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1

LOVE THAT PASSETH KNOWLEDGE

To know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge.
Ephesians 3:19

If I could only make men and women understand the real meaning of the words of the apostle John—"God is love"—I would take that single text, and go up and down the world proclaiming this glorious truth. If you can convince a man that you love him, you have won his heart. If we really make people believe that God loves them, how we should find them crowding into the kingdom of heaven! The trouble is that people think God hates them; and so they are all the time running away from Him.

A Text Burned In

We built a church in Chicago some years ago and were very anxious to teach the people the love of God. We thought if we could not preach it into their hearts we would try to burn it in; so we put right over the pulpit in gas jets these words—"God is Love." A man going along the streets one night glanced through the door and saw the text. He was a poor prodigal. As he passed on he thought to

himself: "*God is love!*" No! He does not love me; for I am a poor, miserable sinner.

He tried to get rid of the text, but it seemed to stand out right before him in letters of fire. He went on a little farther, then turned round, went back, and entered the meeting. He did not hear the sermon, but the words of that short text had gotten deeply lodged in his heart, and that was enough. It is of little account what men say if the Word of God only gets an entrance into the sinner's heart. He stayed after the first meeting was over; and I found him there weeping like a child.

As I unfolded the Scriptures and told him how God had loved him all the time, although he had wandered so far away, and how God was waiting to receive him and forgive him, the light of the gospel broke into his mind, and he went away rejoicing.

There is nothing in this world that people prize so much as they do love. Show me a person who has no one to care for or love him, and I will show you one of the most wretched beings on the face of the earth. Why do people commit suicide? Very often it is because this thought steals in upon them—that no one loves them; and they would rather die than live.

I know of no truth in the whole Bible that ought to come home to us with such power and tenderness as that of the love of God; and there is no truth in the Bible that Satan would so much like to blot out. For more than six thousand years he has been trying to persuade men that God does not love them. He succeeded in making our first parents believe this lie, and he too often succeeds with their children.

When Does God Love Us?

The idea that God does not love us often comes from false teaching. Mothers make a mistake in teaching children that God does not love them when they do wrong; but only when they do right. That is not taught in Scripture. You do not teach your children that when they do wrong you hate them. Their wrongdoing does not change your love to hate; if it did, you would change your love a great many times. Because your child is fretful, or has committed some act of disobedience, you do not cast him out as though he did not belong to you! No! He is still your child, and you love him. And if men have gone astray from God it does not follow that He hates them. It is the sin that He hates.

I believe the reason why a great many people think God does not love them is because they are measuring God by their own small rule, from their own standpoint. We love men as long as we consider them worthy of our love; when they are not, we cast them off. It is not so with God. There is a vast difference between human love and divine love.

The Dimensions of God's Love

In Ephesians 3:18, we are told of the breadth, and length, and depth, and height of God's love. Many of us think we know something of God's love, but centuries hence we shall admit we have never found out much about it. Columbus discovered America; but what did he know about its great lakes, rivers, forests, and the Mississippi Valley? He died without knowing much about what he had discovered.

So, many of us have discovered something of the love of God, but there are heights, depths, and lengths of it we do not know. That love is a great ocean, and we require to plunge into it before we really know anything of it. It is said of a Roman Catholic archbishop of Paris that when he was thrown into prison and condemned to be shot, a little while before he was led out to die he saw a window in his cell in the shape of a cross. Upon the top of the cross he wrote "height," at the bottom "depth," and at the end of each arm "length." He had experienced the truth conveyed in the hymn:

When I survey the wondrous cross,
On which the Prince of Glory died.

When we wish to know the love of God, we should go to Calvary. Can we look upon that scene and say God did not love us? That cross speaks of the love of God. Greater love never has been taught than that which the cross teaches. What prompted God to give up Christ?—what prompted Christ to die?—if it were not love? "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Christ laid down His life for His enemies; Christ laid down His life for His murderers; Christ laid down His life for them that hated Him; and the spirit of the cross, the spirit of Calvary, is love. When they were mocking Him and deriding Him, what did He say? "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." That is love. He did not call down fire from heaven to consume them; there was nothing but love in His heart.

The Love of God Is Unchangeable

If you study the Bible you will find that the love of God is *unchangeable*. Many who loved you at one time have perhaps grown cold in their affections and turned away from you; it may be that their love is changed to hatred. It is not so with God. It is recorded of Jesus Christ, just when He was about to be parted from His disciples and led away to Calvary, that "having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end" (John 13:1). He knew that one of His disciples would betray Him; yet He loved Judas. He knew that another disciple would deny Him, and swear that he never knew Him; and yet He loved Peter. It was the love which Christ had for Peter which broke his heart, and brought him back in penitence to the feet of his Lord. For three years Jesus had been with the disciples trying to teach them His love, not only by His life and words, but by His work. And, on the night of His betrayal, He takes a basin of water, girds Himself with a towel, and taking the place of a servant, washes their feet. He wanted to convince them of His unchanging love.

There is no portion of Scripture I read so often as John 14, and there is none that is more sweet to me. I never tire of reading it. Hear what our Lord says, as He pours out His heart to His disciples: "At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you. He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and *he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father*" (14:20-21; emphasis added). Think of the great God who created heaven and earth

loving you and me! "If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him" (v. 23).

Would to God that our puny minds could grasp this great truth that the Father and the Son so love us that they desire to come and abide with us. Not to tarry for a night, but to come and *abide* in our hearts!

We have another passage more wonderful still in John 17:23. "I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and *hast loved them, as thou hast loved me*" (emphasis added). That is one of the most remarkable sayings that ever fell from the lips of Jesus Christ. There is no reason why the Father should not love Him. He was obedient unto death; He never transgressed the Father's law, or turned aside from the path of perfect obedience by one hair's breadth. It is very different with us, and yet, notwithstanding all our rebellion and foolishness, He says that if we are trusting in Christ, the Father loves us as He loves the Son. Marvelous love! Wonderful love! That God can possibly love us as He loves His own Son seems too good to be true. Yet that is the teaching of Jesus Christ.

It is hard to make a sinner believe in this unchangeable love of God. When a man has wandered away from God, he thinks that God hates him. We must make a distinction between sin and the sinner. God loves the sinner, but He hates the sin. He hates sin, because it mars human life. It is just because God loves the sinner that He hates sin.

God's Love Is Unfailing

God's love is not only unchangeable, but *unfailing*. In Isaiah 49:15–16 we read: "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me."

Now the strongest human love that we know of is a mother's love. Many things will separate a man from his wife. A father may turn his back on his child; brothers and sisters may become inveterate enemies; husbands may desert their wives; wives, their husbands. But a mother's love endures through all. In good repute, in bad repute, in the face of the world's condemnation, a mother loves on and hopes that her child may turn from his evil ways and repent. She remembers the infant smiles, the merry laugh of childhood, the promise of youth; and she can never be brought to think him unworthy. Death cannot quench a mother's love; it is stronger than death.

You have seen a mother watching over her sick child. How willingly she would take the disease into her own body if she could thus relieve her child! Week after week she will keep watch. She will let no one else take care of that sick child.

"This Is My Boy; I Love Him Still"

A friend of mine, some time ago, was visiting in a beautiful home where he met a number of friends. After they had all gone away, having left something behind, he went back to get it. There he

found the lady of the house, a wealthy lady, sitting behind a poor fellow who looked like a tramp. He was her own son. Like the prodigal, he had wandered far away, yet the mother said: "This is my boy; I love him still." Take a mother with nine or ten children, if one goes astray, she seems to love that one more than any of the rest.

A leading minister in the state of New York once told me of a father who was a very bad character. The mother did all she could to prevent the contamination of the boy; but the influence of the father was stronger, and he led his son into all kinds of sin until the lad became one of the worst of criminals. He committed murder and was put on trial. All through the trial, the widowed mother (for the father had died) sat in the court. When the witnesses testified against the boy, it seemed to hurt the mother much more than the son. When he was found guilty and sentenced to die, everyone else, feeling the justice of the verdict, seemed satisfied at the result. But the mother's love never faltered. She begged for a reprieve, but that was denied. After the execution she craved for the body, and this also was refused. According to custom, it was buried in the prison yard. A little while afterward the mother herself died, but before she was taken away she expressed a desire to be buried by the side of her boy. She was not ashamed of being known as the mother of a murderer.

The story is told of a young woman in Scotland who left her home and became an outcast in Glasgow. Her mother sought her far and wide, but in vain. At last, she caused her daughter's picture to be hung up on the walls of the Midnight Mission

rooms, where abandoned women resorted. Many gave the picture a passing glance. One lingered by the picture. It was the same dear face that looked down upon her in her childhood. She had not forgotten or cast off her sinning child, or her picture would never have been hung upon those walls. The lips seemed to open, and whisper: "Come home! I forgive you, and love you still."

The poor girl sank down overwhelmed with her feelings. She was the prodigal daughter. The sight of her mother's face had broken her heart. She became truly penitent for her sins, and with a heart full of sorrow and shame, returned to her forsaken home; and mother and daughter were once more united.

The Love of God Surpasses a Mother's Love

But let me tell you that no mother's love is to be compared with the love of God; it does not measure the height or the depth of God's love. No mother in this world ever loved her child as God loves you and me. Think of the love that God must have had when He gave His Son to die for the world! I used to think a good deal more of Christ than I did of the Father. Somehow or other I had the idea that God was a stern judge, that Christ came between me and God and appeased the anger of God. But after I became a father, and for years had an only son, as I looked at my boy I thought of the Father giving His Son to die, and it seemed to me as if it required more love for the Father to give His Son than for the Son to die.

Oh, the love that God must have had for the world when He gave His Son to die for it! "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). I have never been able to preach from that text. I have often thought I would, but it is so high that I can never climb to its height; I have just quoted it and passed on. Who can fathom the depth of those words: "God so loved the world"? We can never scale the heights of His love, or fathom its depths. Paul prayed that he might know the height, the depth, the length, and the breadth of the love of God; but it was past his finding out. It "passeth knowledge" (Ephesians 3:19).

The Cross of Christ and the Love of God

Nothing speaks to us of the love of God like the cross of Christ. Come with me to Calvary, and look upon the Son of God as He hangs there. Can you hear that piercing cry from His dying lips: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do!" and say that He does not love you? "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). But Jesus Christ laid down His life for His enemies.

Another thought is this: He loved us long before we ever thought of Him. The idea that He does not love us until we first love Him is not to be found in Scripture. In 1 John 4:10 it is written: "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." He loved us before we ever thought of loving Him. You loved your children before they

knew anything about your love. And so, long before we ever thought of God, we were in His thoughts.

What brought the prodigal home? It was the thought that his father loved him. Suppose the news had reached him that he was a castoff, and that his father did not care for him anymore, would he have gone back? Never! But the thought dawned upon him that his father loved him still; so he rose up and went back to his home. Dear reader, the love of the Father ought to bring us back to Him. It was Adam's calamity and sin that revealed God's love. When Adam fell, God came down and dealt in mercy with him. If anyone is lost it will not be because God does not love him; it will be because he has resisted the love of God.

Heaven's Attraction

What will make heaven attractive? Is it the pearly gates or the golden streets? No. Heaven will be attractive because there we shall behold Him who loved us so much as to give His only begotten Son to die for us. What makes home attractive? Is it the beautiful furniture and stately rooms? No; some homes with all these are like whited sepulchers.

In Brooklyn a mother was dying; and it was necessary to take her child from her, because the little child could not understand the nature of the sickness and disturbed her mother. Every night the child sobbed herself to sleep in a neighbor's house, because she wanted to go back to her mother's; but the mother grew worse, and they could not take the child home. At last the mother died; and after

her death they thought it best not to let the child see her dead mother in her coffin. After the burial the child ran into one room crying, "Mama! Mama!" and then into another crying, "Mama! Mama!" and so went over the whole house; and when the little creature failed to find that loved one, she cried to be taken back to the neighbors. So what makes heaven attractive is the thought that we shall see Christ who has loved us and given Himself for us.

If you ask me why God should love us, I cannot tell. I suppose it is because He is a true father. It is His nature to love; just as it is the nature of the sun to shine. He wants you to share in that love. Do not let unbelief keep you away from Him. Do not think that, because you are a sinner, God does not love you, or care for you. He does! He wants to save you and bless you.

"When we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6). Is that not enough to convince you that He loves you? He would not have died for you if He had not loved you. Is your heart so hard that you can brace yourself against His love, and spurn and despise it? You *can* do it; but it will be at your peril.

I can imagine some saying to themselves: "Yes, we believe that God loves us, if we love Him; we believe that God loves the pure and the holy." Let me say, my friends, not only does God love the pure and the holy; He also loves the ungodly. "God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). God sent Him to die for the sins of the whole world. If you belong to the world, then you have

part and lot in this love that has been exhibited in the cross of Christ.

The Kidnapping of Charlie Ross

There is a verse in Revelation (1:5) that I think a great deal of—"Unto him that loved us, and washed us." It might be thought that God would first wash us, and then love us; but no, He first loved us. Years ago the whole country was intensely excited about Charlie Ross, a child four years old, who was stolen. Two men in a gig asked him and an older brother if they wanted some candy. Then they drove away with the younger boy, leaving the older one. For many years a search has been made in every state and territory. Men have been over to Great Britain, France, and Germany, and have hunted in vain for the child. The mother still lives in the hope that she will see her long-lost Charlie. I never remember the whole country to have been so much agitated about any event unless it was the assassination of President Garfield.

Well, suppose the mother of Charlie Ross were in some meeting; and that while the preacher was speaking, she happened to look down amongst the audience and see her long-lost son. Suppose that he was poor, dirty and ragged, shoeless and coatless. What would she do? Would she wait till he was washed and decently clothed before she would acknowledge him? No, she would get off the platform at once, rush toward him and take him in her arms! After that she would cleanse and clothe him.

So it is with God. He loved us and washed us. I can imagine one saying, "If God loves me, why does He not make me good?" God wants sons and

daughters in heaven; He does not want machines or slaves. He could break our stubborn hearts, but He wants to draw us toward Himself by the cords of love.

He wants you to sit down with Him at the marriage supper of the Lamb; to wash you and make you whiter than snow. He wants you to walk with Him the crystal pavement of yonder blissful world. He wants to adopt you into His family, and to make you a son or a daughter of heaven. Will you trample His love under your feet? Or will you, this hour, give yourself to Him?

A Mother's Touch

When our terrible Civil War was going on, a mother received the news that her boy had been wounded in the Battle of the Wilderness. She took the first train, and started for her boy, although the order had gone forth from the war department that no more women should be admitted within the lines. But a mother's love knows nothing about orders, and she managed by tears and entreaties to get through the lines to the Wilderness. At last she found the hospital where her boy was. Then she went to the doctor, and she said: "Will you let me go to the ward and nurse my boy?"

The doctor said: "I have just got your boy to sleep. He is in a very critical state, and I am afraid if you wake him up the excitement will be so great that it will carry him off. You had better wait a while, and remain without until I tell him that you have come, and break the news gradually to him." The mother looked into the doctor's face and said:

“Doctor, suppose my boy does not wake up, and I should never see him alive! Let me go and sit down by his side; I won’t speak to him.”

“If you will not speak to him, you may do so,” said the doctor.

She crept to the cot and looked into the face of her boy. How she had longed to look at him! How her eyes seemed to be feasting as she gazed upon his countenance! When she got near enough, she could not keep her hands off; she laid that tender, loving hand upon his brow. The moment the hand touched the forehead of her boy, he, without opening his eyes, cried out: “Mother, you have come!” He knew the touch of that loving hand. There was love and sympathy in it.

The Tenderness of Jesus

Ah, sinner, if you feel the loving touch of Jesus you will recognize it—it is so full of tenderness! The world may treat you unkindly, but Christ never will. You will never have a better Friend in this world. What you need is to come today to Him. Let His loving arm be underneath you; let His loving hand be about you; and He will hold you with mighty power. He will keep you and fill that heart of yours with His tenderness and love.

I can imagine some of you saying, “How shall I go to Him?” Why, just as you would go to your mother. Have you done your mother a great injury and a great wrong? If so, you go to her and you say: “Mother, I want you to forgive me.” Treat Christ in the same way. Go to Him today and tell Him that you have not loved Him, that you have

not treated Him right; confess your sins, and see how quickly He will bless you.

A Pardon from Abraham Lincoln

I am reminded of another incident—that of a boy who had been tried by court-martial and ordered to be shot. The hearts of the father and mother were broken when they heard the news. In that home was a little girl. She had read the life of Abraham Lincoln, and she said: “Now, if Abraham Lincoln knew how my father and mother loved their boy, he would not let my brother be shot.” She wanted her father to go to Washington to plead for his boy. But the father said: “No, there is no use; the law must take its course. They have refused to pardon one or two who have been sentenced by that court-martial, and an order has gone forth that the president is not going to interfere again. If a man has been sentenced by court-martial, he must suffer the consequences.”

That father and mother had not faith to believe that their boy might be pardoned. But the little girl was strong in hope.

She got on the train away up in Vermont and started off to Washington. When she reached the White House, the soldiers refused to let her in, but she told her pitiful story, and they allowed her to pass. When she got to the secretary's room, where the president's private secretary was, he refused to allow her to enter the private office of the president. But the little girl told her story, and it touched the heart of the private secretary; so he passed her in.

As she went into Abraham Lincoln's room, there

were United States senators, generals, governors, and leading politicians, who were there about important business about the war; but the president happened to see the child standing at his door. He wanted to know what she wanted, and she went right to him and told the story in her own language. He was a father, and the great tears trickled down Abraham Lincoln's cheeks. He wrote a dispatch and sent it to the army to have that boy sent to Washington at once. When he arrived, the president pardoned him, gave him thirty days furlough, and sent him home with the little girl to cheer the hearts of the father and mother.

Do you want to know how to go to Christ? Go just as that little girl went to Abraham Lincoln. It may be possible that you have a dark story to tell. Tell it all out; keep nothing back. If Abraham Lincoln had compassion on that little girl, heard her petition and answered it, do you think the Lord Jesus will not hear your prayers? Do you think that Abraham Lincoln, or any man that ever lived on earth, had as much compassion as Christ? No! He will be touched when no one else will; He will have mercy when no one else will; He will have pity when no one else will. If you will go right to Him, confessing your sin and your need, He will save you.

A Prisoner's Release

A few years ago a man left England and went to America. He was an Englishman; but he was naturalized, and so became an American citizen. After a few years he felt restless and dissatisfied

and went to Cuba. After he had been in Cuba a little while, civil war broke out there. It was in 1867, and this man was arrested by the Spanish government as a spy. He was tried by court-martial, found guilty, and ordered to be shot. The whole trial was conducted in the Spanish language, and the poor man did not know what was going on.

When they told him the verdict, that he was found guilty and had been condemned to be shot, he sent to the American consul and the English consul, and laid the whole case before them, proving his innocence and claiming protection. They examined the case and found that this man whom the Spanish officers had condemned to be shot was perfectly innocent. They went to the Spanish general and said, "This man whom you have condemned to death is an innocent man; he is not guilty." But the Spanish general said, "He has been tried by our law; he has been found guilty; he must die." There was no cable, and these men could not consult with their governments.

The morning came on which the man was to be executed. He was brought out sitting on his coffin in a cart and drawn to the place where he was to be executed. A grave was dug. They took the coffin out of the cart, placed the young man upon it, took the black cap, and pulled it down over his face. The soldiers awaited the order to fire. But just then the American and English consuls rode up. The English consul sprang out of the carriage and took the union jack, the British flag, and wrapped it around the man, and the American consul wrapped around him the star-spangled banner, and then turning to the Spanish officers they

said, "Fire upon these flags, if you dare." They did not dare to fire upon the flags. There were two great governments behind those flags. That was the secret of it.

"He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love. . . . His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me" (Song of Solomon 2:4, 6). Thank God we can come under the banner today if we will. Any poor sinner can come under that banner today. His banner of love is over us. Blessed gospel; blessed, precious news! Believe it today, receive it into your heart, and enter into a new life. Let the love of God be shed abroad in your heart by the Holy Ghost today. It will drive away darkness; it will drive away gloom. It will drive away sin, and peace and joy shall be yours.