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Bridgeway Church
John 13-17 / #24
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Sermon Summary #24

The Unfathomable Love of God and Seeing the Glory of Christ John 17:20-26

I know some of you don't like your jobs. And I can understand why. You struggle to get up each day and return to a task that either bores you or wears you out or feels unproductive. But you do it anyway because you know that God honors hard work and you know you have an obligation to pay your bills and you know that others depend on you. I say this because I want to say Thank You to everyone at Bridgeway. Thank you for paying me to do something that I enjoy more than anything else in the world. I'm never bored with what I do. I never struggle to get up each day and resume my responsibilities as senior pastor of this church. I get worn out on a fairly regular basis, but that's largely because I'm getting old. Sometimes I feel unproductive because I don't see the fruit or results in some people's lives that I had hoped to see. But aside from that, I can't begin to imagine doing anything else than what I do. So, thank you!

Now, of the many things I get to do as senior pastor, *the most satisfying and energizing and joyful job is studying the Bible*. Nothing is more enjoyable than trying to understand what God has said in his Word and then trying to help you understand it and apply it to your life. But every once in a while I come across a verse in Scripture that I simply don't understand. I don't mean that I don't understand what it means. Given enough time and resources I can usually come to grips with what is being said.

What I mean when I say there are texts that I don't understand is that *I struggle to believe they are true*. They are texts that stretch the limits of "believability". They simply seem too good to be true. I know they are true, because I believe in the inspiration and authority of the Bible, but I don't see how. We've come to one of those texts today. I hope this doesn't sound irreverent or flippant, but when I hear Jesus say that God the Father loves me just as he loves Jesus, my immediate reaction is: "Oh, come on! Get serious, God! You ask me to believe a lot of remarkable things, Lord, but now you've gone too far."

If you think I'm over-reacting just to secure a response from you, then you didn't listen closely when I read v. 23 and v. 26. Let me explain. You've often heard me say that John 1:14 is the most amazing verse in the Bible. I say that because I can't get my mind around the idea that "the Word," that is to say, the glorious Son of God, second person of the Trinity, "became flesh". I may be on the verge of replacing John 1:14 with John 17:23 and 26. For there we read that *God loves us even as he loves Jesus*. My mind is stretched to the point of breaking when I hear that "the Word became flesh." But my heart explodes when I hear that God loves me just as he loves Jesus.

Think about it with me for a few minutes.

I was raised in a wonderful Christian home in which both my mother and father were Christians. They loved me. I never doubted it for a moment. My sister loves me. I've had numerous close friends whose love for me was real and powerful. My two daughters and my grandchildren love me. And come this May I will have been married to Ann for 45 years and, quite to my surprise, she *still* loves me.

But the love of one human being for another is one thing. To love someone who is like you makes sense. To love someone who shares your nature and experiences is not surprising. Even to say that God, who is unlike me, still loves me, although shocking is still within my capacity to grasp and appreciate. But what I can't understand, what threatens to push me over the edge into the valley of incredulity and disbelief, is that God loves me in the same way and to the same degree that he loves his Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Let me explain this by looking back to something Jesus said in John 5. We read this in John 5:19-20,

“So Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing’ (John 5:19-20a).

When you hear a passage like that your response is probably like mine: “Well, of course the Father loves the Son. The Son only does what the Father does. The Son, Jesus Christ, is perfectly obedient to his Father’s will.” We can even make sense of this on a purely human level. Although my earthly father always loved me I could sense an extraordinary pleasure in his heart toward me when I consistently obeyed him. Thus for Jesus to say that he only does “whatever the Father does” alerts us to the fact that the Father was undoubtedly incredibly pleased with Jesus during the course of his earthly life.

We hear Jesus saying much the same thing a bit later in John 5:30.

“I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (John 5:30).

And then one more time, in John 8:29 we hear Jesus declare, “I always do the things that are pleasing to him.”

So, it makes perfectly good sense that the Father would love the Son. The Son is perfectly obedient, never rebellious, never defiant or even remotely inclined to act or speak in a way that is contrary to his Father’s will. Who of you today can say that about yourself? I can’t. I have often in the past done things and even in the present continue to do things that are contrary to God’s will and displeasing to him.

Do you see, now, why I struggle to comprehend these statements in John 17? ***How can it be anything other than ludicrous for Jesus to say that God the Father loved the disciples in the upper room and loves you and me today “even as” he loves Jesus?*** How can Jesus say in v. 26 that “the love with which” God the Father has “loved” God the Son may be “in” us?

Let me make my point with even greater force. I love all of you. But I probably don’t love all of you the same. That would be difficult given the fact that I know some of you far more personally and intimately and for a much longer time than I know others of you. All of us accept that as an inescapable fact of reality. Our love for one another is real, but our love for some is greater and more intense than it is for others. And there’s nothing wrong with that.

Now, who here today has been known and loved by God for as long as God has known and loved his own Son? None. God the Father has loved God the Son ***for all eternity***, long before any of us were born! God the Father’s experience with God the Son is ***infinitely deeper and more intimate*** than his experience with any of us. But Jesus says that God the Father loves you and me “even as” he loves the Son.

It’s difficult for us to get our minds around the ideas of ***eternity*** and ***infinity***. What I mean is that we struggle to understand something as being “eternally” true. We live in a world that is bound and governed by time: by starting dates and expiration dates and celebrations of events on particular days. Certain years are of great importance to us, such as 2017, since it marks the 500th anniversary of the launch of the Protestant Reformation.

But with God there is no beginning and there is no end. There has never been a time when he didn’t exist. Thus there has never been a time when he didn’t love his Son. He never “began” to love his Son and he will never “cease” to love his Son. He has loved his Son from all eternity, and always will. How are we supposed to comprehend that sort of love, an eternal, never-beginning-and-never-ending kind of love?

We struggle even more with the idea of infinity. To say that something is infinite is to say it has no limitations, no boundaries, and that it is impossible to measure or compute or quantify. The Father’s love for his Son is infinitely passionate and infinitely intense. It doesn’t rise or fall, it doesn’t increase or decrease. It is now and has always been and always will be infinite and measureless and unfathomable.

Now, are you beginning to see why I struggle so deeply and painfully to understand and believe what Jesus says here? ***The love that God the Father has for God the Son in the intimacy and eternity and infinity of the Godhead is here***

said to be the same love that he has for you and me. If that doesn't blow your mental and emotional circuits, nothing will.

Let me take you back to the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. As Jesus came up out of the water, having been baptized by John the Baptist, the Spirit of God descended on him like a dove, "and behold, a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, ***with whom I am well pleased***'" (Matt. 3:17). Makes sense, doesn't it?

But what doesn't make sense is that this same God, this same infinitely holy, just, pure, and righteous God should look on Peter or James or you or me and say, "This is my beloved hell-deserving child, with whom I am well pleased." Of course, I'm not saying that God is "pleased" when we disobey him. I'm not suggesting that God ceases to be holy and is only love. Many things we do displease the Lord. But notwithstanding that inescapable truth, Jesus still says in John 17:23 and 26 that the Father loves us with the same love with which he loves his Son.

I may be wrong, but I don't think I'll ever reach a point, either now or in eternity future, when I'll be able to say, "Yeah, makes sense!" As I said, I could be wrong. Perhaps God will bring each of us at some point in the future to the point where we fully grasp and trust in that truth. But I'm not so sure.

I wish I had words adequate to explain to you what this means. D. A. Carson, in his commentary on John's gospel, refers to this truth as "***breathtakingly extravagant***" (569). I agree. But even that falls pathetically short of what is entailed in being loved by God as God loves God.

A Johannine Echo

I've indicated on several occasions that what Jesus said in John 13-17 often finds an echo in the later writings of John the Apostle. This may well again be the case in light of what we see in 1 John 4:17.

"By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world" (1 John 4:17).

I believe that John is saying that the Father's love for his children reaches its intended goal (is "perfected") when it produces in us a feeling of security so powerful that we lose all fear of judgment. When our sense of being loved by God becomes so ***internally intense*** and undeniable that we can only smile at the prospect of judgment day, his passion has fulfilled its purpose!

Someone might think it *presumptuous* to have lost all fear of judgment. But John clearly says that our confidence is based on the *fact* that the believer is "as he [Jesus] is". What could that possibly mean? In what sense is the Christian "as Jesus is" in the world? John may mean that ***we are righteous***, as Jesus is righteous. By faith in him we are justified, declared righteous in the sight of God and therefore we look forward to judgment day confident that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (cf. Romans 8:1). That's possible, but I think the answer lies elsewhere.

John is saying that our confidence is linked with God's love for us and that in some sense we are as Jesus is. It seems reasonable to me that John is here saying what he heard Jesus pray in John 17:23. When John says that our confidence is based on the fact that ***we are as Jesus is***, he is declaring that ***we are loved by the Father as Jesus is loved by the Father!*** No wonder all fear is cast out (v. 18). There is no need to fear him whom you know feels only that kind and depth of love for you.

Again, the "fear" of which John speaks is not godly reverence for Jesus but the dread of the criminal who stands guilty in a court of law awaiting sentence. But we no longer fear the ***punishment*** of God as judge because we know and are assured of the ***pleasure*** of God as Lord and Lover and Savior of our souls!

So what does it mean to say that God the Father loves us "just as" he loves his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ? It means God cares for you far more than anyone else does. He watches over you. You can know that you are never, ever alone. He will always be present when you hurt. He will never leave you or forsake you. He will never abandon you or leave you all by yourself. When you hurt, he hurts. You matter to him. His love is seen in the incredible sacrifice he endured to reconcile you to himself: namely, the cross of Christ.

Consider how valuable you are to your heavenly Father. Jesus said this in Matthew 10 –

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore, you are of more value than many sparrows” (Matt. 10:29-31).

In other words, God cherishes you. He enjoys you.

All of that is wonderfully true about God’s love. But there is yet one more dimension or manifestation to his love, and we see it in John 17:24.

“To See My Glory”

The disciples in the upper room with Jesus had already seen his glory in one sense. In John 1:14 John said, “and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” But this “glory” was the glory of his **lowly service**, his humble suffering, his willingness to stoop down and touch lepers and heal them, his willingness to endure mockery and spitting and ultimately crucifixion. They had also seen his glory in the signs and wonders he performed. But the “glory” spoken of here in John 17:24 is that of **his exalted grandeur, his majestic power and beauty and authority**.

Three of them, Peter, James, and John, were witnesses of his “glory” in a way that none of the others were. They were with Jesus on the Mt. of Transfiguration. Peter described it this way in his second epistle:

“For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but **we were eyewitnesses of his majesty**. For when he received honor and **glory** from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,’ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain” (2 Peter 1:16-18).

And John was given a glimpse of his glory while he was on the island of Patmos. In Revelation 1:12-16 the risen and glorified Christ appears to John who, when he saw him, “fell at his feet as though dead” (Rev. 1:17a).

All of us today, in a certain sense, “behold” the “glory” of Jesus Christ as we see him in Scripture and in his actions in the world. This is what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 3:18 – “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18a).

But none of these experiences comes close to what Jesus is talking about here in John 17. John is describing for us the **unmediated, unqualified splendor of Christ Jesus, the direct sight of the immeasurable and exalted beauty and grandeur of who Jesus really is**. And that is something that Jesus wants to show us. He wants us to be “with him” so that we might “see” him and his glory.

Don’t be misled by this. Jesus isn’t saying that all we will do is “see” his glory. When you see something glorious, when you encounter and are stunned by something beautiful, two things happen instantly. First, you feel a deep and abiding and overwhelming joy and satisfaction in your soul, indeed, throughout your whole being. This is what David was talking about in Psalm 16:11 when he said that being in God’s presence brings “fullness of joy” and being at God’s right hand produces in us “pleasures forevermore.”

Nothing we have experienced thus far in this life can compare with the sort of ecstatic exhilaration that Jesus is talking about in John 17:24. I’ve seen some beautiful things: paintings, human faces, sunsets, colors, expansive night skies filled with innumerable stars. But not all of these sights can collectively produce in my heart the incomparable joy and delight and fascination that will be mine (and yours) when we finally set our eyes on the glory of Jesus!

We can come pretty close to it in this life. The Apostle Peter, who saw Jesus with his own eyes, who actually saw a preview of the glory of Jesus on the Mt. of Transfiguration, nevertheless said this in his first epistle:

“Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory” (1 Peter 1:8).

But this “inexpressible” and “glory-filled” joy that we experience now, in this life, is a mere pittance, a drop in an infinite ocean, of the joy that we will experience when we actually “see” the glory of Jesus in the new heavens and new earth.

This is the same thing John had in mind when he said this in 1 John 3:2-3,

“Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because *we shall see him as he is*. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.”

The possession of such hope is *the strongest imaginable incentive to purity of life*. It is no passing fancy; it is a hope securely fixed upon *him*. Simply stated: the Christian hope is incompatible with moral indifference.

The words *purify* and *pure* stress the personal, internal aspect of purification. The emphasis is on one's sensitivity to sin, the tendency to shrink away from all contamination. It is an intense, inner purification from sin because of a deep sensibility to it.

In Revelation 22:3-4 we are told that when we finally find ourselves in the new heavens and new earth that *we “will see his face”* (Rev. 22:4a).

So, that is the first thing that happens when you see something glorious or beautiful. You are filled with delight and your soul soars and your heart beats rapidly and your mind feels as if it’s about to explode. But there is something else that happens.

This joy invariably overflows into praise. I emphasize the word “invariably”. It is impossible not to praise whatever it is that brings you this sort of joy. When we finally “see” Jesus and are “with” him, *we will explode with praise. We will come unglued and unraveled with worship and celebration and adoration*.

So, when Jesus prays that one day all his followers, his disciples, those who have come to know and trust him for eternal life and forgiveness of sin, when all these finally are “with” him and “see” his glory, they won’t sit silently or passively or indifferently. They will explode with praise. All the excuses that Christians make today to restrain themselves when they worship, all the reasons they give why they won’t raise their hands or dance or kneel or weep or shout aloud or fall prostrate on the ground, all such reasons and excuses will disappear in the presence of so glorious a Savior as Jesus is.

Please don’t misunderstand what Jesus is saying. Many think of God as needy. Many distort God by conceiving of him as lacking something that you and I can supply. Please resist any temptation to think of God in this way. When Jesus says I “desire that they also . . . may be with me,” it isn’t so that he can receive something we can give, but in order that *he might give something that we desperately need*. Jesus lacks nothing. His desire for us to be “with” him is so that he can show us his “glory” and in doing so fill up what is lacking in us, not something that is lacking in him. *What you and I need most and what Jesus will supply us with forever is the sight and the savoring of his eternal glory*.

But there’s more. In v. 26 Jesus prays that *“the love with which you have loved me may be in them.”* I think there are two things here. One is that God’s love would be “in” us in the sense that we would experience his love “for” us, the same love with which he loves Jesus. But second, the love that God the Father has for Jesus is “in” us in the sense that *our love for one another* is nothing less than the same sort and kind of love that the persons of the Godhead have for one another. As God the Father loves God the Son and the Spirit, and as God the Son loves the Father and Spirit, and as the Spirit loves the Father and the Son, so we have in us the same love and with it we love one another.

I can’t leave this without making one more observation. I’ve often heard people say, “Well, that all sounds ok, at least for a while. But after a few hours of praise and adoration, won’t we get bored? Will I get to withdraw from the worship

service long enough to play golf? I mean, we're talking about eternity. What's to keep all of us from growing weary of worship and losing our excitement in being there?"

To be brief, if you were ever to grow bored with gazing on the glory of the Son of God, it would mean that it isn't the Son of God at whom you are gazing. If the object of your sight and delight brings only a temporary satisfaction and joy, the object is not God. God is infinite. Among other things this means that because he is God there is an *eternally endless supply* of reasons to find him irresistibly attractive and appealing and enthralling. *Boredom and indifference are impossible when the object of your gaze is the infinitely glorious, infinitely beautiful, infinitely majestic God of the universe!*

Conclusion

Now, let me put together these two truths. How is God's love for us most perfectly and greatly expressed? In other words, of all the things that God might do for us to show his love, what is the highest and greatest expression? I think the answer is stated clearly in v. 24. There is no greater manifestation of God's love for hell-deserving men and women than to do whatever is necessary to make it possible for them to "see" his glory. If you think there is something greater and more blessed than that, then I suggest you have a very low and inadequate view of who God is and what seeing his "glory" entails.

This is why the Apostle Paul prays as he does in Ephesians 3:14-21. There he speaks of the love of God for us in Christ as being something "that surpasses knowledge" (v. 19). It is a love, "the breadth and length and height and depth" (v. 18) of which we can't begin to fathom. So Paul prays that the Holy Spirit would "strengthen" you and me "with power" so that we might have the capacity to "comprehend" the reality and life-changing power of this love.

So perhaps we should pause now and pray precisely that! . . .