

New Hope Sermon - The unconditional Love of God

Song: Human Touch by Bruce Springsteen

“You and me, we were the pretenders We let it all slip away.
In the end what you don't surrender, well, the world just strips away.

Tell me, in a world without pity, do you think what I'm askin's too much
I just want something to hold on to. And a little of that Human Touch
Just a little of that Human Touch. You might need somethin' to hold on to

When all the answers, they don't amount to much
Somebody that you could just to talk to And a little of that Human Touch.”

“For 50 years, the rock icon Bruce Springsteen has turned his struggle into songs... One of the most moving passages in his 2016 memoir...occurs a few days before the 1990 birth of Springsteen's first child, his son Evan. His father Doug Springsteen embarked on an impulsive, impromptu road trip, driving 400 miles south to Bruce's house in Los Angeles from San Mateo. Over beers at 11 A.M., Doug, uncharacteristically, made a small peace offering to his son. "Bruce, you've been very good to us," he said. And then, after a pause: "And I wasn't very good to you."

"That was it," Springsteen writes. "It was all that I needed, all that was necessary."

[An interviewer] asked him if he ever heard the words "I love you" from his father.

"No," he said, a little pained. "The best you could get was [after]'Love you, Pops.' [Switching to his father's gruff voice.] 'Eh, me, too.' Even after he had a stroke and he'd be crying, he'd still go, 'Me, too.' You'd hear his voice breaking up, but he couldn't get out the words." David Kamp, ["The Book of Bruce Springsteen,"](#) Vanity Fair (October 2016)

What happens to us when we don't get the love or affirmation we need from our parents? Or from our teachers or other significant people in our lives? We live with the burden of conditional love – always trying to please or gain favor or approval or love. It is even worse if we have a situation like Elton John had with his dad:

“In an interview with Rolling Stone, singer Elton John reflected on his father: "They wouldn't hold you, they wouldn't say they loved you. I was afraid of my father. I was walking on eggshells the whole time trying to get his approval. He's been dead for a long time, and I'm still trying to prove things to him."

Asked what he meant, Elton replied, "I still do things and say, 'Dad, you would've loved this.'"

Elton's father died in 1997 without ever seeing him play live. His father physically touched him most when he was beating him. "My mum always says, 'That's just the way we did it in those days, and it didn't affect you.'" Elton says. "And I'd say, 'What are you talking about? It affects me every day.'"

Stephen Rodrick, "The Bitch at Peace," Rolling Stone (3-10-16)

Springsteen and John both represent a problem that is actually global. It is reflected in Muslims, in secular Chinese, in Hindus, in all of us – because who we are is affected by our particular upbringing and the words we internalized about our worth from our parents and teachers. The result is that many people, including Christians, are stuck in the unending cycle of conditional love and we live on the outside of the reality of God's **un**conditional love. We didn't experience it in human relationships and we can't imagine experiencing it from the God of the universe.

Lloyd Ogilvie in his book *You are Loved and Forgiven*, says:

“There are four deep, undeniable emotional needs we all have in common... - to *be loved*, to *feel forgiven*, to *experience security* and to *sense an adequate hope* for the future. All of our other emotional needs for acceptance, esteem, affirmation, freedom and purposefulness flow from these basic four... Our emotional needs are part of our created nature. God made us that way. We were

created for a relationship with Him... It is on the emotional level that most of us are blocked. Some of us have emotional malnutrition as a result of an inadequate experience of love in our childhood or present families... Others of us have felt rejection or the excruciating pain of broken relationships. Still others are racked with the memory of past failures, the inability to forgive ourselves and try again. And then, all of us at times feel the turbulent emotions of anger, impatience, fear and frustration... It is there (at the foot of the cross) that the love, forgiveness, security and hope we so desperately need flow in limitless, unreserved power... The cross began in the heart of God. It was His heart's desire to give all of Himself to all of us" (Ogilvie, *You are Loved and Forgiven*, Regal Books, 1977 pp. 43-45).

He goes on to say: "The pleasure of God is to *love* us. He created us as recipients of that delight and esteem-oriented love. He is for us, and we need to know that. Emotional healing and strength come from the knowledge that our Creator loves us and wants to live in fellowship with us. We cannot love ourselves until the love of God waters the arid desert of our souls.. Our excruciating need for love is met by the dynamic love of the cross (Ogilvie, *Ibid.*, p. 47).

It is at the cross where God demonstrates the ultimate meaning of unconditional love. Jesus died for us while we were still sinners. And He loves us today while we are still sinners. Although we are accountable to Him for what we do and think and choose. But the cross has made forgiveness and a relationship with God possible. We can know the God who longs *to pour His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.*(Rom.5:5)

Therefore, thinking of the cross, I want us to stop and sing the Ortega song: How deep the Father's love for us.

"How deep the Father's love for us - How vast beyond all measure
That He should give His only Son -To make a wretch His treasure.

Behold the man upon a cross -My sin upon His shoulders.
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice -Call out among the scoffers

I will not boast in anything, No gifts, no power, no wisdom
But I will boast in Jesus Christ His death and resurrection.

Why should I gain from His reward? I cannot give an answer
But this I know with all my heart His wounds have paid my ransom"

So, here's how the *New Bible Dictionary* defines God's love:

The whole drama of redemption, centering as it does on the death of Christ, is divine love in action (Gal.2:20, Rom. 5:8,)

God's love is deeper than a mother's love for her children (Isa. 49:15, 66:13.

God says: I have loved you with an everlasting love. Jer. 31:3.

God's love is spontaneous , not evoked by any intrinsic worth in its object but rather creating that worth. Deut.7:7

The word love translated *agape* means the highest and noblest form of love which sees something infinitely precious in its object.

New Bible Dictionary, eds. Howard Marshall, A.R. Millard, J.I. Packer, D. J. Wiseman, 3rd edition IVP, 1996, pp. 700-701

Let's stop a minute and go over some of those descriptions:

God's love is not evoked by any intrinsic worth in its object but rather creates that worth. We ARE of infinite value in the universe because as humans we are created in the image of God (Gen.2). But our inherent, continual sinfulness is not acceptable to God. We deserve His wrath, not His love. So Christ died to remedy that gap. But our Christian life is not based now on our performance as Christians. God loves us. *His love is everlasting.* It doesn't stop. It doesn't throw us over or give up on us. We are given calls to follow Him and love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength – as

2 cor.5:14 says: *the love of Christ constrains me to give everything to Him*) - but that is our response to who God is – not our ticket to earn God’s favor.

His love does create our worth. *Agape love sees something infinitely precious in its object*. Isn’t that amazing? God sees us as a people and as individuals who are infinitely precious in his sight.

Living in God’s love fulfills our need to belong, to have worth and to have competence. As Maurice Wagner says in his book *The Sensation of Being Somebody*, God the Father grants us belonging (we are made to be sons and daughters of God by His choice and by our faith (Jn.1:12, Eph.1:6). Jesus and me creates my worthiness (Romans 8:17: as a child of God I am *an heir of God and co-heir with Christ*, Eph.1:12 *we were chosen to be for the praise of his glory*, 2 Cor.6:1 *we are made partners with God and ambassadors for Christ* 2 Cor. 5:20). And the Spirit in us give us competence and power (Eph.1:19 *his incomparably great power is for us who believe*; 2 pet.1:3:*his divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness*)." (Wagner, *The Sensation of Being Somebody*, Zondervan, 1975, pp.32-37). God has set His love on us because we are precious in His sight.

Yet, we all experience times when we live as if Christ had not died for us. “Often self-justification or defensiveness are the telltale signs that we are trying to earn what is offered as a free gift. Our words and actions often betray that we need a fresh sense of forgiveness. The lack of self-acceptance and assurance, which spills over in meager affirmation or negativism about others, shows us that the completed work of Calvary is incomplete in our personalities and attitudes (Ogilvie, *Ibid.*, p. 68).

Ogilvie says “The experience of the indwelling Christ has transformed both my personal life and my ministry. When I was gripped by this liberating experience (Col 1:27 *Christ in you, the hope of glory*) it set me free from compulsive efforts to earn my status with God by being good enough... The indwelling Christ gave me all that I had previously worked to achieve, studied to understand, struggled to accomplish ...What a relief it is to no longer feel that I have to find answers and solve problems to please or placate him. He is at work in me...But we need to be honest about the things we add to Christ for our security. He is not the fullness of God for us if we continue to need something or someone else to fill the emptiness” (Ogilvie, *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73, 75, 103).

Those who accept the love of the cross are given a new status. “Paul had used three words to describe all people’s condition prior to the cross: We are *alienated, enemies in mind and doing evil deeds*... After accepting the cross, because of Calvary, we are now *holy, without blemish and free from accusation*. (Ogilvie p. 52). That is our standing before God – totally based on Christ’s righteousness in us.

Put another way, at the cross “God has taken His grace sponge and blotted out all the charges, wiping the page clean of all the incriminating, acknowledged failures. You and I are completely exonerated! ... Because of Christ and the cross, [God] has no memory at all when it comes to our past sins. The problem is that most of us have a better memory than God has! We tend to be far less gracious to ourselves than He is. [But] that’s blasphemy. We harbor the mistakes and misdeeds long after we have heard and seemingly accepted the good news of the gospel. We continue to assume the responsibility for our self-justification even though God assumed it once and for all on Calvary... Guilt drives us to all sorts of patterns, actions and activities to prove our self-worth, in spite of what we are... The cross was not only a once never-to-be-repeated atonement for our sins, it was also a victory over the elemental spirits, angels and demons [who constantly accuse us. Satan is called “*the accuser of the brethren*” Rev. 12:10. But through Christ’s victory over Satan on the cross] we are set free from both self-incrimination and Satan’s condemnation. (Ogilvie, *Ibid.*, pp. 116, 118-121).

So, beloved, if all this is true, why do we still live outside the unconditional love of God and base our relationship with God on conditional love – trying to please Him, trying to placate his anger, trying to justify ourselves when we fail, trying to be good enough and score brownie points with God?

When we feel God's love is based on our performance, it is like this scenario between a newly married husband and wife:

Picture this: a bride and groom dashing out of the church, through the showers of birdseed and into the limo, all aglow with the light of love from the vows they've just taken. In the backseat of the car, en route to the reception, they embrace and kiss. Then the groom announces that he has something to say. "Now you realize, my dear, that, as far as I'm concerned, we can't really say we're married, because I don't know yet what kind of wife you'll turn out to be. I hope for the best, of course. And I'll help you all I can. But only at the end of our lives will I be able to tell if you've lived up to my expectations. If you have—then, and only then, I'll agree that we truly got married today. But if you don't, then as far as I'm concerned we were never married at all. After all, how can I call you my wife if you fail to be a wife to me?"

Under such circumstances, it will not be a happy honeymoon—if there's one at all. A wife cannot be a wife if her whole existence as wife is conditional and under constant scrutiny (likewise for a husband). She will certainly fail. [He will fail.] This groom has completely misunderstood [the power of marriage to transform the beloved]. The couple that tied the knot only 60 minutes ago is every bit as married as the couple celebrating their 60th anniversary. Whatever happens in the course of the marriage does not affect the "married-ness" of that couple.

In the same way, how can we be expected to love and trust a God always watching us like a hawk to see if we fail? Right standing with God isn't something that we have to generate from within ourselves. Right standing with God is a free gift—and that's what helps us grow [in a right walk with God - to trust, love, and obey God. *Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, "What's His Is Ours," Christianity Today magazine (9-24-12)*

John Piper also explains the difference between God's love for us and the love that we pledge will exist in marriage: "Sometimes we joke and say about marriage, "The honeymoon is over." But that's because we are finite. We can't sustain a honeymoon level of intensity and affection. We can't foresee the irritations that come with long-term familiarity. We can't stay as fit and handsome as we were then. We can't come up with enough new things to keep the relationship that fresh. But God says his joy over his people is like a bridegroom over a bride. He is talking about honeymoon intensity and honeymoon pleasures and honeymoon energy and excitement and enthusiasm and enjoyment. He is trying to get into our hearts what he means when he says he rejoices over us *with all his heart*. And add to this, with God the honeymoon never ends. He is infinite in power and wisdom and creativity and love...He can foresee all the future quirks of our personality and has decided he will keep what's good for us and change what isn't; he will always be as handsome as he ever was, and will see to it that we get more and more beautiful forever; and he is infinitely creative to think of new things to do together so that there will be no boredom for the next trillion ages of millenniums. *John Piper, The Pleasures of God (Multnomah, 2000), p. 188*

God's unconditional love is a gift to us, beloved. This is why Paul prayed, in his letter to the Ephesians "*May you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love really is.*" *Ephesians 3:18* This love IS actually knowable and the basis of our relationship with God. And, as God pours this love into our hearts, it is how we can love others unconditionally as well. I like this quote: "to love a person is to see all their magic and to remind them of it when they have forgotten." (source unknown)

So I want to close describing that kind of love practically from a letter a father wrote his daughter. It is taken from Dr. James Dobson's book, *When God Doesn't Make Sense: My Dear Bristol,*

Before you were born, I prayed for you. In my heart I knew you would be a little angel, and so you were. When you were born on my birthday, April 7, it was evident that you were a special gift

from the Lord. But how profound a gift you turned out to be! More than the gurgles and rosy cheeks, more than the firstborn of my flesh—a joy unspeakable. You showed me God's love more than anything else in all creation. Bristol, you taught me how to love. I certainly loved you when you were cuddly and cute, when you jabbered your first words.

I loved you when the searing pain of realization took hold that something was wrong—that maybe you weren't developing as quickly as your peers, and even when we understood it was more serious than that. I loved you when we went from hospital to clinic to doctor, looking for a medical diagnosis that would bring us some hope. And of course, we always prayed for you. We prayed and prayed.

I loved you when you moaned and cried; your mom and I and your sisters would drive for hours late at night to help you fall asleep. I loved you when you were confused—when, with tears in your eyes, you would bite your fingers or your lip by accident. I loved you when your eyes crossed, and then when you went blind. I most certainly loved you when you could no longer speak, but how profoundly I missed your voice!

I loved you when scoliosis began to wrench your body like a pretzel, and when we put a tube in your stomach so you could eat. We fed you one spoonful at a time—even up to two hours per meal. I managed to love you when your contorted limbs made changing ten years of diapers difficult. Bristol, I even loved you when you could not say the one thing in life that I longed to hear back: "Daddy, I love you."

Bristol, I loved you when I was close to God and when he seemed far away—when I was full of faith and also when I was angry at him. And the reason I loved you, my Bristol, in spite of these difficulties, is that God put this love in my heart. This is the wondrous nature of God's love: He loves us when we are blind, or deaf, or twisted in body or in spirit. God loves us even when we can't tell him that we love him back.

My dear Bristol, now you are free. I look forward to that day when, according to God's promises, we will be joined together—completely whole and full of joy. I'm so happy that you have your crown first! We will follow you some day in his time.

Before you were born, I prayed for you. In my heart, I knew you would be a little angel. And so you were. Love, Daddy *www.oneplace.com*; submitted by Eugene Maddox, Palatka, Florida

Today, can you receive this kind of unconditional love from God and know that He treasures you? That He has given everything in Christ's death and exaltation for you? That he is *able to do exceedingly abundantly above everything you can ask or think because of his power that is working in you*? This love of God is **not** something you have to strive to achieve. It is based on God's character "*in accordance with the riches of God's grace which he lavished on us.*" Eph.1:8). It is a gift. We need to reach out and receive it. And then, because of that amazing gift, we will choose to love and obey, to serve and follow our lavish God – loving Him back with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. The Spirit has been given to enable us to do that. But it all starts with appropriating His wonderful, unconditional love. Dare to allow yourself to feel that nourishing, encouraging, enabling love. Let's pray.

Dr. M.L. Codman-Wilson 4/15/18

Song of Response:

O Lord, Your tenderness, melting all my bitterness;

O Lord, I receive your love.

O Lord, Your loveliness, changing my unworthiness;

O Lord, I receive your love.

O Lord, I receive Your Love,

O Lord, I receive Your Love.

(words and music: Graham Kendrick)