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A Meditation on Holy Love

By Pastor Christopher Seah

Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.
(1 John 4:8 ESV)

Two weeks ago, many commemorated Valentine's Day, a day devoted to the celebration of love. For some cultures like Cambodia, however, Valentine's Day has become associated with sexual sin. At some point, the occasion had become packaged and sold in such a way that encourages perversion. Like any other precious human trait, romantic love has not escaped the taint of sin.

But long before human love of any sort (familial, brotherly, romantic, etc.) was perverted and distorted, there was the pristine perfection of holy and divine Love. Divine Love was the pattern on which all earthly loves were made. In the eternal community of the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, love was the all-pervading environment.

But this original, uncreated inter-Trinitarian love was no abstract principle or impersonal thing. It was itself a divine attribute. It was and continues to be part of the essence of God, an extension of God's own being. Since God alone is eternal, and God had never been without his traits (attributes); God's traits must be seen for what they are—they are God himself. Herman Bavinck, one of our best theologians, has stated that God's being "is not the bearer of the attributes, but his attributes are identical with his essence" (*The Doctrine of God*, 115). He also says, "Every attribute is identical with God's being. He *is* what he *has*...God is all light, all mind, all wisdom, all logos, all spirit, etc" (121). In short, the community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the truth, love, goodness, and righteousness that they have shown to one another from all eternity. Each Person of the Trinity is life, truth, and goodness.

Does this blow your mind? It should. God is God! We should expect to be awe-struck and amazed because God is infinitely and eternally beyond us.

Still, what does all this have to do with our little, earthly versions of love? Since God is the original truth, love, righteousness, and goodness; our lesser, creaturely expressions of truth, love, righteousness, and goodness must reflect that divine

original. True human love in all its varied expressions conforms to the truthful and righteous love of God in the Trinity. At its best, human love resembles the God who is love (1 Jn 4:8), because that loving God made us in his image (Gen 1:27) and calls us to be perfect as he is perfect (Mt 5:48). The holy, uncreated, God-Love is the Fount of all created loves; the Archetype or Primary Pattern on which all other creaturely loves are based, whether love for parents, spouse, children, friends, or other good things. The love that Christians have for God and for one another must resemble, to the extent appropriate for us, this divine Love of God, this God who is love. As John wrote, “Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 Jn 4:8).

Since God is love, God’s love and God’s holiness belong together. Holiness is often understood in negative terms, as God’s separation from evil. But if we remember that the love of the Trinity “pre-dated” the existence of evil, we begin to see that holiness is itself fiercely energized by divine love. Holiness is God’s unflinching love for his first community, the Trinity! To protect their threefold Glory, the triune God burns with undying hatred for all evil. Sin is so evil because sin attacks the eternal love of God, the very foundation of all creation itself. For this reason, God hates sin. Holiness is therefore God’s fierce and loving protection of the very heart of all that is good and pure—himself! The holy love of God is the living flame of God’s glory.

So, what does human love at its best look like?

It is first a love for God. Just as God loves God first, we are to love God first. The expression of loving God is the cherishing and keeping of God’s commandments (Ex 20:6). The reason we do not keep God’s commandments as fully and passionately as we should is because we do not love God as fully and passionately as we ought. The essence of sin is a refusal to live under the loving rule of God. Thankfully, God has mercifully come to our aid. Through the forgiveness and grace that comes through our Lord Jesus, we are able to grow more and more to love God and his commandments.

It is love for our fellow human beings for the sake of God (cf. 1 Cor 10:31). A God-centered love of God brings forth a God-centered love of others. We love one another that God might be honored, that his loving character might be reflected in our actions. Loving one another for God’s sake is not to be construed as an emotionally detached activity whereby the lover, acting from a position of emotional distance, condescends to offer trinkets of good to his or her beloved. No. God-centered inter-human love is love in all its richness and connectedness. God-centered love for others is love that, among other things, rejoices with those

who rejoice; mourns with those who mourn (Rom 12:15); practices patience and kindness (1 Cor 13:4); refrains from irritability, resentment, and “insisting on its own way” (1 Cor 13:5); “does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth” (1 Cor 13:5); “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor 13:7); speaks the truth in love to one another (Eph 4:15); visits orphans and widows in their affliction; seeks to help one another mature in Christ (Col 1:28); and keeps oneself unstained by the world (Jas 1:27). That is how we reflect the divine Love in our love for one another. It is a rich, multi-faceted, courageous, persistent, and connected activity. If this is what true love is like, we might begin to wonder: Does the world even know how to love?

We can be thankful that God is far more determined than sin could ever be. He is, after all, the divine Husband (Ex 34:14; Isa 54:5). If sin has left almost nothing untouched, we can rest assured that God will leave nothing untouched when he finally extends his holy, loving rule to its fullest extent in our world. The holy love of God will purge all evil from the world, bring forth a new heavens and new earth (Isa 65:17), and perfect the holy Bride (Hos 2:16; Rev 21:2). Nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ (Rom 8:39). That is our hope. And that is the strength for our love.

May God grant us to love as he has loved us (Jn 15:12).