

Experiencing God Pt. 1

EXPERIENCING THE LOVE OF GOD

Tonight we're going to be talking about experiencing the love of God. I began a series last Sunday night, "Experiencing God:" the fact that God reveals Himself experientially in Scripture, not just in theories of propositions, statements about Himself, but in people's experience of Him. Tonight I want to talk about experiencing the love of God.

I'm going to read a story that is probably familiar to you, from Luke Chapter 15. Luke Chapter 15, verse 11, it begins. We're going to talk about this story towards the end to illustrate the main point that I want to make tonight.

Now, Luke 15 verse 11, this is the story we call the "Parable of the Prodigal Son." It was the third in a series of three stories that Jesus told about something being lost: a lost sheep, a lost coin, and then this third story is the lost son, all in the same chapter. Verse 11, Luke 15 says,

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

"After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

And he couldn't finish the speech he'd rehearsed.

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because

he has him back safe and sound.'

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

"'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

One of the great stories of Jesus. We'll come back to that in just a moment. I'm talking about experiencing the love of God.

And, of course, the fact that God loves is one of the fundamental truths about Him. I could quote, though I won't at this point, Scripture after Scripture about God's love. Just a couple of them ... It speaks in Psalm 33 of "His unfailing love." It speaks it in Jeremiah 31 of "His everlasting love." It speaks in Psalm 86 of Him "abounding in love." And there are many, many other verses like that.

But perhaps the greatest statement is in 1 John 4:8 which says, "God is love." It's not just something He does. It's not just something He puts on in any way at all. It's something He **is** by nature. It's not even just one of His attributes. God is powerful. That's an attribute of God. God is omniscient – He knows everything. That's an attribute of God. This is more than just an attribute. This is His very core, His very being. God is love.

Now I realize for some of us that may be a very distant reality. It's a truth we believe. We want to discover tonight how that truth that we believe may become experiential in our lives.

It seems to me that we can identify God's love in Scripture in three ways. First of all, there's what I'm calling His "common" love for humanity: statements like John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." God loves the whole world. There's nobody you'll ever meet on the street who God doesn't love in that sense, His common love for the whole of humanity. Deuteronomy Chapter 10, verse 18 says, "The Lord your God shows no partiality; He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and He loves the alien" – the one who's on the outside giving Him food and clothing. That's His common love for the whole of humanity.

Secondly, Scripture speaks of His – what I'll call His "covenant" love for His chosen people. Remember the old covenant in the Old Testament? That was the nation of Israel. Deuteronomy Chapter 7, verse 7 to 9 – if you read the whole of that sometime, talks about this. But it says, "He is the faithful God, keeping His covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commands." And having set aside Israel, you remember that time God said, "I've not loved you because you're more numerous than anybody else. I've not loved you

because you're better than anybody else. I loved you simply because I've loved you. You are my chosen people, set apart, for a particular purpose." And in His covenant relationship is His love – the covenant love of God. Under the new covenant, of course, it is the church. Ephesians 5:25 says, "Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her." And though it's true that God loves the world in a very particular sense, in a more personal sense He loves the church, the people of God.

The third area is what I'll call His "centred" love, His focused love for individuals. It may be true that God loves the world as it is. It's true that God loves His own people, but it's also true that God loves me. God loves you.

Actually to my surprise, in these past few days I've been preparing this, I have realized that there is least said about this aspect of God's love than about the other aspects of His love.

There are verses like Romans Chapter 5, in verse 5, which says, "God has poured out His love into our hearts." That's a personal, individual thing: "poured out His love into our hearts," by the Holy Spirit whom He's given to us. And it is this personal experience of His love I want to talk about today: the fact that He loves me. However, experiencing the love of God is not an automatic thing for us.

The experience of God's love in Scripture is not unconditional. There are conditions involved if we're going to experience God's love. The fact that God is love, as I've said, is part of His immutability, that is unchanging, but our experience of God's love is subject to conditions. There are two primarily that I can find from Scripture.

First of all, my experience of His love is subject to my love for Him. Now that is true, of course, in any relationship, because love is only experienced where it is reciprocated. Love by definition is relational. You can love someone, and they don't love you back. And you might love them deeply and, because they don't love you back, it just produces pain in your heart. To experience a love relationship with that person requires that love to be reciprocated. That's why it speaks of God, in Genesis Chapter 6, His heart being filled with pain. Why was His heart filled with pain? I'll just read that verse – I love the way the NIV puts it, in Genesis Chapter 6, in verse 8:

"The Lord saw how great man's wickedness of the earth had become, that every inclination of the thoughts of His heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that He had made man on the earth. And His heart was filled with pain."

Why was His heart filled with pain? Because He was loving people that did not love Him back. And to love and not be loved back is going to be painful. On the other hand, to be loved by someone and not know it or not want it, not be interested in it, means you have no experience of that love. It's true that there are some that might love somebody else and that person doesn't want their love or doesn't know about their love. There's no experience on their part of love. Because love by definition is relational, and unless it is responded to it becomes meaningless.

And so, in order to experience the love of God, one of the things we're told in Scripture is that we are to love God. Deuteronomy Chapter 6, verses 4 and 5 say, "Hear oh Israel: the Lord our

God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” What that means is this. If we’re to love the Lord our God with all our heart and all our soul and all our strength, everything we do, everything our affection is spent on, everything our energy is engaged in, every ambition we hold, says in some way, “I love God.” That’s to love Him with all our heart and soul and strength.

We might say, “Is it possible to command people to love?” And the answer is, “It is,” because love actually is more volitional than emotional. We enjoy the emotional dimension of love, of course. But love essentially is an issue of the will. That’s why in the wedding service a man is asked about his bride, “Will you love her, comfort her, honour and protect her?” Will you ... that’s a commitment you’re making. “I’m not asking now about your feelings,” the person conducting the wedding is saying. “I’m asking about your intent, your will. Will you love her in sickness and in health, in prosperity and in poverty?” And I’ve forgotten what the rest of the words are, but they are something like that. “For better or for worse,” that’s right.

Heard about a man in India [who] came to some missionaries one day and said, “Could I have a Christian wedding?” And they said, “Certainly.” They were excited this man wanted a Christian wedding. On the day of the wedding, he turned up with sixteen women. And the missionary said, “I thought you wanted a Christian wedding!” And he said, “I do. I’ve got four better, four worse, four richer, four poorer.”

But the point is at your wedding there is no question about your emotions. That can be taken for granted. The question you’re asked in your wedding is about your will. We need to remind ourselves of that. It’s a commitment.

A friend of mine used to say, and only he could say it and get away with it, but I’ll quote it. He said, “If you marry a girl and discover a week later she’s a pig, learn to enjoy pork!” Now I couldn’t get away with saying that, but he did, so I’m quoting him. You have made your commitment. And if it’s pork, it’s pork.

That’s why love is not just, “I feel good about God; I feel wonderful about God.” There are times when you do. There are times actually when you love God, and you don’t feel anything for God.

Jesus repeated this in the New Testament, in Mark Chapter 12. I’ll quote verse 28. One of the teachers of the law asked Him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” Jesus answered. “The important one is,” answered Jesus, “hear oh Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” Then He said, and there’s a second one that’s like it: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” And then said Jesus, “There is no command greater than these.”

Probably were we to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and strength, and were we to love our neighbour as ourselves, we wouldn’t need the rest of the commandments, because they’re fulfilled in loving God and in loving each other. But again, it’s a command.

In fact, the second, “Love your neighbour as yourself,” is intricately related to your relationship with God and your experience of God’s love. In 1 John 4:20, John writes, “Whoever loves God, whoever says He loves God but hates his brother, is a liar. How can he love God whom he’s not seen if he does not love his brother whom he has seen?” Our relationship with God cannot be separated from our relationship with others. If I can put it this way, the vertical and the horizontal - not that God’s up there somewhere but that you understand what I mean by this - reaching out to God or reaching out to our neighbour in love are intimately connected. And if we do not love those who are our neighbours, those around us, we are going to find it very difficult to experience the love of God. Because anybody who says, “I love God,” but hates his brother is actually lying. He’s kidding himself, says John.

I know sometimes we may feel incapable of loving others, because sometimes we are being damaged and wounded. We find it very hard to reach out to somebody else. One of the things we must believe, as Scripture teaches, is that if God calls us He enables us. It’s when we take that first step of reaching out and beginning to love that He enables us, and we begin to experience what He intends. But if loving God is the first condition of experiencing His love in our own lives simply because love is relational, it can’t be one-sided.

The second condition I find in the New Testament is my obedience to Him. In John 14, in verse 15, Jesus said, “If you love me, you’ll obey what I command.” And later in John 14:21, Jesus said, “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.” That’s experiential. It’s not that the Father doesn’t love him anyway, because He loves the world anyway.

He says, “When a person obeys me, he’s the one who I love, and he who loves me by his obedience to me will be loved by my Father and I too will love him and show myself.” That is, the love of God and the love, Jesus says, that He has for us becomes experiential in the context of our obedience to Him. Now that may sound legalistic, but our obedience to Him is saying, “Lord, I want to live in such a way as to please you and honour you and further your purposes and live according to your will as you’ve revealed it.” And as I do so, He says, “I will show myself.”

Jesus said this was true of His own relationship with His Father. Again, in John 14:31: “The world must learn that I love the Father and I do exactly what my Father’s commanded of me. My love for my Father, you want to see it,” says Jesus, “is in my obedience to my Father.” You see, we can’t just sit back in the corner and say, “Well I don’t want to serve God, but I want Him to love me.” The whole thing is intricately linked together. Our experience of His love can never be detached from our obedience to Him.

Let me say this. If you have an obedience problem with God, you have a love problem with God, according to those verses.

If these are the conditions of experiencing His love, I want to talk in particular about how we may experience His love. I want to take this from the story we read together in Luke 15, the story of the Prodigal Son.

I want you to notice something important in this story. That is that nothing changed in the attitude of the father throughout the whole story. Nothing changed in the attitude of the father. He never ceased to love his son. But something changed in the attitude of the son. And that change in the attitude of the son brought him into an experience of his father's love.

When you look at this story I wonder what you think is the best part of this story. A colleague of mine, back in England, a man called Billy Stracken, who is well known in North America. He has been teaching on the "Day of Discovery" television program frequently, though he died very suddenly a year ago. I remember listening to Billy Stracken speaking on one occasion, and he asked us which we thought was the best verse in the story of the Prodigal Son.

I wonder what you would say to that question. I don't know what you would say. You might say verse 20 is probably the best verse: "The father ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." Or you might say verse 17 is the best verse, when he came to his senses. You might say that's the best verse in the story. Or you might say it's verse 18 when the son says, "I'll go to my father and say, 'Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you.'" Now the son is recognizing his own sin and wanting to put it right. You might say that's the best verse. Or you might say the best verse is verse 22, where the father says, "Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him." All these, of course, are good verses.

Billy Stracken said, "I think the best verse is verse 12, where the younger son said to his father, 'Father give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them." And Billy made the point, the best sentence in this story is when the son said to the father, "Father give me my share of the property." The father let him go.

Now that is probably, in the minds of many of us, the worst part of the story. But when the whole story was known, and you look back and you compare him with the second brother in particular, you realize that's probably the best part of the whole story. He came and said, "Father, give me my portion that belongs to me."

Now we know under Jewish law, according to Deuteronomy 21, the eldest son got a double share, and every other son in the family got an equal share. As there were only two sons in the family, he would have got a third of the father's possessions. When he asked for this, his father sounds like a fairly easy walkover, simply, "So he divided his property between them." But you can be sure of this, this father knew his son. I'm sure the son persuaded his father, "Father, I'll invest this money wisely. I'm going to go and start my own business with this. You watch me, father. In a few years time, I'll have multiplied this ten times over." You can imagine the son trying to persuade his father of that. But his father would have known the son. He would have known the moment this boy is out of sight, over the hill and out of sight, he's going to squander his wealth. And so he did. He's going to waste it on drink and partying. And so he did. He's going to buy superficial friends with this money. And so he did. He's going to spend it on prostitutes. And so he did. Must have been a hard moment when the father handed over his share. Fathers, you see, usually know their sons.

Winston Churchill said, “Parents should not leave their children money. They should leave their children horses.” By that he meant this of course, you can’t spend a horse. You have to work a horse. And it will make money for you. Give your children the means to prosperity, but don’t give them prosperity on a plate.

The Book of Proverbs Chapter 20 verse 21 says, “An inheritance quickly gained at the beginning will not be blessed at the end.” That’s why the quick rich syndrome, the lottery and all these kinds of things are dangled in front of us, are so deceptive, because they correct an inheritance quickly gained will not be blessed at the end, and this boy received an inheritance he hadn’t worked for, hadn’t earned. He liquidated the assets to cash. It was a very high-risk strategy on the part of the father. He could have kept him home and have refused to give him the inheritance, but he let him go. Very high risk. But let me remind you of something: it’s the same risk God is taking with you and with me. He’s let us go.

You know how the son went to a far country. It doesn’t tell us where he went, but he went to a far country. You see, “Get away from anybody who knows me. Then I can behave like I want to behave, and nobody’s going to tell tales about me.”

At first he had plenty of friends. Of course he did. He had plenty of money in his pocket. The Book of Proverbs Chapter 14 tells us, “The rich have many friends.” Of course they do. It tells us in Proverbs 19 that, “Wealth brings many friends.” It says later in that same chapter, “Everyone is the friend of a man who gives gifts.” He had no problem being the heart and soul of the party. I mean, he threw the party. He had the cash in his pocket.

But the day came when his funds became exhausted. When his funds were exhausted, so were his friends. He was left bereft. And then a famine came into the country where he’d gone, and he sunk so low that he got a job feeding pigs. That detail is significant, by the way, because pigs were unclean animals to Jews. We know he went to a far country. He must have done, because it was illegal to keep pigs in Israel territory. It still is in Israel today.

On one occasion, I was speaking at a conference in Haifa in Northern Israel, and the room – my wife and children were with me – the room that we had overlooked a zoo, which ran right up to the building in which we were staying. From our window, we could watch the tigers. They were below us, and they would begin to make their calls in the morning. It was great fun actually, living next door to tigers!

We went into the zoo one day, and they had pigs in this zoo. The thing about the pig’s pen was that it was set on concrete. Everything else was on the ground, but the pigs were on concrete, because it’s actually illegal for pig’s feet to touch Jewish soil. They’re dirty, unclean animals.

This man had gone to a far country, and the significance of this was that he ended up looking after pigs. I suppose, I’m trying to think of an equivalent, and I’m not sure I’ve got this right. But I think an equivalent might be that a boy from Canada ends up growing heroin in Columbia. It’s illegal to do that here. Right to the very bottom of the pit.

If the best verse was the father letting him go, I suggest the second best verse is in verse 18, where he says, “I will set out and go back to my father, and say to him, ‘Father, I’ve sinned against heaven and against you. I’m no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired men.’” You see, actually the son was not, “I’ll go back and get my father to love me.” He actually was, “I’ll go home and tell him I’ve sinned.”

In the experience of this son, it is that which opened the door to him experiencing his father’s love. He was not actually expecting his father’s love. He was not looking for it. He did not come back with any sense, “I deserve this,” or “I’m worthy of this,” or “I ought to be loved. He is obligated to love me.” He came back to his father with no demands, other than the recognition of his own disqualification: “I no longer have the right to step over the threshold of your home. Just make me like one of your hired servants.”

That was the spirit in which he came to leave and head back to home. And verse 20 says, “And while he was a long way off, his father saw him.” I imagine his father had watched him go over the horizon. I don’t know, I imagine he left on horseback. That’s the best way to travel in that part of the world if you’re going to a far country. It’s a long way to walk anywhere. [He] probably invested a bit of his money in getting a decent horse. I imagine his father watching him and the horse and watching him go down the road and disappear as he got smaller and smaller and smaller and disappear over the horizon. And every day since then, in the course of his work, there must have been times the father would look up to the horizon, no sign, go back to his responsibilities but look up to the horizon. Probably first thing in the morning, last thing at night, maybe several times in the day, he’d glance to the horizon.

One day he saw a dot on the horizon. There was no horse just some bedraggled young man, unkempt, probably unclean, dragging himself down the road. But he recognized him straight away, ran to his son, threw his arms around him, kissed him. The father had loved that son every day since he’d left home and before. Nothing changed in the attitude of the father. But the son began to experience something he hadn’t experienced before. He began to say his rehearsed speech, “Father, I’ve sinned against heaven and against you. I’m no longer worthy to be called your son ...” But before he’d go on about being a hired servant, the father had taken over, and called his servants to bring the best robe, take off his dirty, unkempt, worn-out clothing, give him the best robe, put a ring on his finger, give him some dignity back.

And you see, the reason why my friend said that the best verse was verse 12, when the father let him go, is because sometimes we never really discover – and this is the sad reality – never really discover what God is like until we fall into the pigpen. It’s high risk.

Some of us as parents have to let our children go. And you watch them go over the horizon, and your heart breaks for them. High risk. But maybe that’s where God is going to meet them. You see, the boy who stayed at home, the boy had been devoted to his father’s service all those [years]. Relatives would have said, “What a great first-born son you’ve got.” The oldest son was devoted to his father’s law; he said to his father, “I’ve done everything you’ve asked me to do.” And the neighbours probably say, “What a good son you’ve got there.” But the son knew nothing of his father’s heart. That’s the problem with the elder boy. And you know, you can stay in touch with the law of God and the service of God, but yet your heart becomes cold.

The context of this story is Jesus is explaining it to some Pharisees. That's back in Chapter 15, in verse 1. Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Him, but the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Never forget that verse when you think about the story of the Prodigal Son.

The Pharisees are saying, "This man eats with sinners, the tax collectors and the rough sinful people hang around Him." Because you see, the Pharisees were those who knew all about the Father's law, and they kept it. The Pharisees were renowned for their righteousness as far as their external behaviour was concerned. They're renowned for the laws they kept and their disciplined observance of them. But they knew nothing of the Father's heart. Pharisaism sometimes creeps closer than we like to think, and we begin to look down our noses at the people who we don't think deserve the friendship of Jesus.

It's when we're stripped of all that pomposity and all that self-righteousness that these Pharisees had, and sometimes it's in the pigpen that we find that, we come to ourselves and say, "What a mess I am." You see, it's the sense of unworthiness that brought the son back to his father's love. It's that same sense that will bring you and me back to our Father's love. It's that sense of undeservedness that enables us to experience His love.

I heard somebody give a testimony a while ago, and they said one of the things they had learned in recent months was that God loves them. And she said, "The best thing I've learned about that is that I am worth it." Well I don't know about that. If you're worth it, it's not very marvellous that God loves you if you're worth it. The marvellous thing is [that] He loves us when we know we're not worth it. That's the marvellous thing.

Maybe some of us are in the older son category here tonight, that we theoretically believe that "God loves me," because that's part of what we believe about Scripture, but our lives don't show much of that. We can develop that hard heart that the older son had. Sometimes we find difficult the fact that where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. Do you know why we find that difficult? Because it's not fair.

The wonderful thing about God is that He's not fair about His love. He lavishes it on the people who least deserve it. That's why the popular thinking today is, "Let's boost ourselves; let's get hold of our ego and hold it with dignity and pride." That doesn't bring us into the love of God. It's when that ego is broken, and we come to our senses and say, "What a mess I am." That's why the grace of God extends to the deepest sin, and those who are forgiven most love most. Jesus said, "Those who have been forgiven much will love much." That's why Mary Magdalene was one of His closest friends, because she had been forgiven much.

I'm not advocating, of course, running away and getting into some pigpen. You don't need to do that. It's the spirit of our hearts that says, "Lord, I recognize my unworthiness, and I come home to my Father, not demanding, 'you better love me the same' just 'make me one of your hired servants.'" And He'll grab hold of you, kiss you, hug you, put the robe on you.

There may be somebody here tonight and you've had a bad week this past week and maybe you've been in the pigpen this past week. It happens. Christians go and play in pigpens. I know because I've talked to too many. And I know my own heart as well. But there's always a way back from the pigpen.

There really didn't see a way back to the self-righteousness of the son who kept the rules but knew nothing of the father's heart. The answer's not to run out and get drunk a few times. Don't think I'm saying that. Though if you have done that, come home, because the Father's waiting. And the experience of His love, although His love never changed, was only when the son came home. And when the son came home, the father lavished on him a love that his brother found offensive.

You can know that God loves you but never experience it, until everyday you're saying, "Lord, I'm not worthy of this. I acknowledge, I stand before you as somebody who left my own self, my own resources, my own righteousness; [someone who] is not worthy of knowing you. But thank you as you do love and you care. I want to run back to you and experience Him coming back to you." That's how this son experienced what his father had always had – love for his son.

Do you need to come back to Him tonight? Could be. Some of us here tonight, you're a Christian but you know nothing of His love and you've played around in some kind of pigpen somewhere. There comes a time when you wake up and you come to your senses and you say, "I need to go home." Not to demand anything of my Father, but I come home in humility and repentance and discover His love waiting for you.

We're going to pray together. I'm going to ask God to make this experiential in some of our lives. Father, I want to pray for each person here tonight. I want to thank you for those who love you with all their heart and soul and strength and whose love for others gives evidence of their love for you. Thank you for the times that we come feeling least worthy, the times we come aware of our failure, aware that once again we've messed up. It's then we discover that you love and that where sin abounds grace abounds, and you pour into our hearts, by the Holy Spirit, your love. I pray Lord Jesus that there are many of us here tonight who might experience a fresh touch of that, because we know our hearts, and we know how desperately corrupt our hearts are. We know how easily, if we have the opportunity, if nobody was looking, if there were no consequences, we know how easily we'd run back into the pigpen and play with sin. Forgive us for that. Thank you that you're always looking to the horizon, and the moment we start to turn back, you run to meet us. I pray that some here tonight might experience this in a way which is personal, and Lord if that is some of us and we don't know Christ at all, we've never come home to the Father at all, bring us home we pray in true humility and repentance and let us enjoy your love in a new way. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.