

Special Section: Learning To Love

Learning To Savor The Love Of God

We cannot know the depth and beauty of God’s love if we have experienced it only as rescue from sin’s punishment.

By John Piper

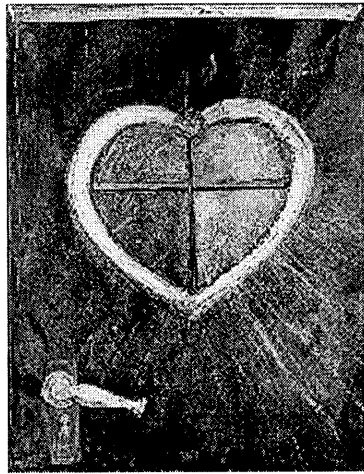


Illustration by Kari Kroll

I have felt most sorry for my sins when the sun comes out.

I recall being very irritated with my wife, Noël, one morning. I said some harsh and unkind things. In a huff, I picked up the garbage can and took it out to the street. As I set the garbage by the curb, the sun came out and filled the spring morning with luscious, yellow-green light. The morning breeze was cool on my face and the sunlight warm on my skin.

I stood at the bottom of the driveway and felt overwhelmed by the love of God. And I felt brokenhearted for my sin. If lightning had struck me, there would have been justice in it. But instead, the Almighty caressed me with a gentle wind and warmed me with the morning sun. I knew at that moment why Jonathan Edwards said, “A truly Christian love . . . is a humble brokenhearted love. . . . The joy [of saints], even when it is unspeakable and full of glory, is a humble, brokenhearted joy.”

God’s love reveals the ugliness of sin.

Ironically, the very sin that makes it so hard for us to believe that we can be loved is the precondition for experiencing how stunning God’s love really is. As long as we remain in this world, the joy of being loved by God will be “brokenhearted joy.” In the light of His brightest blessing we will see the darkness of our sin.

Remember when Jesus told the fishermen to push out into the deep and let down their nets

for a catch? Peter protested, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything!” But when the nets went down, they were filled with so many fish that they started to break. Peter realized that in spite of His skepticism, Jesus had loved him with tremendous power.

His response was very unlike our modern, self-esteeming reactions to love. “When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, ‘Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!’” (Luke 5:8). But Jesus did not go away. Instead He said, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will catch men” (Luke 5:10).

God’s love breaks our hearts and then binds them up again. I have heard it said many times that we will awaken to the wonder of the love of God when we awaken to the seriousness of our sin. But my experience in the morning sunshine, and Peter’s experience by the sea, demonstrate that the reverse is also true: We will awaken to the seriousness of our sin when God drenches us with the wonder of His love. In fact, the key to what I want to say in this article is this: Unless God’s love exposes our sin for what it is, our awareness of sin will not open us to more of the love of God. Let me explain.

The ugliness of sin helps us savor God’s love.

Not all who believe on Jesus were awakened to the seriousness of sin by a powerful experience of God’s love. Some were awakened by the fear of hell. This way of beginning the Christian life is one of the reasons many Christians do not experience a profound sense of God’s love. Why is that?

Although hell is very real and extremely fearful, the motive of fear can actually short-circuit the experience of love. Fear has its limited and useful place in the Christian life. But when the Christian life begins that way, a person may be crippled in His capacity to experience love. That’s because fear only wakens us to the consequences of sin, not its ugliness. Only the light of the beauty of God’s love reveals the hideous moral darkness of sin.

Failing to deal with sin at its root of moral ugliness hinders the flow of God’s love and keeps us from experiencing it to the full. This is what I meant when I said unless God’s love (rather than His terror) exposes our sin for what it is (ugly and not just dangerous), our awareness of sin will not free us to experience more and more of the beauty of God’s love. However, when we recognize sin not just as dangerous but also as deformity, we are prepared to see its remedy (God’s love) not just as rescue but as beautiful and satisfying in itself.

If you think this sounds circular, you’re right. God’s love exposes the true nature of sin, and knowing what sin really is enables us to experience more deeply the true nature of love. So don’t be confused. When I talk now about love’s power to expose sin, I am really trying to show how understanding our sin releases us into deeper experiences of God’s love. My aim is to help you savor the love of God. All else is a means to that end.

David Brainerd made a discovery that illustrates my point. As he preached to the Indians in Crossweeksung, New Jersey, in 1745, they experienced a great awakening. Here’s what he wrote in his journal afterwards:

There were many tears among them while I was discoursing publicly. . . . [My words] caused the persons to cry out in anguish of soul, although I spoke not a word of terror, but on the contrary, set before them the fullness and all-sufficiency of Christ’s merits, and His willingness to save all that come to him. . . . They have almost always appeared much more affected with the comfortable than the dreadful truths of God’s Word.

In other words, the Indians felt most sorry for their sins when the sun of God’s love came

out. Or to put it another way, they were spiritually revolted by the ugliness of sin, because they tasted the surpassing sweetness of the love of God.

When God's love has wakened in us a taste for the beauty of holiness, we are repulsed by the grotesqueness of our sin. This means that our motive for entering the Kingdom will not be mainly the fear of hell, but our hunger for the banquet of God's love. Paradoxically, being repulsed by the ugliness of sin prepares us to savor the beauty of God's love.

God's glory is at the heart of His love.

Another way to say this is that we experience the love of God more fully when we hate sin more deeply. There is a reason for this that may seem surprising to you. It goes like this: The essence of human sin is the belittling of God's glory—our cherishing other things above God (Romans 1:23; Romans 3:23). And, at the heart of God's love is the exalting of His glory—God's unwavering commitment in all He does to display His infinite worth (Isaiah 48:11).

We don't often think of God's love as an expression of His self-exaltation. But I believe one great hindrance to savoring God's love today is the false idea that we are at the center of it rather than God. God's aim in all His acts of love is to exalt His glory.

This truth permeates Scripture. For example, "In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ . . . *to the praise of his glorious grace*" (Ephes. 1:5–6). That is, God's loving predestination aims at the praise of His glory. So does His loving forgiveness: "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, *for my own sake*" (Isaiah 43:25). When David realized this truth, he prayed accordingly: "*For the sake of your name, O LORD, forgive my iniquity*" (Psalm 25:11).

Moreover, the ultimate aim of Christ's love in accepting us into His fellowship is to bring glory and praise to God. Paul says, "Christ accepted you, in order to *bring praise to God*" (Romans 15:7). And Christ's loving work of sanctification is for the praise of His Father: "The fruit of righteousness . . . comes through Jesus Christ—*to the glory and praise of God*" (Phil. 1:11).

Therefore, even though it may be surprising, God's love for us is a way that He exalts His own glory. He is at the center of His love for us. We can't savor the God-centered love of God if we try to put ourselves at the center of it. To savor the God-centered love of God, we must hate the self-centered ugliness of sin. The more clearly we see the grotesqueness of our self-exalting sin, the more dearly we will cherish the beauty of His God-exalting love.

Yes, there is a circle here. The experience of the sunshine of God's love awakens in us a taste for His beauty. This in turn causes us to be repulsed by the ugliness of our sin. And the more we hate the essence of sin's ugliness (the belittling of God's glory), the more we will savor the essence of God's beauty (the self-exaltation of His love).

Three Truths about God's Love

The greatest experience in the world is being loved by God for God's sake. My heart's desire is to help you discover and savor that experience. To help you rejoice in the divine self-exaltation of God's love, let me mention three astonishing truths.

The first truth is this: *Because God exalts Himself through love, He is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.* Let me use an illustration: My wife is not honored when I date her out of duty. She is honored when I say, "Noël, there is nothing else I would rather do than spend this evening with you." The more I enjoy being with her the more she feels valued and treasured. So it is with God. He is most glorified not when we come to Him out of duty, but

when we come to Him out of delight.

This is the greatest news in all the world! God's infinite passion to be glorified and my unremitting longing to be satisfied are not at odds. And the reason is that God's love is God-centered. Therefore, let us savor the God-exalting love of God for us!

The second truth is this: *Because God exalts Himself through love, His commitment to do us good is as strong as His commitment to be God.* Or to put it another way, if God wills to exalt His divine power and wisdom by loving us, then His zeal for that self-exaltation will be the very zeal of His love for us. This is utterly astonishing. It's what lies behind those scriptures that describe God's amazing passion to do us good.

For example, God says, "I will never stop doing good to them . . . I will rejoice in doing them good . . . with all my heart and soul" (Jeremiah 32:40–41). The basis of such breathtaking promises is the self-exalting love of God. Samuel illustrates this when he says, "*For the sake of his great name* the LORD will not reject his people" (1 Samuel 12:22). God's love for us is as sure as His commitment to uphold the glory of His name. And that is an infinite commitment. For without that He would not be God. Therefore, let us savor the God-centeredness of the love of God! It is the inexorable guarantee of His faithfulness to be for us forever.

The third truth is this: *God's greatest gift to us is God.* Jesus prayed for the consummation of our hope: "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory" (John 17:24). How can such a self-exalting prayer be loving? It is loving because the glory of Jesus is the greatest thing in the universe. Therefore, the greatest gift God can possibly give us is to show us the glory of His Son, which is His own glory. Anything short of that would not be infinite love.

When shall we see this love and savor it with all-satisfying joy? When the work of God comes full circle. When the first rays of His love shine into our dark hearts. A taste for His beauty is awakened. The ugliness of self-exalting sin is revealed. The glory of God-exalting love is discovered. And we set ourselves on a quest to savor it more and more forever and ever.

This is not a work that we can perform on our own. It is the Lord's work. Therefore, Paul prays for us, and I pray for you who read this article, "May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love" (2 Thes. 3:5).

That's what He did for me as I stood at the end of the driveway with tears of brokenhearted joy. I returned to the house, as I have a hundred times, and said, "I'm sorry, Noël, forgive me. I love you."

» **See Also:** *On Your Own: Let Me Count The Ways*

» **See Also:** *Sidebar: And Grace My Fears Relieved*



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John says, "My joy, peace, and confidence are rooted in the granite, Gibraltar-like reality of God's allegiance to God. His love for me in Christ is as sure as His commitment to being God. This is the greatest news in the world for a fragile sinner like me."

On Your Own

Let Me Count The Ways

The golden oldie goes, "To know, know, know him is to love, love, love him." King David knew his God, and throughout the many psalms he wrote, he applauds God's love.

Read Psalm 103. At the top of an index card (or some other easy-to-carry piece of paper), write, "Because God loves me, He . . ."

Then list all the phrases from the psalm that describe the results of God's love. For example, "Because God loves me, He satisfies me with good things."

Carry this card with you and refer to it often. Bask in God's love. Marvel at it. Savor it. Enjoy it!

1. How is God's love for us fundamentally different from our love for each other?

2. *The Message* paraphrases Matthew 11:28–29, “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you.” What would “learning the unforced rhythms of grace” look like in your life as you walk with God?

3. What do the following psalms reveal about a satisfying relationship with God?

Psalm 13:5–6

Psalm 17:15

Psalm 36:7–9

Psalm 65:3–4

Psalm 91:14–16

Psalm 16:11

Psalm 21:6

Psalm 63:2–5

Psalm 90:14

4. What are the biggest obstacles in your life to regularly seeking a time of silence with God?

5. Schedule a block of time sometime in the next month to get alone before God solely for the purpose