

Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church

2080 West Grand Boulevard
Detroit, Michigan 48208
Pastor Nathan Johnson, D.D., Senior Pastor

Pastor's Bible Study

If God Is Good

A Bible Study Series
Based on the book
"If God Is Good" by Randy Alcorn

Part XIII

January 24, 2012

Proposed Solutions to the Problem of Evil and Suffering: Limiting God's Attributes Is God's *Limited* Love a Solution?

☉ Is God's *Limited Love* a Solution?

- While few critics make a philosophical argument that God lacks love, many, when personally facing evil and suffering, interpret the terrible things happening to them to mean that God doesn't love them after all. Doubt about their salvation may grip them, causing them despair.
- Others view God's love in a way that eclipses all his other attributes.
 - ☉ God's love doesn't surprise them. ("Why *shouldn't* God love us? We're lovable, aren't we?")
 - ☉ But his holiness and hatred of sin *does* surprise and trouble them.

- ⊙ And they feel terribly disappointed that his love for them does not exempt them from suffering. Some feel hurt and confusion; others anger and resentment.

⊙ Is God's *Limited Love* a Solution?

- The Old Testament repeatedly affirms God's love for his people.
 - ⊙ Exodus 34:6–7 (HCSB) — 6 Then the Lord passed in front of him and proclaimed: Yahweh—Yahweh is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in faithful love and truth, 7 maintaining faithful love to a thousand generations, forgiving wrongdoing, rebellion, and sin. ...

⊙ Is God's *Limited Love* a Solution?

- God's people call upon him to keep his promises of love: 2 Chronicles 6:42 (ESV) — 42 O Lord God, do not turn away the face of your anointed one! Remember your steadfast love for David your servant.”
- Nehemiah appeals to God's love and asks him to intervene in a time of great hardship: “...*But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them.*” (Nehemiah 9:17, ESV)
- ““*Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us...*” (Nehemiah 9:32, ESV)
- God's love *abounds*. It proliferates. It's overflowing, even excessive—something all sufferers need to hear.

⊙ Is God's *Limited Love* a Solution?

- The New Testament repeatedly affirms God's love, through Christ, to his people.

- ⊙ With amazement, John writes, *“See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are! But the people who belong to this world don’t recognize that we are God’s children because they don’t know him.”* (1 John 3:1, NLT)
- ⊙ *“And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.”* (Romans 5:5, NLT)

⊙ **Is God’s *Limited Love* a Solution?**

- Christ’s incarnation and atonement provide the ultimate demonstration of love and the basis for our loving others.
- *“This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins. Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other.”* (1 John 4:10–11, NLT)

⊙ **Is God’s *Limited Love* a Solution?**

- God’s constant love for us will never let us down, no matter how things appear.
 - ⊙ We often define love in superficial and trivial ways, setting us up to question God’s love in hard times. Yet notice how our spiritual forebears saw his love:
 - ⊙ *“Many sorrows come to the wicked, but unfailing love surrounds those who trust the Lord.”* (Psalm 32:10, NLT)
 - ⊙ *“Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love. Because of your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins.”* (Psalm 51:1, NLT)
 - ⊙ *“Though he brings grief, he also shows compassion because of the greatness of his unfailing love.”* (Lamentations 3:32, NLT)

- ⦿ Is God's *Limited Love* a Solution?
- ⦿ Our problem is not that we make too much of divine love, but too little.
- ⦿ God does not love us on our preferred terms, but on his own. His infinite wisdom ensures that he gives to us a higher love, not a lower one.
- ⦿ C.S. Lewis writes: "We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven- a senile benevolence who, as they say, liked to see young people enjoying themselves', and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, 'a good time was had by all'. . . I should very much like to live in a universe which was governed on such lines. But since it is abundantly clear that I don't, and since I have reason to believe, nevertheless, that God is Love, I conclude that my conception of love needs correction."

⦿ **Is God's *Limited Love* a Solution?**

- God is as just and holy as he is loving.
 - ⦿ In order to understand God's love in our current culture, it's necessary to distinguish what love doesn't mean and to see it in relationship to God's other attributes.
 - ⦿ Yes, God is love, but it is not his only attribute, nor is it always his defining attribute. More and more we hear that God's love overshadows all his other attributes, as if the rest have only secondary importance.

⦿ **Is God's *Limited Love* a Solution?**

- ⦿ Gregory Boyd writes, "God is unsurpassable love. The foundational difference between the true image of God and

every version of the serpent's lie is that Jesus Christ first and foremost reveals God as unsurpassable love: 'God is love'... The most fundamental distinguishing characteristic of every false picture of God is that it qualifies and compromises the truth about God's love."

☉ Is God's *Limited Love* a Solution?

- Unfortunately, this viewpoint guarantees that affirmations of God's holiness or justice, which *also* should never be qualified or compromised, will appear to qualify and compromise God's love.
- God is loving, but he is not *only* loving.
- Isaiah says: *"It was in the year King Uzziah died that I saw the Lord. He was sitting on a lofty throne, and the train of his robe filled the Temple. Attending him were mighty seraphim, each having six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. They were calling out to each other, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Heaven's Armies! The whole earth is filled with his glory!'"* (Isaiah 6:1–3, NLT)
- Notice that the angels before his face day and night do not cry, "Love, Love, Love is the Lord Almighty."

☉ Is God's *Limited Love* a Solution?

- Of course, holiness is not God's only other attribute, which makes it all the more important that we refuse to reduce him only to love.

☉ Is God's *Limited Love* a Solution?

- It's a mistake to think God's love overshadows his holiness, or to think his holiness limits his love.

☉ In *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, D.A. Carson writes, "The love of God in our culture has been purged of anything the culture finds uncomfortable. The love of God has been

sanitized, democratized, and above all sentimentalized. ... It has not always been so. In generations when almost everyone believed in the justice of God, people sometimes found it difficult to believe in the love of God. The preaching of the love of God came as wonderful good news. Nowadays if you tell people that God loves them, they are unlikely to be surprised.”

- ⦿ Is God's *Limited Love* a Solution?
- ⦿ If we asked people to vote on a divine character quality they most appreciate, God's love would surely receive far more votes than his holiness.
- ⦿ Christians tend to reflect our culture, and because our culture values love and devalues holiness, we do the same.
- ⦿ We have taken one precious divine attribute, love, defined it as we please, then used our redefinition to neutralize others of God's attributes that don't appeal to us.

⦿ **Is God's *Limited Love* a Solution?**

- God reveals his multifaceted character in Jesus, who is eminently loving, but not only loving.
 - ⦿ Jesus shows us exactly what God looks like. Problems arise when we trust our own subjective picture of Jesus over what the Bible says and shows.
 - ⦿ The same Jesus who spoke words of tender love and forgiveness also spoke some of the harshest words of condemnation in Scripture.
 - ⦿ Jesus spoke more about Hell, and in more terrible terms, than anyone else in the Bible.

⦿ **Is God's *Limited Love* a Solution?**

- If God’s love outstripped his holiness, then why send Jesus to the cross? If love trumps holiness, then why not dispense with the Crucifixion altogether.
- The truth is, God’s holiness and love combined at Calvary constitute the only way possible to save sinners and still satisfy God’s perfect nature.
- God’s love divorced from the full picture of his infinite glory reduces him to a false god, made in our own likeness.
- God’s love defined in the like of the totality of his all-encompassing majesty, depicts him as he truly is and invites our heartfelt praise.

☉ **Is God’s *Limited Love* a Solution?**

- God could have created or governed us without loving us, but he would not have gone to the Cross without loving us..
 - ☉ The most compelling proof of God’s love is giving his Son to die for us. *“God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.”* (1 John 4:9–10, NLT)
 - ☉ *“But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.”* (Romans 5:8, NLT)

☉ **Is God’s *Limited Love* a Solution?**

- **As our *Abba*, God knows our hurts intimately and remains lovingly attentive to our cries.**
 - ☉ Children who know their Father as good and loving find great security. And the Bible assures us that the God who spun galaxies into being “gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart” (Isaiah 40:11).