

Good morning friends and welcome back to Foothills Church. My name is Dillon if we haven't met yet and it is a pleasure to be here with you this morning. Even though Summer is technically over since millions of kids went back to school this week including my own, we still have a few more weeks left in our summer series we are calling What's God like? Each Sunday we are exploring one of the key attributes of God as we seek to know him and understand him more fully.

Today we are going to explore the subject of the Love of God which is arguably the most important of God's attributes. Without God's love, everything falls apart and we are all hopelessly lost and there is no meaning in life and there is no reason for the universe to exist. The funny thing is that we could say that about each of God's attributes and it would be true. That is part of why this series is so great, because each week we explore just a tiny sliver of God's character, a tiny bit of God's wonder and majesty and beauty and through that we get a little glimpse of his nature. Nevertheless, the Love of God is probably the most important. At least it is this morning.

[Transition] One of the simplest and clearest verses that explains the Love of God is 1 John 4:7-8. "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love."

There aren't many verses in the Bible that say what God is in such simple terms. God is Spirit. God is Light. God is a Consuming Fire. Those are some of the clearest declarations of what God is. And then there is this declaration: God is love. God does not merely feel love, or show love or express love, God Is Love, it is an essential aspect of his very nature.

Now here is the trouble. What is Love? It is seriously one of the hardest words to nail down. Let's do a little exercise together. I've given you a fill in the blank in your worship guide. Love is _____. I'm not going to give you the answer. I want you to write down the first 2 or 3 words that come to mind when you complete that statement. Love is _____. Maybe it is a feeling that comes to mind, maybe a person, maybe a food or a love song. Don't over think it. There is no grade. What is love? What does it mean? Now, if you are brave, turn and share your answer with your neighbor. Did you write the same two or three things? I'm

going to guess that no one in the room thought or wrote the same 3 things unless you cheated.

Love is incredibly complicated. Our idea of love, how our culture communicates or expresses love, how we learned to love, all of that is very complex. I searched through several dictionaries to try to come up with a clear definition and the more I read the more confused I got. Love is this mixture of feelings and emotions and desires and there are a lot of positive aspects to love but there are also a lot of negative sides and hurts and wounds all tied up in love. The people we love the most can hurt us the most. Kaley helped me create this image, this word cloud to help illustrate just a little bit of the complexity of love in one image. (Show Word Cloud Image).

Look at all these ideas and feelings and things that we associate with love. All the red words are the positive things, the grey words are the hurts and wounds that come from brokenness in love. What a mess. I'm sure you wrote down some things that I didn't even think of for this word cloud. Maybe you can email them to me and I'll add them to my list.

Now here is the risk, and I know we have talked about this before in this series. If God is Love, but we have this messy, convoluted, cloudy understanding of what Love is, how do we keep from putting our definition of Love onto God? In other words, how do we make sure our messy view of Love doesn't become a messy view of God? Hopefully, as we dig into God's word together, we will find a clearer definition of God's love, and through that have a clearer understanding of who God is.

Let's jump in together.

1. God's love is steadfast.

There are several words in the Bible that are used to express love, words that express intimate love, brotherly love, family love things like that. But there are two words in particular that help us understand God's love. The first is in the Old Testament and the Hebrew word is Hessed. It's pronounced with a guttural H sound, like you are clearing your throat while you say it. Hessed. Say it with me Hessed. It is translated a variety of ways into the English language. It is translated as Steadfast love, lovingkindness, unending love, loyal love, mercy, favor and faithfulness. My favorite translations are steadfast love and lovingkindness. I feel like those two really capture the meaning of the word. More than any other word

for love in the Old Testament, hessed expresses God's love for creation, for his people, and for those who put their trust in the Lord.

Now, let's take a look at a few examples and see how this plays out in the scriptures.

1 Chronicles 16:34 Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!" This statement is repeated numerous times throughout the OT. The Steadfast love of the Lord endures forever.

Similarly in the Psalms, many verses state the same sentiment. Psalm 25:6 "Remember your mercy, O Lord, and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old."

We get the sense that God's love is steady and unchanging. He doesn't just change his mind about who he loves or what he loves. He doesn't have a new favorite team every season because the last one lost, he doesn't have a new girl friend every few months. God's love is steadfast and trustworthy.

2. God's Love is Unconditional.

Look at Exodus 34:6-7. You are familiar with this passage as we have used it a few times already. It is one of the key passages that describes God's character as he reveals himself to Moses. "The Lord the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (hessed) and faithfulness." Now look at the next verse, this is interesting. "keeping steadfast love (hessed) for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation."

Verse 6 seems really great. All those things that God says about himself, slow to anger, compassionate, gracious, abounding in love, that all sounds great. Then we get to verse 7 and it gets into punishment for iniquity and sin and visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the next 3 generations. This same declaration about God's nature is repeated numerous times throughout the Old Testament. I really wrestled with this for a while because it makes it seem like God's love is conditional. Is he saying that God's steadfast love is only for the righteous and he punishes the wicked? That doesn't seem right.

So I talked it over with Phil and we worked it out together and here is where we landed. God's steadfast love is unconditional because it is offered freely to all.

However, only the people who receive his love, who choose to respond to God's love, through trusting him and entering relationship with him will experience the full blessing of God's love and his loving kindness. Does that make sense? So I guess the only conditions on God's love are the conditions we put on him. He invites us in, and gives us the freedom to reject him or draw close to him. Does this mean there are no consequences for sin? Absolutely not. God can love us unconditionally and still allow us to experience the consequences of our sin and choices. We do it for our kids all the time.

[Illustration]

Parents and grandparents get to have a little taste of this kind of unconditional love when our babies are born. The moment those tiny babies enter the world we are instantly given a new capacity to love that we didn't know existed and we would do anything in the world, even die for that little baby even though he or she does nothing for us. That baby is our baby, so we love her or him with everything we've got. It could be the ugliest baby we have ever seen, but it's our baby and we would do anything, anything to love and care for that little one. They may even grow up and make poor choices and walk away from us. We are still going to love them even when it hurts.

That is a tiny taste of God's unconditional love for us.

3. God's Love is limitless.

Psalm 36:5-10.

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.

Your righteousness is like the mountains of God; your judgments are like the great deep; man and beast you save, O Lord.

How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights.

For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light.

O continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your righteousness to the upright of heart!

We humans are limited in so many ways. Our capacity to love is remarkable but not endless. We may want to love everyone, but that guy who cut me off yesterday is really hard to love. God's love extends to the heavens, there are no limits to his love. Some times we try to limit God's love. We try to decide who God loves and who he doesn't. We even argue with God about his love for us. But God's love

has no limits. His love is not going to run out or change. His love is not picky or fickle.

4. God's love is our hope.

This is one of my favorites. I think really helps me see God's lovingkindness, Lamentations chapter 3. Lamentations is written after the fall of Jerusalem. After God carried out his promised judgment on Israel for their disobedience and their violation of the Covenant with God. Lamentations is one long song of sorrow. It is a book of grief and loss. In the very middle of the lament are these key verses.

Lamentations 3:21-26

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end;

They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

"The Lord is my portion", says my soul, therefore I will hope in him.

I love this passage because it reminds me that even when our world is falling apart. Even when we are suffering the consequences of our choices or just the consequences of a broken world, even when our lives are a total mess, God's loving kindness, his steadfast love is available to us, never ceasing.

Indeed, is God's unconditional, steadfast, lovingkindness offered freely to all humanity, all creation, and enjoyed uniquely by those who put their trust in Him.

5. God's love is selfless love.

[Transition]. Ok, what does the New Testament tell us about God's love? Again, there are a few words in the Greek that translate to love in the English, but one specifically is used to describe God's Love and that is Agape. You are probably familiar with this word. When John the apostle wrote that God is Love, he used Agape.

Agape love is self sacrificing, selfless love. Paul expresses this clearly in Romans 5:8. "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Jesus himself said, "no greater love has a man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." Then he turned around and showed an even greater love. He laid down his life for his friends and his enemies, and everyone else. This is how we know what love is, that God sent his own son, to be a ransom for many.

This brings us to our last definition of God's love.

6. God's love is eternal.

The Cross was not an accident or a last minute idea. The cross was God's plan from before creation existed, and it was his expression of love from the beginning. Before the creation of the universe, before Genesis 1:1, before the beginning, God existed as Father, Son and Spirit in perfect harmony and love. One God, One Nature, Three Persons. This is our trinitarian theology. That means for eternity past, the Father loved the Son, and the Son loved the Father, and the Spirit was the communicator of that love. The Father, Son and Spirit were complete, perfect, whole, needing nothing. Yet God chose to create all that exists out of the overflow of his love, knowing that the Son would eventually come in the flesh and suffer and die to save those who put their trust in him. God knew the price of salvation before creation began and he willingly accepted the cost because he loves us with a selfless love and wants us to be close to him. We get to look forward to living in God's presence for all eternity because of the blood of Christ. We, the church are called the bride of Christ, and when the time is right, He promises to come and get us and take us to be with him for the rest of eternity.

So what have we learned about the Love of God?

1. God is Love.
2. God's love is steadfast, unconditional, lovingkindness for all, and enjoyed especially by those who trust in Him and receive his love and his grace through Jesus Christ his son.
3. God's love is selfless and self sacrificing. God pays all of the price.
4. God's love is eternal. He loved us before creation began. He knew us before we were born and he has done everything to win our love and draw us close to him. And we get to look forward to experiences the fullness of his love for all eternity.

Now the next question: How do we respond to God's love? This one is tricky.

One of the challenges we wrestle with as humans is we pick up a lot of junk along the road of life. We pick up a lot of hurts and wounds and misconceptions and behaviors and sometimes we are aware of them and we work on them and other times we just stuff them in our junk drawer and hope that they don't spill out and get messy. When it comes to love we have all been conditioned or trained in some way on how to attain love or maintain love.

I have been reading a book about preaching this summer and one of the things it says is to practice being vulnerable. So here we go. When I was eleven years old my parents divorced. Over the next few years I struggled to figure out my emotions and my place in the world. I was a pretty broken up kid. My parents did their best to provide for me and make sure that I knew that I was loved and valued and they did a pretty good job, but I still somehow grabbed onto the idea that in order for God to love me, really in order for anyone to love me I needed to earn it. I needed to be good enough to be loved, and man was I trying my hardest to be good enough. The trouble is, what is good enough? When I was senior in High school I went on a missions trip with my youth group down to Mexico. It was a spring break trip when thousands of youth would swarm the border towns with VBS programs, street soccer and service projects and then we would go back to camp and sing worship songs and hear a speaker challenge us to grow in our faith. I remember very distinctly one evening in Mexico that speaker gave a great message and reminded us that God loves us with an unconditional love, a love we could never earn but was freely given. It wrecked me. I wept in front of all my friends. For the first time I comprehended the smallest bit of God's unconditional love for me. I tasted the smallest taste that I was good enough to love because God loved me. I came back from that trip a different person.

How have you been conditioned to seek or earn love? Is it through obedience? Being good enough? Is it through performance or achievement? Good in school, good in sports, got a good job, making good money trying to earn your way? Maybe you are trying to win the love of others by being the one who serves and cares for everyone else. Maybe you use humor to win people over. Maybe you use money and status, you bribe people to win their affections. We all do things to try to get people to like us, and even more so, to try to get God to Love us.

On the flip side, sometimes we have inner narratives, lies or half truths that tell us that we aren't lovable. A voice that tells us that if people actually knew us they wouldn't love us. Or maybe if I was a lovable person my parents wouldn't have split, or my spouse wouldn't have left. If I was lovable maybe I would be married by now. If I was lovable I wouldn't be so lonely. Maybe you were abused by someone who should have loved you and been kind to you. Maybe you were assaulted by someone you thought was safe and they left you deeply wounded and you wonder if you are lovable anymore. Maybe you have made choices and done things that hurt others. Things that make you question if you can be loved or even deserve to be loved.

What lies have you allowed yourself to believe about love? What lies have you allowed yourself to believe about God's love and how he loves you? I've given you space to write in your notes.

I want to read this passage to you as we close and my hope is that it will refresh you and remind you that God loves you with an unconditional love. He invites you with his love to come and be close to him. To receive his grace and his mercy and his forgiveness and simply rest in his love. Just listen to these words for a moment and rest in God's lovingkindness.

Romans 8:31-39

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus in the one who died-more than that, who was raised- who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

There is absolutely nothing you can do to earn more of God's love. He already loves you completely, despite all your mistakes and failures. At the same time there is nothing you can do or anyone can do to you that would make God love you less. His love is steadfast. You may experience the consequences of your mistakes and choices, you may allow your sin and guilt to push yourself away from God. But he won't be moved. And his is waiting for you to turn back to him and let him pull you close.

I gave you some heavy things to think about and wrestle with this morning. I'm sorry not sorry. I encourage you to take the time to process some of your hurts and wounds and misconceptions about God's love and how you love. If you need to talk to one of our pastors or if you would like a referral to one of our area counselors please let me know.

Remember the love of God is steadfast, unconditional, loving kindness. It is part of his very nature, and he chose to love you before the very foundations of the earth were laid. As we go, let's rest in his unfailing love.