

Contents

1	God Loves Freely—December 28–January 3	4
2	Covenantal Love—January 4–10	12
3	To Be Pleasing to God—January 11–17	20
4	God Is Passionate and Compassionate—January 18–24	28
5	The Wrath of Divine Love—January 25–31	36
6	God’s Love of Justice—February 1–7	44
7	The Problem of Evil—February 8–14	52
8	Free Will, Love, and Divine Providence—February 15–21	60
9	The Cosmic Conflict—February 22–28	68
10	Rules of Engagement—March 1–7	76
11	What More Could I Have Done?—March 8–14	84
12	Love and Justice: The Two Greatest Commandments —March 15–21	92
13	Love Is the Fulfillment of the Law—March 22–28	100

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The God of Love and Justice



God is love. So says 1 John 4:8 and verse 16. The entirety of the Bible testifies to this fact. The Christian faith is centered on God's character of love. Love is at the core of who God is, at the core of everything that we believe, and should be at the core of everything we do. Accordingly, the way we understand love affects the entirety of our faith and practice. If, for example, one believes that God's love must be earned or merited, a person might think that God does not love them because they are sinful and unworthy. And, in relation to others, one might expect others to merit love—a recipe for disaster.

In this and many other ways, how we understand God's love has massive implications for our faith and practice. Yet, what is love? If you ask ten people to define love, you might get ten different answers. Even among Christians, there are many myths and misunderstandings about God's love.

For example, Christians offer different answers to such questions as:

Does God's love only give but never receive? Is divine love purely self-sacrificial, or might God also delight in and be pleased by humans? Is God's love emotional? Does God really care about humans? Can God's love be rejected or forfeited? Does God enter into a back-and-forth love relationship with creatures? Is anger incompatible with love? How do love and justice go together? If God is love, why is there evil in this world, and so much of it? Can humans love the way God does? If so, what would that look like?

The answers to some of these questions might seem obvious but are often disputed in Christian treatments of divine love. And many answers that are sometimes taken to be obvious, turn out on closer inspection to be incompatible with what Scripture teaches about God's love.

We will not address all these questions at once, but we will take up these and other questions throughout this quarter. And we will see that God's love is far greater than we might think. God's love as depicted in Scripture is far superior to the ideas that pass for "love" in much of our world today. In the coming weeks, we will look more closely at some of the most prominent and beautiful aspects of God's love that are revealed in the Bible.

And, as we continue on, we will see how divine love and justice are inextricably connected. The God of the Bible loves justice (*see, for example, Isa. 61:8*).

And, as the Bible portrays them, divine love and justice go together in such a way that you cannot have one without the other. Because God is love, He is deeply concerned about injustice and suffering in this world, and He identifies Himself with the oppressed and the suffering, willingly entering into the pain and grief that evil has wrought in creation—Himself suffering most of all, so much so that God Himself is the greatest victim of evil.

Throughout the Bible, God is repeatedly grieved and pained by evil and suffering because He loves each person more than we can possibly imagine. One can see the depth of God's love in the lament of Christ over His people when He said: " 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!' " (*Matt. 23:37, NKJV*).

The God of the Bible, who is love, is often portrayed throughout Scripture as brokenhearted and grieved by love rejected and love lost. The entire story of Scripture is about what God has done and is doing to restore love to every corner and crevice of the universe. This and much more is the topic of this quarter's lessons.

As the Bible portrays them, divine love and justice go together in such a way that you cannot have one without the other.

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