking for fun in all the wrong places. They tell me there’s no more phony place than a singles’ bar. Where else do you walk up to a stranger and offer to buy them something? “Can I buy you a drink?” Do you walk up to a stranger in a department store and say, “Can I buy you a toaster?” Or, “Would you care for a refrigerator?” And, that’s fun?!

Now folks, the way you fight fear is with fact; and look at what the fact says – 1 Timothy 6:17, “God richly provides us with everything for our (what?) enjoyment.” God wants you to enjoy life. He doesn’t want to deprive you of fun. Jesus spoke more about being happy than He did about Heaven. Matthew 11:19 (Phi) says that Jesus came “enjoying life”.

Let me tell you what “fun” is – It is a clear conscience. Fun is a happy, unified family. Fun is laughing in church. Fun is having Christian friends who don’t try to use you or manipulate you. Fun is enjoying the world that God made. Nobody has more genuine fun than a genuine Christian.

2. Fear #2. “I’m afraid that I’ll become a fanatic.” Often, well-meaning but misguided people tend to cause us to avoid God because of their fanaticism. They have more zeal than common sense.

There’s “Freddie the Pharisee” – rigid, narrow-minded, legalistic. He would tell you Mother Teresa isn’t a Christian because she’s a Roman Catholic. He has a rule for everything, and his favorite word is “Don’t!”. Someone says, “Will I become like that if I become a Christian?”

Then there’s “Susie Self-Righteous” – “holier than thou” in her attitude, judgmental of others. Her favorite remark is, “Thank God I’m not like you.”

And, “Billy Bible Thumper” – obnoxious, over-zealous, a crusader in shining armor. If it’s alive, he’ll convert it. His favorite phrase is, “Turn or burn”!

All of us have met “Priscilla Praise-all-ua” – she can’t utter a sentence without using a religious cliché. Everything’s a miracle, or else the devil did it! Her favorite phrase? Oh, she’s got dozens of them! She’s always wanting to “share” something with you! People say, “Will I become like that if I become a Christian? What would my husband think, or my wife? What

would my boss think? What would the kids at school think?"

Now, look what the fact is – John 10:10, Jesus says, “I have come that they may have (what?) life (not religion), and have it to the full.” Jesus’ harshest criticism was reserved for religious fanatics. Go home today and read Matthew 23. He couldn’t stand them. He said, “You are like white sepulchres” (Matt. 23:27); “You strain at a gnat and swallow a camel” (Matt. 23:24).

3. Fear #3. “I’m afraid that I’ll lose my freedom.” Now, the world defines “freedom” as a life without any constraint. “I can do anything I want to do, and it’s nobody else’s business.” Parents worry about their children listening to rock music, but the words of Frank Sinatra’s “My Way” are much worse than a lot of rock songs. “I did it ‘My Way.’ Everybody else got burned, but I did it ‘My Way.’ I left five marriages behind, but I did it ‘My Way.’” Let me tell you, old “Blue Eyes” – that’s not freedom; that’s total selfishness.

Let me ask you this – What has sexual freedom given us? AIDS, and a host of other sexually transmitted diseases; abortions; an illegitimacy rate that staggers the imagination. What has chemical freedom given us? Grade school addicts, a soaring crime rate, and the most chemically-dependent society in the world; a soaring suicide rate, especially amongst teenagers. What has credit card freedom given us? People are waking up to discover that those “Discover” cards leave a lot to be discovered! The purveyors of credit cards have a “come on” about “easy payments”, but there’s no such thing as an easy payment.

What am I saying? I’m saying that people are not as free as they think they are. The Bible teaches that with every choice we make, there are consequences. You are free to live any way you want to live, but once you make that choice, you are no longer free. What you sow, you will reap.

Now, look what Jesus says about freedom in John 8:36 (GN), “If the Son sets you free, then you will be really free.” Circle that word “really”. What’s Jesus talking about? He’s talking about real freedom, not phony freedom.

Let me tell you what real freedom is. Real freedom is freedom from guilt, freedom from worry, freedom from bitterness, freedom from the fear of death, because I know I’m going to heaven. It’s freedom to be myself. It’s freedom to quit pretending. That’s real freedom.

Now, how do you get rid of those kinds of fears that I’ve been talking about? Look at the remedy in 1 John 4:18, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear.” What is the antidote to fear? It is to recognize how much God loves you. You see, when you realize how much God loves you, you’re not going to be afraid that God’s going to take away your fun or that you’ll become a fanatic or that you’ll lose your freedom or anything else in life that’s worth having. He’s not a cruel, depriving God; He’s a loving God.

How much does God love you? Well, look at these wonderful verses, Ephesians 3:17-18 (Phi), “I pray that you may be able to grasp how WIDE and LONG and HIGH and DEEP is the love Christ...” Notice that there are four dimensions in this amazing love that Christ has for you

– it’s “wide and long and high and deep”. So, let me tell you four ways in which this “love divine, all loves excelling” impacts your life.

1. His love is WIDE. What does that mean? It means that it is WIDE enough to, include everybody. Look at Psalm 145:17, “The Lord is...loving toward ALL He has made.” And, of course, John 3:16, “God so loved the WORLD...” Who does that include? EVERYBODY. The good news is that God loves me. The bad news is that He loves the people who hurt me, just as much! Jesus loved the unlovely, the people who were on the scrap heap of humanity, and that’s what got Him in trouble with the religious establishment – the fanatics. God loves everybody, and He loves them unconditionally. God never made a person that He didn’t love; and He loves you very, very much; You matter to God; and if you want to know the secret of self-esteem and confidence, realize how much you matter to God. If God likes me, and I like me, and you don’t like me, then you’re the one who has the problem! If I know that God loves me with His “perfect love”, then I don’t ever have to prove my self worth. I don’t need the props any more to help me feel good about myself. I don’t have to have certain clothes or cars or houses or status symbols to bolster my faltering ego.

2. God’s love is LONG enough to last forever. In Jeremiah 31:3 God says, “I have loved you with an everlasting love. Ps. 89:2 says, “God’s love will last for all time.”

Now, that’s so different to our kind of love. You see, human love can wear out. That’s why we have so many divorces. There are married couples who are not divorced, but they don’t love each other anymore. That’s why you need God’s love in your marriage if it’s going to last. In fact, I don’t know how any marriage can last and be truly meaningful and rewarding if God’s love is not in it.

But, God’s love never wears out. His love is patient; it is persistent; and it is persevering. Isn’t it good news to know that God never gives up on us? His love is wide enough, and it is long enough to last forever; and God will never love you any more or any less than He does right now. He loves you on your good days; and He loves you on your bad days because His love is not conditioned by your response. God’s love is unearned and undeserved, so just accept it in humility.

3. God’s love is HIGH enough to be everywhere. Romans 8:39 says, “...neither height nor depth, or anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” What’s Paul saying here? He’s saying, “There is no place that you can go where God’s love isn’t! No circumstance, no situation, no matter how painful, can separate you from Him, because His love is everywhere.

Folks, if you want an antidote for loneliness, this is it. We do lose loved ones, and we grieve over that bitter loss. But, if you are a Christian, you will never be alone, because God is waiting to pour His love into your wounded soul. You have tapped into Him Who is the source of love and peace.

I must, however, remind you that this 8th chapter of Romans is written to Christians, and if an unbeliever reads these words, he is, in a sense, reading someone else’s mail. Remember, as

we said last Sunday, God's promises are "Yes" in Christ. It is as we know Christ as Savior and Lord that we experience the fullness of His love because we have opened up our lives to that love. It is the personal relationship with Him that really matters. And then,

4. God's love is DEEP enough to meet all my needs. Some of you are going to like these verses, Psalm 40:11-12 (LB), "My only hope is in Your love and faithfulness. Otherwise, I perish, for problems far too big for me to solve are piled higher than my head." How many of you can identify with that verse? "I'm going under for the last time!" But the fact is, "God's love is not shallow; it is profound. No matter what problem you have, His love is deeper than that problem.

Some of you may be under deep stress this morning. You have problems and heartaches; they may be physical problems; they may be financial problems; they may be marriage and family problems. God's love is deeper still.

Many of you have seen the movie, The Hiding Place – the story of Corrie and Betsy Ten Boom who hid Jews in their home to protect them from the Nazis during World War II. When they were discovered, both they and the Jews were taken to the concentration camps. Corrie came out alive; her sister died there. At one point in the movie, where they have seen one atrocity after another, Corrie says to Betsy, "This place is the pit of hell." And, Betsy replied with this profound remark, "There is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper."

Now, maybe some aspect of your life has hit bottom, and you're frustrated, and you think, "I am going under." Where is God when you hit bottom? I'll tell you where. Look at Deuteronomy 33:27, "The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are His everlasting arms"! When you reach bottom, guess Who's underneath the bottom? God is! Drop into His arms of love. Let Him catch you and support you when there's nowhere else to go.

Now, when you look at the width, the length, the height and the depth of God's love, you have the four dimensions of the Cross. You can't really talk about the love of God without talking about the Cross because the ultimate demonstration of love is when someone gives his life for you. Jesus, Himself, said in John 15:13, "Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." But, set alongside that statement the words of St. Paul in Romans 5:8 (CN), "God has shown us how much He loves us; it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us." It is one thing to die for a friend; but what a demonstration of love it is when the person you die for is not a friend, but an unworthy, ungrateful, rebellious sinner!

During World War II, a captain in the British Army was on an extremely dangerous mission against an enemy position. Suddenly he saw his sergeant struck down by a hail of shellfire. Crawling over to him, he hoisted him onto his shoulders and managed with a great effort to carry him back to safety. No sooner had he laid him down than an enemy sniper, spotting the captain, sent a bullet through his heart. Slumping to the ground, the captain died instantly, but the life of the sergeant was saved.

When the war ended, the parents of the deceased captain decided to invite some of their son's friends over for dinner, with the sergeant as the guest of honor. On the evening appointed,

the guests arrived punctually – all except one, the guest of honor. He arrived late, and he was drunk. Sitting down at the table with the others, he wolfed his food, passed raucous and obscene remarks and behaved altogether in an outrageous manner; and never once throughout the evening did he say so much as one word about the brave captain who had given his life for him.

When the guests finally departed, and as the sergeant staggered down the steps into the street and disappeared in the darkness, those bereaved parents looked at one another in silent dismay. Finally, that mother put into words what was in both their minds. Bursting into tears, she said, “Just think, John, our dear boy had to give his life for a thing like that!”

“It was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us”!

Did your little child ever come to you and say, “Daddy, how much do you love me? This much?” “No, much more.” “Do you love me this much?” “No, far more than that!” “Daddy, do you love me this much?” “I love you even more than that!” When you go to Jesus and say to Him, “Jesus, how much do You love me?”, He stretches out His arms to full length on that “old rugged Cross”, and He says, “I love you even more than this!”

Now, when you reject that kind of love, and then still expect God to let you into heaven, that is the ultimate arrogance – to walk away from that kind of love as if it doesn’t matter. It matters, and you matter to God. That’s why He went to the Cross.

God brought you here this morning to tell you one thing – it’s the last verse on your outline, Isaiah 54:7 (GN), “...with deep love I will take you back.” God is saying to you, “You matter to me more than you will ever know. Have a plan for your life. The stress and frustration you’re experiencing is there because you’re outside My plan. But, if you will enter into a relationship with Me; get to know Me by receiving Me into your life; then you will know why you are here on this earth.”

Don’t reject God’s love. There is no one who will ever love you as much as God loves you!

AMEN.