

Session 10: Love

Faith, Hope, and Love: Rediscovering the Essentials of Christianity

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The Basics of Love

1. In the last two sessions, we have looked at the New Testament's exhortations to *faith* and *hope*. As we look at *love* and how the Scriptures describe it, we must not forget that this 3-fold framework is rooted in real events and real history.

**“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.”
(Galatians 5:6 ESV)**

**“Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”
(Ephesians 6:23 ESV)**

**“So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”
(1 Corinthians 13:13 ESV)**

2. Love is generally defined as “an intense feeling of deep affection” or “a great interest or pleasure in something”. In this way, we often say that we love football or that we love our spouse or family. We express our love for football by playing or watching football games. Likewise, we express love for our spouse or family by spending time with them or giving them a gift. Like other emotions, love cannot be *discerned or known* unless it is *expressed*.
3. In our highly individualized, man-centered, hyper-sexualized Western culture, *love* is more often associated with infatuation, immorality, and lust. Relationships, romance, and sex are marketed on magazine covers, cola commercials, and TV sitcoms as *therapeutic*, as if *love* was the perfect drug that cures the soul's illnesses of loneliness and rejection. We've been left with the impression that when we find *true love*, we'll be fully satisfied and have the self-confidence that we need to soar and succeed in life.
4. The Bible's portrait of *love* (both the love of God and the love we are commanded to have for one another) stands in complete conflict with our cultural perspective. Unfortunately Christianity in the West has largely presented *love* in such a way that keeps mankind as the reference point. In our hearts *we believe that God exists for us rather than us existing for Him*. The apex of this reasoning leads us to conclude that our self-fulfillment

remains the final goal and that Jesus and His love is simply the means to achieve that goal.

5. Emotional experiences and therapeutic repetitions of concepts ungrounded in reality have no power to solve our sin problem, save us from the wrath of God on the Day of the LORD, and reorient our existence around God and His glory. If we want to understand how *love* is expressed by God and how we ought to walk in it *we must once again look to the story.*

How the Bible speaks about the love of God

1. The Bible describes God's *love* in a multi-faceted way. Sometimes we make the mistake of describing the love of God in a much simpler way than the Bible does by overlooking some of the distinctions the Bible makes. In his work *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, author and scholar D.A. Carson lists five distinguishable ways the Bible speaks of God's love:

- a. *The love the Father has for the Son, and the Son has for the Father* - John's gospel is filled with this "intra-trinitarian" way of describing love:

"The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand." (John 3:35 ESV)

"For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing." (John 5:20 ESV)

- b. *God's care and concern over all He has made*

"And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." (Genesis 1:31 ESV)

"But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?" (Matthew 6:30 ESV)

- c. *God's saving love towards His fallen world* - God has promised to *restore all things* and desires men everywhere to repent because He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11).

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16 ESV)

d. *God's covenantal love towards His elect, the people of Israel -*

**"It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt."
(Deuteronomy 7:7–8 ESV)**

**"Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day."
(Deuteronomy 10:14–15 ESV)**

**"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son."
(Hosea 11:1 ESV)**

- i. This manner of love stems from the Hebrew word *chesed* and is translated "steadfast love", "lovingkindness", or "mercy" in our modern Bibles. The word does not mean "affection", but instead is a statement of God's *covenant faithfulness* or *covenantal loyalty*. We see this often in the Psalms as the psalmists draw on the truths of God's loyal, covenantal faithfulness to Israel.

"Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds." (Psalm 36:5 ESV)

"Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you." (Psalm 63:3 ESV)

"My faithfulness and my steadfast love shall be with him, and in my name shall his horn be exalted." (Psalm 89:24 ESV)

**"For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;"
(Psalm 103:11 ESV)**

"The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." (Psalm 145:8 ESV)

"Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love." (Micah 7:18 ESV)

e. *God's love for His people in a provisional way, conditioned on obedience*

- i. The two greatest commandments God gave to Israel was to *love Him* and to *love others*. The way they were to walk out these commands was through obedience to the law from the heart, soul, mind, and strength. He gave these commands so that the nation would be *like Him* and image Him to the nations.

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise... You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."
(Deuteronomy 6:9 ESV)

- ii. Obedience does not have to do with how we become followers of Jesus, but rather how we maintain relationship with Him once we have put our faith in Him.

"keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life."
(Jude 21 ESV)

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love."
(John 15:9–10 ESV)

- 2. Each of these ways of speaking about the love of God must not be compartmentalized, sealed off, or made exclusive from one another. We

need *all* of what Scripture says on this subject so we can remain steady in our faith and effectively disciple others into knowing God's love as He has revealed it through His story.

Love Expressed in the Cross

“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”

(John 15:13 ESV)

“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us,”

(1 John 3:16 ESV)

“but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

(Romans 5:8 ESV)

1. God has chosen to reveal what He is like through real *events in time and history*. For example, the events of the exodus and the Law given at Sinai were significant disclosures of the character and heart of God. The future Day of the LORD will reveal still more of what He is like. Unfortunately a heresy called *Gnosticism* was introduced the early church which erroneously said that one could obtain “special revelation” and knowledge of God apart from the historical ways He has revealed Himself. The apostles called this “false knowledge” (1 Timothy 6:20).
2. The New Testament does not present *love* as an abstract or subjective concept as Gnosticism would. As we peer through a very specific, definitive lens to discover what *love* is, we behold one particular event that brings us exceptional clarity. *The cross of Christ* is the way that the love of God is *fleshed out* for us to see.
3. The New Testament knits together Carson's five distinctions of the love of God by uniting them in one grand event in context to the Biblical story - *the cross*.
 - a. Intra-trinitarian love
 - b. Loving care and concern for creation
 - c. Saving love
 - d. Covenantal love
 - e. Love conditioned on obedience
3. The cross was not a sterile, robotic event that is to be evaluated simply to produce doctrinal statements. As we peer into the mystery of what God has done in reconciling us to Himself, we must fix our eyes on a Person named Jesus.

4. We are not saved from God's wrath on the Day of the LORD by mere mental agreement with a doctrine called *justification by faith* – we are saved by throwing our faith on a Man named Jesus and what He did. At a real time and a real place on this earth that still exists, the long-awaited son of God suffered in agony as blood flowed from His feet and His hands. Jesus of Nazareth was martyred by His own people. This was the greatest injustice in history.

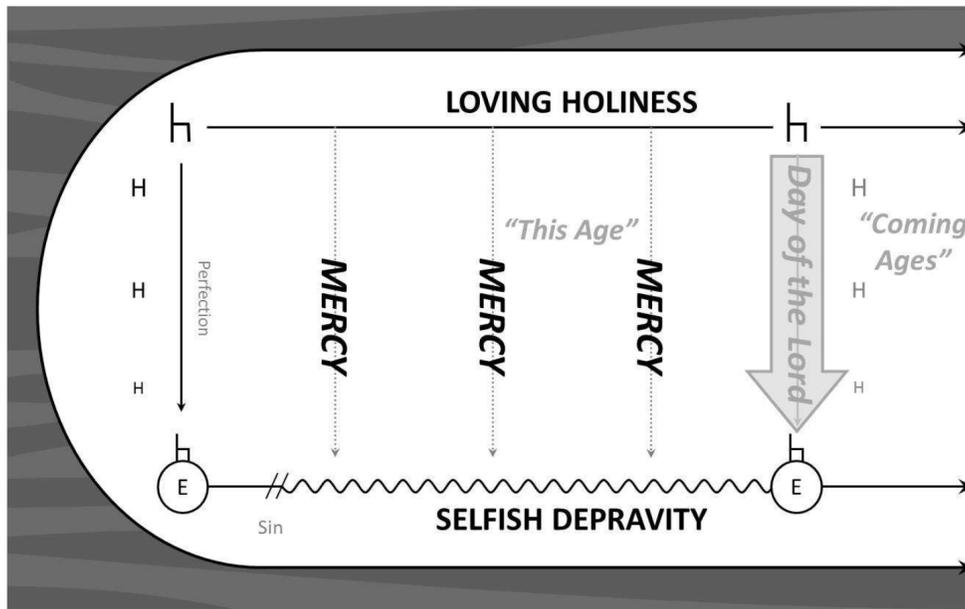
“To those present that day, the subject of our sterile theological musings was a scene unforgettable in its horror and yet somehow unthinkably beautiful. Memories of skin torn asunder, heaving sweat, dripping blood, and tear-stained eyes filled their minds at the mention of the Cross of Christ. Through the testimony of Scripture and the ministry of the Holy Spirit we, no less than they, should also know the feeling of this graphic scene bearing down upon our souls until we are reduced to speechless sobbing.”¹

5. *It is only by beholding the cross of Christ in context to the Biblical story that we can come to a lucid understanding of the love of God. As we have seen, the cross of Christ is dynamically connected to the story of redemptive history. Though the cross does show God's desire and affection for us as individuals, the corporate implications of Christ crucified for Israel, the nations, and all creation are the most emphasized in Scripture. He has loved us and given His life up for us so that we may be brought back into His story.*
6. The mercy, amnesty, and longsuffering love that Jesus displayed on the cross is what characterizes God's dealings with humanity in this age. The cross (*love*) must be seen in context to the Day of the LORD, a day of joy and gladness for those who trust in God's sin-bearing arrangement (*faith*) and who “put no confidence in the flesh” (Philippians 3:3) for salvation, immortality, and eternal life (*hope*).

“In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”
(1 John 4:9–10 ESV)

“The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9 NKJV)

¹ Venable, Stephen. *Christology II* class notes, session 10, “Relational Mediation”.



The Loving Witness of the Church

1. In light of God's amnesic, longsuffering *love* displayed through the cross, this age could be labeled as *cruciform* ("shaped like a cross"). The Bible's call to *love* must therefore be understood in light of God's demonstration of His love for us. We show love to others by walking like Jesus did. Christian love is *cruciform love*.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."
(John 15:12-13 ESV)

"When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly."
(1 Peter 2:23 ESV)

"Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."
(Ephesians 5:1-2 ESV)

"If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own

way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."
(1 Corinthians 13:3–8 ESV)

2. In order to be understood rightly, Christian *love* must be expressed and proclaimed in context to *the greater story of the Bible*. The testimony and mission of the church is to “proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26), to declare that Jesus “is the one appointed by God to judge the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42). *To only say “God loves you” is to erroneously tell a small portion of the story out of context.* As strangers, pilgrims, and exiles who have our hope *fully* set on the age to come, we *warn* of the coming judgment and *comfort* with the loving mercy expressed through the cross, i.e. “the kindness and severity of the Lord” (Romans 11:22).
3. This loving, merciful restraint from judgment in light of the greatest injustice in history is the central witness of the Apostles to the Jews who had martyred Jesus:

"this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men... For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, “ ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.” ’ Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”"
(Acts 2:34–36 ESV)

"The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses... And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers... Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out"
(Acts 3:13–19 ESV)

4. The same amnesic restraint from judgment is exemplified by Stephen, the church's first martyr. Stephen’s final declaration reveals the deepest drive and agenda of his heart, which echoes the words of Jesus on the cross (Luke 23:34):

"“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered ... But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him... And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out... “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”

(Acts 7:51–60 ESV)

5. The early church understood that Jesus’ call to *remain in His love* and to *imitate His love* involved persecution, suffering, and mistreatment from the wicked. The very model Jesus set forth in *suffering before glory* was now to be the church’s model. Just as He did, we *love* our enemies (Matthew 5:44), submit to injustice, and restrain from vengeance in this age as we faithfully proclaim the need for repentance and faith in light of the judgment to come. As we imitate Him in mercy and forgiveness, we magnify the glory of God, put Jesus on display, and exemplify His amnesic stance towards humanity before the Day of the LORD.

"But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations.... And you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved."

(Mark 13:9–13 ESV)

"And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. (the sufferings of Christ before the glory of Christ’s reign in Jerusalem, cf. Luke 24:26; Acts 3:18; 17:3; 1 Peter 1:11)"

(Acts 20:22–27 ESV)

"Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking"

(1 Peter 4:1 ESV)

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed... Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name."

(1 Peter 4:12–16 ESV)

"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay (on the Day of the LORD), says the Lord.""

(Romans 12:19 ESV)

6. As the Holy Spirit enables us to boldly declare the simple truth of salvation from the wrath of God through faith in the cross, He also enables us to demonstrate and "flesh out" the love of God. We are called to be *cruciform* in both word and deed, "bearing fruit and increasing in the knowledge of God" (Colossians 1:10).

"And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death (at the cross), in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him (at the Day of the LORD), if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake (as Jesus did, cf. Hebrews 12:2; Philippians 2:8f), and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church (a long-suffering witness that they might be saved; cf. 2 Peter 3:9), of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known,"
(Colossians 1:21–25 ESV)

"Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation (the day of judgment). Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme... For this is the will of God, that by doing good you

should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people... Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.”

(1 Peter 2:11–21 ESV)

"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus (emulating Jesus' suffering), so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies (in the resurrection). For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh... knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence (on the Day of the LORD). For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away (in suffering and persecution), our inner self is being renewed day by day (in faith and hope in the resurrection). For this light momentary affliction (emulating Jesus) is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison (in the resurrection)”

(2 Corinthians 4:8–17 ESV)

"Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ (patiently enduring what God leads us through), so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have."

(Philippians 1:27–30 ESV)

7. At the end of the age, *martyrdom* will be common for followers of Jesus. As sinful humanity grows in wickedness, the church will have a final opportunity to display Christ crucified as a witness of His amnestic, longsuffering love.

"When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth (day of the LORD)?" Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been." (Revelation 6:9–11 ESV)

Distortions of love

"The modern culture of subjectivity has long since been in danger of turning into a culture of narcissism, which makes the self its own prisoner and supplies it merely with self-repetitions and self-confirmations. It is therefore time for Christian theology to break out of this prison of narcissism, and for it to present its doctrine of faith as one of the all-embracing history of God."²

1. Our narcissistic, self-seeking, individually-focused culture has caused many Christians to sanitize the Biblical understanding of *love* and purge it of anything offensive. This is why the wrath of God and the subject of hell is under fire in the church today.

"The love of God in our culture has been purged of anything the culture finds uncomfortable. The love of God has been sanitized, democratized, and above all sentimentalized. This process has been going on for some time. My generation was taught to sing, "What the world needs now is love, sweet love," in which we robustly instruct the Almighty that we do not need another mountain (we have enough of them), but we could do with some more love... Nowadays if you tell people that God loves them, they are unlikely to be surprised. Of course God loves me; he's like that, isn't he? Besides, why shouldn't he love me? I'm kind of cute, or at least as nice as the next person. I'm okay, you're okay, and God loves you and me... Today most people seem to have little difficulty believing in the love of God; they have far more difficulty believing in the justice of God, the wrath of God, and the non-contradictory truthfulness of an omniscient God. But is the biblical teaching on the love of God maintaining its shape

² Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 5

when the meaning of “God” dissolves in mist? We must not think that Christians are immune from these influences.”³

2. Instead of a gloriously holy yet tender and compassionate God who took on flesh and has shown us overwhelming mercy through the cross, the cultural perspective on love has distorted our view and caused some to see Jesus as an “extravagant, romantic lover” that “satisfies the deepest longings of our heart with His love”. When this perspective is adopted and perpetuated, God’s love often becomes divorced from a real story, a real crucified Man, and a real day of judgment. Love is reduced to a subjective emotion that we “feel”.

While confessional Reformed and Presbyterian pastors and theologians in the mid-1800s challenged the emphasis on the self rather than God and human will over God's gracious initiative, revivalism finally won the field.

As a result, "The major categories of evangelical talk about God tend to emphasize one's personal experience of an immanent deity." Witten adds, "When God is seen in transcendent terms at all, his fearsome qualities are either deemphasized or banished from the discourse and replaced by portraits of a clear-thinking, well-organized 'super-administrator,' one of whose primary functions is to plan efficiently the affairs of the universe."

This thinking, no doubt, contributes to the phenomenon that Smith characterizes as *moralistic, therapeutic deism*. God is basically the ideal Secretary of Homeland Security - *Homeland* defined as my own personal happiness, or national health, whether defined by the political left or right.

Of course, when the affairs of the universe center on me and my happiness this generic deism becomes therapeutic, especially focusing on "'God as Daddy' and 'God as Sufferer.'" In a therapeutic paradigm, not only the parishioner but even God is put on the couch as we emphatically interpret his feelings. God is never angry or judgmental toward people; in fact, he is more anguished than we are, since he knows how much our actions can harm us. He is simply waiting for us to come to our senses, like the father in the parable of the prodigal son. We might even be inclined to feel sorry for this deity. These sermon samples treated God exclusively as the *extravagant lover*. In fact, love overwhelms law; God sets aside any question of merit, duty, or achievement and simply embraces the prodigal.

God never really surprises us, because his behavior is always predictable: he would never do anything to offend us. Consequently, there is no suggestion that we need a mediator at all, according to these sermons.

God's love need not be correlated with his holiness, righteousness, and justice. Everything is okay - without mention of Christ's self-sacrifice as the only way of reconciliation. Since, as a rule, God's love apparently overwhelms his justice and holiness, the "good news" offered here eliminates any need for the actual story recorded in the Gospels. If God's love so easily ignores his justice, holiness and righteousness, then Christ's death on the cross seems like a cruel waste.⁴

³ Carson, D.A., *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, Crossway (Wheaton, IL), p. 11

⁴ Horton, Michael. *Christless Christianity*, p. 55

3. Moreover, other concepts commonly associated with our cultural understanding of *love* (“romance”, “satisfy”, “encounter”, “lover”, etc.) are now being used in preaching and prayer to describe Biblical *love*. These terms are completely absent from the evangelistic sermons and prayers of the apostles throughout the New Testament. In fact, *the word "love" is not used at all in the book of Acts*. If the book of Acts shows us how the early church proclaimed the Gospel and encouraged believers to persevere in the faith, we must soberly reassess our priorities and goals in prayer, evangelism, and discipleship. This type of alternative language inadvertently dulls people to the truths of the cross and the glory of the Biblical story.
4. As we have seen, *love* should be understood in context to *hope* and *faith*. Our prayer to understand and know more of the love of God is essentially a prayer to *understand the cross* more deeply and *overflow with gratitude* for Christ crucified.

"that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."
(Ephesians 3:16–19 ESV)

5. A false witness of the Gospel is arising even today that perverts the glory of the cross and gives license to avoid embracing suffering and martyrdom. The apostles instructed us to be on guard against those who would diminish the call to imitate Christ crucified in this age:

"Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself."
(Philippians 3:17–21 ESV)

Final thoughts: Discipleship towards Biblical faith, hope, and love

1. As we have examined the Biblical story and diligently sought out the meaning of faith, hope, and love, I trust that by the Holy Spirit you have begun to “breathe the air of the Bible’s world, recognize it as the real Narnia, and never want to leave.” (Jim Hamilton, Jr.)
2. As we seek to lead and disciple others towards Jesus, the most important thing we must call them to is *the Biblical story*. That story has a *guaranteed* outcome and holds out a hope that will not disappoint. To point people to an ambiguous or uncertain hope like “revival”, “breakthrough”, “ministry impact”, or “encounter” is to inevitably point them down a path that leads to some measure of disappointment. *We must first and foremost shepherd our flocks towards the hope of the Gospel as the Apostles taught it.*
3. One of the chief errors in the church today is defining our spirituality by our emotions. We must resist presenting the mirage of “emotional experience”, “encounter”, and “the presence” as the primary goal and focus of Christianity. The Apostles never put forth any other standard for believers beyond sincere faith in the cross, complete hope in Jesus’ return, and a heart of love for God and others.

When a high value is placed on personal experiences or revelations, Scriptures are then unscrupulously twisted and misquoted. We find those who believe the feelings of a congregation must be hyped up in order to "feel" the Presence of the Lord or else the church is thought to be "dead". Instead of music being used to worship and glorify God, it is used as a means of "connecting" or "feeling" the Presence of God. If the "location" (or a feeling within) of God is not aroused and sensed, the Spirit is said to be either absent or bound. To counter this passive situation, worship is intensified, the devil is "bound" and certain forms of excitement are encouraged until "God's Presence" is "felt". Many times music is used as the conduit for the "feeling". A popular slogan to advertise a certain music company is: "Feel the Presence of the Lord". The church has been taken down this primrose path for so long that they equate the Presence of God with a certain feeling that they obtain by doing certain things. The "goose bumps" or the "warm fuzzies" or tears of comfort, is their way of "knowing" that God is present. So what this thinking boils down to is simply: "To know God's Presence you must feel Him." In actuality this is pure Gnosticism... When emotional feelings become the doctrine of God's Presence, then God has been reduced to a "gnosis" form of Presence. For many, the doctrine of "knowing the Presence of God" is sought in a subjective experience... Uncontrolled spiritual feelings transcend sound

scriptural rationalism and give rise to the doctrine of "the Presence of God" built on an experience.⁵

4. Far more than any prophecy, dream, impression, or voice, we must allow the Scriptures and the Bible's story to shape our prayers, personal life vision, ministry goals, discipleship meetings, church mission statements, marriages, finances, relationships, and recreation. True Christian discipleship keeps the Day of the LORD, the resurrection of the body, and the messianic kingdom as the *anchor of hope* in the midst of our sojourn through this present evil age. These glorious events are yet future, and so we must be attentive and maintain a *sojourning, pilgrim posture* as we live day by day.
5. When the mission of God in this age (and thereby the mission of the church) becomes the inauguration of the kingdom and the age to come, the Cross ceases to be the standard of this age. Instead, it serves only a secondary role that brings the church their inheritance now. In such a light, is there any reason to wonder why self-denial, suffering before glory, and martyrdom is so overlooked in the modern church?
6. As we sojourn through this present evil age and eagerly await the return of Jesus to restore all things, I pray that this course has helped you get a proper foundation (a worldview change and a "big picture" amazement in our 'selfie infatuated' generation). Instead of building fruitlessly on ideas that center on our emotions ("I feel more when I fast") or ministry impact ("we need faith for breakthrough in our ministry"), I pray that we can together build on the simple truth of Christ crucified. When Christ is at the center, we find our proper place, and we aren't caught up in building movements for the sake of historical change, but are caught up in the simplicity of faith, hope, and love:

We *believe* in God's existence, we *trust* in the arrangement of His Son's atoning death, we *hope* in the grace to be given at His return, and we *obey/ imitate* Him in a loving, longsuffering witness to the earth.

**"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,"
(Titus 2:11–13 ESV)**

⁵ van der Merwe, Travers and Jewel. *Strange Fire: The Rise of Gnosticism in the Church*, 1995