

GOD'S LOVE PRECEDING

by Ron Harvey

The text this morning is,

WE LOVE HIM BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US.

I John 4:19

The great doctrines of the Bible are not simply garnered from isolated verses here and there. But the great doctrines are great and mighty truths written by our God with a broad brush over the entire pages of Scripture. And the deeper truth of God is understood by those that are mature in the Word, those that are “weaned from the milk”, the Bible says, and they understand doctrine by a meticulous process of building one line of Scripture upon another, precept by precept, and organizing them into a body of truth that is wonderful and irrefutable.

But, this morning, these eight words of our text, if they were the only words of God we ever had, they should be enough to convince us of the great and awesome doctrine of the sovereign grace of God. I tell you that these eight words are sufficient, if that were all we had, to convince us that the doctrine of sovereign grace is true.

Now I say that all of the doctrines of God, from the simplest to the most complex, will be resisted by the fallen will of sinful men. They deny that God is the creator. They even deny that God exists. How can they possibly accept and understand the greater doctrines that rest upon the foundation of God's existence and his creative acts. And so don't be discouraged when the masses reject the plain truth of the Scriptures.

Example: Have you ever seen a rebellious child put his hands over his ears when his mother tries to speak to him?

In the same way rebellious men stop up their ears when the truth of God's Word is spoken.

Nevertheless, the Word of God speaks. And it speaks loudly when it says,

WE LOVE HIM BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US.

Now, most of you have ears that long ago were opened, but if you are one of those who have your hands over your own ears this morning, won't you lay them down? If you are drowning out the sound of God's Word with your own noises, won't you just be quiet for a moment and see if you can hear what God is saying with these eight little words?

WE LOVE HIM BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US.

If your ears can hear that this morning, then you will understand first of all that,

I. God's love for us preceded our love for Him.

Now this is a simple concept. It is so easy a child can understand it. However, self-righteous men won't believe it. This concept flies in the face of human arrogance which says, I am in charge of my own destiny. It flies in the face of most religions of the world which teach in some form or fashion that God will love you if you just love Him. And, it flies in the face of the depraved thinking of sinful men. Isn't that what the natural man is inclined to think? If I just love Him, He will love me. If I just obey Him, He will love me. If I do good works, He will love me. If I go to church, He will love me. If I believe, He will love me.

But I ask you this morning, do you hear what our text says?

WE LOVE HIM BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US.

Now this text cries out to you this morning and teaches that if there is any love in your heart for God, it came after He loved you and it came because he loved you.

You see,

WE LOVE HIM, BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US.

Now the Scriptures everywhere are very plain about this. And they teach that if you have any love in your heart for God on May 8, 2011, it is because God loved you first. And you say, I do love God, but when did God first love me. And I say that if you have love in your heart for Him this morning, that proves first that,

A. God set his love upon you before the world began.

The Bible says that God chose for himself a people and by choosing them he set his love upon his people before the world was ever created. (Eph. 1:4)

According as God hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world.

And the essential truth is that God chose to love us – to love us for all eternity. And this brings up the interesting question,

How could God love me, before He ever created me? How could He love me before I ever did good or evil? How could he love me, before I ever loved Him? And the answer must be that his love for me has nothing to do with any inherent quality in me.

Now this is not necessarily flattering to us because we like to imagine that he chose us because we were so special.

Example: You see, as human beings, we tend to love others because of something in them. Have you ever seen teenagers. They meet someone new and they run back to their friends and they say, "Oh, he is so cute." Or they say, "he is so nice." You see, we like others because we like their looks or we like their personality or we like how they treat us. So, we love them.

But, God loved his sheep before the world was ever created and before they were ever born. And this tells us that God loved them not because of any good thing in the sheep, but simply because he chose to love them. And the Scriptures say that if God chose to love you, it wasn't because you won him over with your good looks or your good personality or with your love for him. But he chose you by His own sovereign will and by his good pleasure. It wasn't because you loved Him, because our text says,

WE LOVE HIM BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US.

And He didn't love you because he looked down into the future and saw that you would love him, because even that would mean your love caused Him to love you. That would completely empty out the meaning of our text this morning, wouldn't it? Because John said,

WE LOVE HIM, BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US.

We can never understand why He chose to love us. God hasn't chosen to reveal that to us. But we do know it wasn't because we loved Him, because our text says He loved us first. Now the Bible **does** say that,

He loved us according to the council of His own will. So, it is apparent that he had his reasons for loving us, because it appears there was an eternal deliberation among the members of the godhead and he chose a people to love. But it is clear that it had nothing to do with our goodness or our love for Him. Do we know why he chose us, and not others? No. Those answers are in the secret councils of God. But we do know that His love for us was not based on us loving Him. In fact it was just the opposite.

WE LOVE HIM, BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US.

So, when did God first love us? He chose us before the world began. But let me go a little further and suggest that,

B. God loved us first when Jesus suffered and died.

Now I want you to note that in the Bible, Jesus is described as "the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world." How is this, since we know that historically, Jesus died around A.D. 30? You see, everything occurs in an eternal instant with God. God sits in the heavens and watches the earth spin and watches the earth revolve around the sun. And a day or a year to us, is merely one of many eternal events to God. And so, Jesus was always the lamb slain. And the Bible says he was the lamb slain before the foundation of the world. So, he was slain for sinners before any man ever sinned. I tell you, the wisdom and understanding of God is beyond our comprehension. Of course, historically, Jesus died around A.D. 30 and you and I were born some 2000 years later. So, we can say that,

1. Jesus died for us before we were ever born. And this shows that He loved us first, before we ever dreamed of loving Him.

And the Scriptures say that,

2. Jesus died for us when we were enemies. (Romans 5:10) Now, when Jesus died for us, we weren't as yet born. Nevertheless, God knew the appointed time when we would be born. And he knew we were condemned in Adam. And as such, we were enemies. And when we were born, we demonstrated ourselves to be enemies by sinning against Him. And Jesus died for us, knowing that we were enemies.

So, we see that God didn't **choose** us because we loved Him. And, God didn't **die** for us because we loved Him. And now I want you to see that, in the course of time, after we were born, and after we were born with a deadly dose of depravity, when it was God's will to change us and make us new, once again He loved us first when

C. The Holy Spirit regenerated us.

We had no good thing in us and no disposition toward God whatsoever. And we didn't love God, but God in the course of time came to us and made us alive. The Bible calls it regeneration or quickening or being made alive. To Nicodemus, Jesus called it being born again. And I would have you to understand that we were not born again because we loved God. That is backwards because our text says,

WE LOVE HIM, BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US.

The simple truth is that we owe our new birth to the awesome and wonderful power of God who first loved us and before we ever loved Him, turned us from death to life and from darkness to light so that we might then love God in return. We didn't bring about our own rebirth by loving Him. No. He brought about our rebirth by loving us. Our faith in Him did not bring about the new creation. His love preceded our faith and brought about the new creation.

Make no mistake, God loved us first even in regeneration and we love him only as a result of what he has done **for** us and **to** us.

So, we have seen that God's love in every step of salvation preceded our love for him. But, now look more closely at our text and you will find that, not only did his love for us precede our love for him, but

II. God's love **caused** our love for Him.

WE LOVE HIM BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US.

If we have any love for Him, it is because He loved us and brought it to pass. Do you suppose that you love God because of something that was inherently good in you? Or do you recognize that God has loved you and has caused a wellspring of love to rise in your heart?

I tell you, if you have any affection for God, any tender feelings toward Him at all, He has done it in you. From the moment you were conceived until this very moment, He has worked it in you and I make a solemn declaration to you this morning by the authority of the Scriptures that you cannot love God except He love you first and give you a heart for Him.

For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.
Philippians 2:13

Now we have seen that God's love for us is first and that His love is the cause of us loving Him. His love for us is the deep well from which all the graces flow. If we have any spiritual good in us, then we have been watered from the deep well of God's love.

Example: Did you know that if there are waters in the rivers and streams, (and those waters are overflowing in Memphis right now) those waters come from the oceans of the world. Water evaporates from the oceans and goes into the atmosphere and rains fill the rivers and tributaries. If there were no oceans, then the riverbeds and the stream beds of this world would be dry. But, there are oceans and so the rivers and streams are full of water.

And there is a deep well of God's love which furnishes all the various graces to His people. Do you have faith? Then God's love has watered your dry riverbed. Do you have godly patience and virtue? Then His love has brought them to life in you. Do you have love for God, then he has first loved you.

Now I want to go further in our text and draw out something else that you may have missed. Our text says, *WE LOVE HIM*. Please note that it doesn't say, "if we love Him," or "we **might** love Him." But John, speaking to his Christian readers, says, "We love Him."

I know we start out from our mother's womb with no love for Him. And I know that He loves us first. But, when His love has its effect in us, then it is an absolute certainty that we shall love Him. Do you see that? John says, "We love Him." There is no question about it. There is no chance that we will not love Him, because that's the design of His love upon us.

And so I want you to see, that,

III. Loving Him is perhaps the chief mark of a Christian.

You see, there must be a difference between the sheep and the goats of this world. There must be a difference between the people of God and the godless. And we all came from Adam. And we are all damaged goods. And if we are different, we are different only because God makes us different.

Do you remember when we spoke recently about the Shepherd and the Sheep and we found that the Shepherd marked his own sheep to distinguish them from the others. Remember, he gave them a mark on the ear and on the foot. He gave them ears to hear and feet to obey.

And our text this morning, tells us of another mark that distinguishes the sheep. And that mark is, "They love Him."

Ladies and Gentlemen and boys and girls, this is **the** great characteristic of every child of God. "We love Him."

Did you know that "those that love Him" is synonymous with "those that are called" or those that are saved?" There is no difference. If you are saved, then you love Him.

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:28

So the distinguishing mark of God's sheep is that they love God. And make no mistake, this is the evidence of spiritual life. If any man does not love God, then he is not a renewed man. It is impossible for the godless to love God. But it is impossible for God's sheep not to love God.

Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not, knoweth not God.

I John 4:7, 8

So I have no right to claim that I am a regenerate person, if I have no love for God. If I have no love for God, then all my law keeping, all my church service, all my religious activity is but empty doings. Everything I have ever learned about God in Sunday School, from the pulpit, from my own study, from other learned men, is all utterly useless unless I have love for God.

But, if I have been regenerated by the love of God, I may not be perfect, but this one thing I can say, "Lord, thou knowest that I love thee."

Example: Have you ever seen fire without heat? It is an impossibility to have fire without heat, because fire, by its very nature, puts out heat.

And has there ever been a regenerate person who did not love God? No, because a regenerate person, by his very nature, loves God.

And so, you know a true sheep by his love for God. But also, if I may go one step further,

IV. Loving others is a mark of a Christian.

Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought to love one another.

I John 4:11

And further,

If we love one another, God dwelleth in us.

I John 4:12

Can I put it in simple terms? No one is a Christian who does not love other Christians. It is the very nature of things for those who love God to love those that love God. And if any man is in the church who does not love those in the church, then he is an intruder and he has broken into our house.

But all of God's sheep are kindly affectioned one toward another. It is our natural inclination and it is our duty.

Now may I encourage you to love one another by referring to our text once again? Look, it says,

WE LOVE GOD BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US.

Now I would like to remind you that God caused us to love Him by first loving us. He took the initiative. He wrapped his arms around us and loved us and in due course, we found ourselves loving Him. And I would encourage you to follow his example. If you reach out and love your brother, it will naturally happen that he will love you.

Example: I have found that it is easy to love these little children in our church. They are so adorable. And I just want to hug them when they pass by. And they must have wondered at first, who is this guy that grabs me and hugs me every time I walk by. But you know what I found, after a while, when they know that I really do love them, they come up to me and hug me. Every so often I'll be talking to someone and I'll feel something tugging on my britches leg and it'll be a little child initiating love toward me.

Example: You may have to hug someone 40 times before they respond to you, but on number 41 they will hug you back.

So, I say, be imitators of God. Others will love you, because you first loved them.

Now when you examine your heart this morning, you may discover that your love for God is shallow and dry. And you may even question whether there is spiritual life in you because your love for God has grown dim. Perhaps your love for Him is lukewarm and not hot at all and you fear lest God's light is going out in you. And I say there is hope to be found in our text this morning. There is great hope for you. The answer is at your fingertips and I would suggest that,

V. The extent to which you love God is directly proportional to the extent that you are persuaded that God loves you. For it says,

WE LOVE GOD BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US.

You see, there are some who love God much. And there are some who love God little. And the difference is the extent to which they are persuaded of the love of God.

The Devil will try to convince you that God does not love you much because then, you will not love God much. Just as Satan told Eve, thou shalt not surely die, he will tell you that God doesn't really love you.

When the trials of life come along you will be tempted to believe that God doesn't love you much. And you will say, "If God loved me much he would take this trial away." And so you will be tempted to disbelieve the love of God for you.

And I say, remember how God has fed you and clothed you day by day. Remember all the mercies of life that he has given you. What love he has bestowed on you by giving you friends and family. Even when you lay your head down at night, if you sleep, he has given it to you. Remember every good gift that he has brought your way.

I think if only you knew how often He protected you day by day, you would love Him more. I wonder how many times his angels have encompassed you around and protected you lest you dash a foot against a stone and you never knew. How many times has His providence carried you when you would have been swept away into faithlessness and godlessness and you never knew his sovereign care bore you along.

How many times has He answered the prayers of your heart even though you may not have even verbalized those prayers to Him?

Don't all these things convince you that he loves you?

But if you are not convinced yet, take a look at the nail prints in his hands and feet. Is this not proof enough that he loves you? Look at the stripes on his back. Does that not say, "I love you?"

Example: I am always amazed every year when the death of winter turns into the new life of spring. And I especially love cherry trees. It seems that cherry blossoms bloom overnight. One day the tree is just bare of all growth. Then, the next day, there are little buds all over. Then, it seems the next day there are beautiful flowering blooms and you forget how barren the tree was just a few days ago.

Did you know that if your love for God is dry and barren today, it could blossom like a cherry tree in spring tomorrow? When God shows you how much He loves you, then your love for Him will break forth like never before. And I promise you, He will show you. And when He does, you will love Him like you never loved him before. And this is clearly found in our text which says,

WE LOVE HIM, BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US.