

18th GENERAL CONVENTION OF SYNOD



Bible Study 2 ... LOVE COMES TO ...

We began this set of Bible studies by looking at **1 John 4**. Take time now to re-read that passage and then open the study group with a prayer.

ACTIVITY 1

John says, 'Herein is love, not that we loved God, but he loved us'.

The statement, 'not that we loved God', is the story of human sin. In fact, we loved everything **but** God. This is what Paul makes plain in **Romans 1:18–32**. Take time to read that now.

- In what way is our love for other things actually the expression of our hatred of God?
- Why do you think God does not want to share first place in our hearts with anything else?

Paul uses the word 'idols' to describe anything that comes between us and God. These are not just physical images. Luther put it this way in the *Large Catechism*. Commenting on the First Commandment, he says,

What is the force of this, and how is it to be understood? What does it mean to have a god? or, what is God?

Answer: A god means that from which we are to expect all good and to which we are to take refuge in all distress, so that to have a God is nothing else than to trust and believe Him from the [whole] heart; as I have often said that the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust be right, then is your god also true; and, on the other hand, if your trust be false and wrong, then you have not the true God; for these two belong together, faith and God. That now, I say, upon which you set your heart and put your trust is properly your god'.

¹ Luther, M. (1999). Luther's works, vol. 30: The Catholic Epistles. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 30, p. 293). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

These are confronting words.

Our idols are the things (hopes, dreams, people, institutions, relationships, riches, spiritual status, abilities, etc) which we set our hearts on—and in which we trust.

Truly, these words leave none of us untouched. We are all idolaters.

Nothing we could do could change our nature in this regard. Only God's merciful action could redeem us from such a state. God's love is active and self-giving. He gave us everything when he gave us his Son.

God loved those who hated him. God loved us when we didn't trust him. He loves us still, even though our hearts are easily led astray from him.

'Not that we loved God' (statement of fact, the Law), 'but that he loved us' (statement of Truth, the Gospel). But John's not just saying that Jesus was given to the world in a general sense. It's not as though Christmas is all there is to the gospel story. The babe born in the manger was born to go to the cross.

The love of God is fully known only through the cross. It's not only that the cross displays **how much** God loves us (he gave his Son), but in the cross, God has actually **done** something very significant.

It's an active work—God reconciling the world to himself through bearing away its sin in the cross.

ACTIVITY 2

We sometimes find it hard to connect with biblical terms, particularly given the western mindset—which values qualities such as freedom, education and self-improvement.

When we've been brought up to believe that we can make free choices; that education is the key to solving the world's problems; or that with enough effort, money or time we can create a 'new you', some of the Bible's teaching is deeply contradictory.

Read the following verses around the group and take notices of how these passages contradict our natural assumptions about self-improvement: John 8:34; Ephesians 2:1–5; Romans 5:6,8,10.

- In what ways do these passages contradict our natural assumptions?
- In each of these readings, who is it that does the saving?
- Why is self-improvement a threat to the message of the cross?

In the first study we commented that selfish or self-centred love wears many masks. One of the most common is religion.

Zealous love (for God!, for a good cause!) can generate intense heat and emotion. The apostle Paul was very zealous for God, and he devoted his life even as a young boy to serving the Lord, but it did him no good.

ACTIVITY 3

Share what you know about the life of Apostle Paul. Where did he come from? What was his upbringing? What did he believe? What work did he take pride in?

Paul ended up being a member of one of the strictest sects of the Pharisees. These were men who really thought they loved God. They were convinced that they were right, that others, even in Israel, were wrong.

Read what Paul has to say about himself in **Philippians 3:1–11**.

- Why does Paul consider all his past achievements as worthless?
- Paul still loves the Lord with a passion, but what has changed?
- What does Paul strive for now? (v10)

ACTIVITY 4

In John 8, Jesus is speaking with a group of people just like Paul ... and surprisingly like us.

Read **John 8:31–59**. Note the themes of freedom and slavery—and the hostile response to Jesus when he insisted that they were not free, but actually belonged to ‘their father, the devil’.

- Why would these people respond with such hostility?
- What is their mistake?

When Jesus met Paul on the road to Damascus, Saul (as he was then known) was a man on a mission. He was fired with zealous love for God; but it was nothing but his self-righteous pride. His passion for God drove him to murder. After Jesus appeared to him everything changed. So what sort of love was it that transformed him? And what sort of love did he now have? Certainly not the ‘love’ he’d previously built his life on. It was not his so-called ‘love for God’ that would henceforth be the foundation for his life, but God’s love for him.

God’s supernatural love comes from outside of our selfish world and when it comes to us it changes everything. It changes our focus. It changes the way we see the world. It changes the way we act. God’s powerful love leaves nothing untouched in our lives.

ACTIVITY 5

In **Titus 3:3** Paul says (including himself), '... we were once foolish, disobedient, deceived, and enslaved'. His zealous freedom and dogmatic certainty (which gave him a rationale to persecute the less holy and less law-abiding members of his own people) were but a manifestation of his own evil heart, dressed up as religion.

Read Titus **3:4–7**.

- What changed Paul's life and relationships?
- What are the gifts that Paul describes here which Jesus has given us to change us?
- What level of change do you think Jesus intends for us here? 10% 50% 90%? Why?

Martin Luther wrote, '... to know God is to know His love at the same time ... He wants to be known by us as a reconciled Father, not as an angry Judge. He who does not know that he has a propitious Father does not know God'.¹

- If God were to walk into the room right now, what would he think of you? Why?
- If Jesus were to appear to you in a blinding light as he did to Paul, what do you think he might say to you?
- What does God's love mean to you? How would you describe it in your own words?

Close this study with prayer, praising God for his amazing love; thanking him for sending Jesus into our lives; and asking him to reveal more of his love to you.