

God is First in Love to His Saints

Michael D. McMullen

*Associate Professor of Church History
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Kansas City, Missouri 64118*

Introduction

Following the theme of the journal, the Epistles of John, the following sermon is published here for the first time, having been transcribed from the unpublished manuscripts of Jonathan Edwards, held in the Beinecke Library at Yale University.

Though this sermon was not dated by Edwards, the researchers at Yale have been able, through a variety of means, to determine with accuracy, that it was one of his early sermons, preached in the period from August 1728 to February 1729. It is an early statement on the distinctions between the loves of benevolence and complacency. The love of benevolence Edwards regards as a general feeling of commiseration or pity, while the love of complacency is delight and pleasure in the object of love. What Edwards makes clear is that God has benevolence towards sinners, but not complacency, for he cannot abide any being that is contrary to him. In the application, Edwards stresses that anything the saint possesses, has come as the fruit or effect of God's love. We have done nothing in that regard. The sovereign God is the source of all good things to his children.

The original sermon manuscript consists of nine duodecimo leaves. What is clear from transcribing and reading the sermon, and then comparing it with many other sermons of his, is that much of it is undeveloped, almost in outline, as if he were either running short of time, or that it was a message he would certainly expand and develop in the pulpit itself.¹

God is First in Love to His Saints

1 John 4:19—That God is First in Love to His Saints. We love him because he first loved us.

¹ Edwards' sermon is largely transcribed just as it was written in his manuscript. That is to say, little punctuation was added, but no considerable effort was made to make sentences out of sentence fragments, nor to add words to make his notes or statements read smoother, etc.

God and his Church are represented as mutual lovers. There is a near relation so there is mutual love; they are nearly united both in relation and love. 'Tis wonderful that it should be so. This love is more fully revealed and manifested in the Gospel. 'Tis this love is the subject the apostle is upon in this place. He here takes notice how love is a common thing between God and the saints or that in which they have communion, of both partaking of the same spirit of love, the saints dwell in love but God is love, verse 16, And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. And in the 17th and following verses he takes notice of a characteristic of the truth and perfection of the love of the saints. In the words I take notice,

1. Who are the two parties loving,
2. The order of this love,
 - a. In God first, and
 - b. God's love the foundation of ours.

Doctrine: That God is first in love to his saints.

Under this doctrine we shall,

1. First take notice of two or three things presupposed by the doctrine.
2. Explain with what love it is that God first loves.
3. How he is first in love to them.

I. Things presupposed.

1. The saints, as they are by nature do not love God. Man was made at first with a principle of love to God as his governing principle. But man sinned away that principle wholly out of his heart. The only principles which in his natural state influence him are self-love, etc. No distinction naturally between Elect and Reprobates. No marks. No distinction, not only in nature but life, except it be in those that are finally given up. Reprobates set after the world, so are Elect. Dreadful hard hearts, so the Elect. Profane, sensual idolaters, so the Elect. As many of the primitive Christians exceeding proud, malicious, persecutors etc., so Paul and some of them that crucified Christ. Not only don't love but hate enemies, Romans 8:7, Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.

As the Elect have the very same sort of hearts naturally with Reprobates, so before their conversion they are liable to all sorts of wickedness, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the

kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.

2. All the saints as soon as they become saints, do truly love God. That principle which was lost in the Fall is restored. In many love is very weak but 'tis true and unfeigned. Every saint has truly had a discovery of such an excellency in God as has convinced him that God is the Chief Good and such as does indeed draw the heart there off from all other enjoyments. There is a kind of natural tendency and inclination in the heart: the weight of the soul, the verticity. Such as will work by a choosing, delighting in him, longing after him, seeking his glory. Such as will infuse the same spirit, such will follow him and will serve him. The Spirit of God which is the Spirit of love, is poured upon their hearts and sheds abroad love like a sweet oil, Romans 5:5, And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. 'Tis charity is the great thing that distinguishes, 1 Corinthians 13 at the beginning.

3. The saints are very dear to God: Jewels, Malachi 3:17, "in the day when I make up my jewels." Beloved, Romans 1:7, "To all that be in Rome, beloved of God." Colossians 3:12, "as the elect of God, holy and beloved." The Church is called "the beloved city," Revelation 20:9. The angel says to Daniel, Daniel 10:11, "O Daniel, a man greatly beloved." We read abundance in the Scripture about the love of God to his people. The Scripture is full of declarations and instances. The Gospel is nothing else but the display of God's love to his people.

II. We proposed to show with what kind of love it is that God first loves his saints, and here we are to take notice that there is a love of benevolence and a love of complacency.

1. The love of benevolence or goodwill is an inclination of heart to the good and welfare. 'Tis a disposition to seek the good of the person beloved. Indeed one person may seek the good of another and yet have no love to him because he don't desire it as his good. That is not the reason why he seeks it because it is the good and benefit of the person that immediately enjoys, but because it is his own benefit. Or for some other end a person may seek the good of another from self ends. But that is pure love of benevolence that is an inclination of heart to another's good and welfare, as it is his welfare.

This sort of love will work by pity if the person beloved be in misery or want, and it exerts itself in bounty. If this love of benevolence be true, it will stir up the lover to lay out himself for the person loved, to entertain thoughts and desires of the good of the beloved at all times, and to use endeavors to procure his welfare in due time, and makes the lover, when the good of the beloved is enjoyed, to take pleasure and satisfaction in his enjoyment of it.

2. A love of complacency is when any one takes pleasure and delight in the person of the beloved. He has complacency in him for some excellency, some way belonging to him or that is inherent in him or imputed to him. 'Tis possible there may be a great deal of benevolence and yet not this love of complacency. A person may sincerely wish for and seek the good of another, and pity another exceedingly in misery and lay out himself very much for his welfare, and yet not have complacency or delight in him. A father may have a great deal more benevolence to a foolish and wicked son, than complacency and delight in him. He may greatly pity him and very much wish for his welfare and happiness, and be grieved at his heart for his folly and misery, and may have great disposition to seek and rejoice at his welfare, and yet have but little complacency in him.

And especially may it be so with God. And so it is the former of these kinds of love that is spoken of in the text and doctrine, even a love of benevolence. God loves his saints. He has an inclination of heart and inclination to seek their welfare and happiness. He greatly desires their happiness and pities them exceedingly in their misery, and lays out himself very much for their good and happiness before they have any love to him, yea while they are yet enemies.

But he does not love them with a love of complacency before they love him. He takes no delight and pleasure in them, or in their prayers, or in anything that they do while they are sinners, but he abhors them. They are an abomination to him. He is very angry with them until they close with Jesus Christ. The love of benevolence is not purchased by Christ, for it was that that moved God to send Christ into the world, but God's love of complacency was purchased by Christ, purchased by his merits. Christ has purchased that they should be received into God's favor, that they should be accepted of him, and that he should delight in them, John 16:27, "For the Father himself loveth you, because ye have loved me". God is well pleased with us, has a complacency in us for the sake of Christ's righteousness, Ephesians 1:6, "To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us to be accepted in the beloved."

III. To show how God loves his saints first.

1. His love to them precedes their love to him in order of time. God loved them with this love of benevolence while they were in a natural condition though they were enemies unto him and lived a wicked life, etc. Yet he then entertained a gracious design of doing glorious things for them and had delightful thoughts of mercy to them, of bringing of them out of their wretched state. God loves sinners while they are all polluted in their blood, wallowing in their filthiness, Ezekiel 16:6, 8, "And when I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood [. . .] behold, thy time was the time of love." Every saint that knows that God loves him now he may know with equal certainty that God loves him when he was so vile, etc. He had no complacency or delight in him as he was then, but he has an exceeding benevolence, etc.

God loved his saints before ever they were born, or had done either good or evil, or were capable either of loving or hating him, Romans 9:11-13, "(For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil [. . .] It was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated." Yea, God loved them long before, while their birth was yet exceeding distant. He loved them before ever Adam the first father of mankind was made, yea before the foundation of the heavens and the earth were laid. There is no beginning of God's love to his saints. From all eternity God's heart entertained a love to his people, Jeremiah 31:3, "The Lord hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love." This appears in the things which God did for his people before they loved him.

1. He, before the foundation of the world, chose them to eternal life. He chose them to be his children and to enjoy his love, Ephesians 1:4, 5, "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world" [. . .] Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children." Christ's flock is but a little flock, and God picked and chose them out from the rest of the world. He chose here and there one to be his own whom he pleased. He fixed his love upon them and wrote their names in the Book of Life and resolved within himself that they should be eternally happy.

2. Christ died for them before they loved God. Indeed, with respect to the saints of the Old Testament, Christ did not actually die for them before they loved him, but yet God entered into a Covenant of Redemption with Jesus Christ and agreed with him that he should die for them before he did this from all eternity. God did not only choose them to life, but he did

also, before the world was, contrive a way how they might be brought to life. Jesus Christ was appointed by the Covenant of Redemption from all eternity to be their surety, to undertake to secure them from Divine justice and to pay down all that God's Law demanded in order to their happiness. And therefore, Christ did virtually die for the saints of the Old Testament before they loved him, for although he had not been actually slain yet he had undertaken the work of redeeming them and stood engaged for them before God the Father to suffer all that their sins deserved should be suffered. And as God's saints that lived in those days Christ has actually died for them before ever they loved him. God's love to them was so very wonderful that he sent his own Son, so dear to him, to die for them. Christ's love to them was so great!

It was not a vagrant, unfixed general love to mankind to some of them he did not know, who that moved him to come into the world, and that was so strong as to make his heart willing to go through such dismal sorrows. Christ knew who he loved, he knew his own. It was not a general respect only to some of mankind, but a particular respect to every saint, Galatians 2:20, "who loved me, and gave himself for me." Their names were written upon his heart. His heart glowed with love to every one of them when he stood before Pilate and when he hung upon the cross. So greatly did God love his saints before they loved him, Romans 5:6-8, "For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

3. God made heaven for them in the beginning of the world. God made heaven out of love to his saints. He prepared it to be the everlasting abode of his Elect. When he built that beautiful and glorious city he did not only make it for the angels, but also for those he had chosen from among mankind. Matthew 25:34, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." So greatly did God love them before they were, God's love did as it were set his wisdom to work to contrive and form those bright and glorious mansions, those blessed abodes.

4. God first seeks their love. The elect, when they first come into the world, are in a state of enmity against God. There is not a reconciliation, but God is first in seeking a reconciliation. The sinners seek it not. God offers his love unasked for. He was stupid and senseless of misery, going on in the way to ruin and destruction. O! He loves his enmity to God, and goes on opposing and fighting against God until God seeks him, knocks

at the door of his heart. Christ comes while the sinner is in his state of enmity, and stands at the door and knocks, and entreats to be admitted. Revelations 3:20, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock"; and Canticles 5:2, "It is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying, Open to me, my love, my dove, my undefiled." Christ, as he is first in love, so he doth as it were court the hearts of men. He earnestly sues for their love and affections while they as yet have no love to him, but continue to reject him and refuse the offers which he makes of himself. He woos them by the calls of the gospel that we have in God's Word. [He uses] arguments, and he sends forth his ministers in his name, to beseech men to be reconciled unto God. 2 Corinthians 5:20, "Now we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God." Appointed ordinances. And strivings of the Spirit. 'Tis a fruit of his love, that he awakens them, etc.

Second. God's love to them is first in the order of nature; and that as their love to God is but the fruit of God's love to them, their regeneration, whereby they have a principle of love of God, is the fruit of God's love to them. If God had not loved them, he would never have given so great a gift as love to himself. He loves them and not others, and that is the reason that he sends forth his Spirit into their hearts and sheds abroad his love there. Men are naturally dead in trespasses and sins. 'Tis a fruit of God's love to them that he infuses life into them by infusing divine love into them. Ezekiel 16:6-8, "And when I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood . . . behold, thy time was the time of love." Jeremiah 31:3, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee." God draws us to love him because he already loves us.

Therefore God when he loved the saints before they actually love him it is not upon a sure sight of their love to him but his love to them is previous in the order of nature as well as time, so their love to him because their love is a fruit of his love. God could not foresee that they would love him any otherwise than he knew he intended to infuse his love into them and that intention is a fruit and effect of his love.

Application.

1. Hence learn the freeness and sovereignty of the grace of God in saving sinners and that it can't be any way influenced by our own righteousness or good works. We are taught by the doctrine that God loves his people before ever they do anything from any gracious respect unto him, yea before ever they do anything at all, before they have so much as a being, yea from all eternity and before the foundation of the world.

Therefore God doesn't love them for their good works. Surely all that they do before they love God can have no influence to draw God's love, for how unreasonable is it to think that God's love should be drawn by what they do from no sort of respect at all to him. And what they do after they love God doesn't draw the love of God, doesn't at all the more incline God to be gracious to them, to forgive their sins and show and bestow any outward or spiritual mercy upon them, for their love is a fruit of God's love to them. All their good works be not the cause of God's love but the effect of it. God, in his infinite love, gives them grace to love him and enables them to do things of love to him. Their good works are God's gift to them and not their gifts to God. All that they do before conversion in order to it, is the fruit of God's love, and their conversion itself. And all those good works that follow it, all their gracious and holy affections in prayer, they don't incline God anything the more to show mercy to them, for they are the fruits of God's love.

How unreasonable then is it for men to expect to procure pardon and mercy upon the account of their works. And sinners are exceeding prone to imagine he has or should have good will to them. But God's good will is never begun nor procured by any thing that men do.

2. Hence we learn what great reason the saints have to love God, that he has loved them first. Thus the apostle says Christians do love God because they first loved him and well they may. How wonderful was it that God should love such a poor, little, infinitely inferior a worm at all, that there should be any love in the heart of the great God. And how much more wonderful that he should love such an one that had no love to him, that he should love one so vile. How great was God's goodness that he should entertain such Divine love to you: when Christ was upon earth, when the world was made. How wonderful that he should so distinguish you from others. What great reason here to admire at the love of God in first seeking reconciliation, [in] warning, awakening, striving by his Spirit. Remember how Christ knocked at your heart. How God's Spirit strove with you. Remember how sinful you were, how miserable when Christ came a-wooing of you and how much better your state is now.

Remember what God has wrought for you in converting you, in infusing his love into your heart, in enabling you to put your trust in Jesus Christ, John 15:16, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain." Consider how great God's love is to you now in preserving you. If God did not keep you, you would fall from grace; and in enabling you to do good works, to exercise love to him and gracious

affections. Every motion of God's Spirit is a glorious instance of grace. Every good work you do is a glorious gift of God to you for which you should love him. And consider what glorious things you believe and what God will do for you when you die, and the resurrection, in heaven forever. And consider, that those things were prepared for you from the foundation of the world, that Christ bought them for you when you were not in being.