

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

THEOLOGY PROPER

The Doctrine of God

UNIT 5: THE COMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

Lesson 16

The Goodness, Love, and Grace of God

The God Who Gives What We Do Not Deserve

Key Texts: Psalm 136; Ephesians 2:4–7; 1 John 4:8–10; Romans 5:8; Lamentations 3:22–23

His Lovingkindness Endures Forever — The God of Inexhaustible Grace

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Series Verse

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”

Romans 11:33–36, NASB 1995

Introduction

In Lessons 14 and 15 we have been pressing into the attributes of God that constitute the moral seriousness of His character: the holiness that crowns all others, and the righteousness and justice that govern His dealings with a moral universe. We have found in these attributes not enemies of the gospel but its very foundation, the theological bedrock without which the cross of Christ cannot be understood in its full weight, necessity, and glory. The holy, righteous, just God demands what fallen humanity cannot supply; and it is precisely this demand that makes the gospel's supply so magnificent.

Now, in Lesson 16, we turn to the attributes that are, in many respects, the most celebrated and most beloved in all of Theology Proper, and also, in our present cultural moment, the most distorted and the most dangerously sentimentalized: the goodness, love, and grace of God. The danger is not that these attributes are overemphasized; they cannot be overemphasized. The danger is that they are detached from the attributes that give them their proper character, that the love of God is preached as though it were independent of His holiness, that the grace of God is offered as though it were independent of His justice, that the goodness of God is celebrated as though it were the indulgent benevolence of a deity who asks nothing and judges no one.

This lesson is designed to give the love, goodness, and grace of God their full and proper weight, not by diluting them, but by pressing them to their full scriptural depth. For when the love of God is properly understood, as the holy, covenant-keeping, self-giving, cross-shaped love of the triune God for undeserving sinners, it is not smaller than the sentimental version; it is infinitely greater, infinitely more costly, and infinitely more transforming. The God who is good, loving, gracious, merciful, and patient is the same God who is holy, righteous, just, and wrathful, and the harmony of these attributes in the cross of His Son is the most magnificent thing that has ever happened in the history of the universe.

I. The Goodness of God: The Ultimate Standard and Source of All That Is Good

The goodness of God is the most comprehensive of all the divine moral perfections, the broadest category under which love, grace, mercy, patience, and related attributes are gathered. To say that God is good is to say that He is the ultimate standard and source of all that is genuinely, truly, and perfectly good; that goodness is not an external quality that God possesses alongside His other qualities, but a fundamental description of what His whole being is in its moral dimension.

The most direct and most theologically suggestive New Testament declaration of divine goodness comes in Jesus' response to the rich young ruler who addresses Him as "Good Teacher": "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone" (Mark 10:18, NASB 1995). The statement is not a denial of Christ's own goodness; the context and the whole of Christology preclude that reading. It is a redirection of attention to the

unique, underived, absolute goodness of God, which is the only genuine instance of goodness in the universe. Every creaturely goodness, every act of kindness, every expression of generosity, every genuine virtue, is a derived, partial, and imperfect reflection of the absolute goodness that belongs to God alone.

The goodness of God encompasses three distinguishable but inseparable dimensions. First, God is good in His character: His whole being, in every attribute and every act, conforms to the highest possible moral standard, which is identical with His own nature. Second, God is good in His creation: everything He made was “very good” (Genesis 1:31), a manifestation of His good character in the form of a world designed for the flourishing of the creatures who inhabit it. Third, God is good in His governance: He administers all things, including the painful, the difficult, and the seemingly adverse, in a manner that is ultimately and genuinely good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

Psalms 136 is the great Old Testament litany of divine goodness in its most celebrated form. Its refrain, repeated twenty-six times in twenty-six verses, is the liturgical declaration that gathers the whole of God’s covenant history under a single, inexhaustible affirmation: “Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good, for His lovingkindness (hesed) is everlasting” (Psalm 136:1, NASB 1995). The connection between goodness and hesed is significant: the goodness of God is not an abstract metaphysical quality but a covenant-shaped, history-saturated, relationship-expressed reality. It is the goodness that rescued Israel from Egypt, that fed them in the wilderness, that brought them into the promised land, that remembered them in their low estate, that gave food to all flesh. His goodness is as concrete and as personal as His history with His people.

II. The Love of God: Holy, Covenant-Keeping, Self-Giving Commitment

Of all the attributes of God, the love of God is simultaneously the most celebrated, the most proclaimed, and the most misunderstood. It is the attribute that popular religion has made the center of its theology; the attribute that therapeutic Christianity has reduced to unconditional acceptance; the attribute that sentimentalism has stripped of its moral seriousness, its covenantal depth, and its costly character. The recovery of a biblically adequate doctrine of divine love is therefore one of the most urgent theological tasks for the contemporary church.

The most important thing to say about the love of God is that it is the love of the holy, righteous, just, and omnipotent God, shaped, governed, and qualified by every other attribute we have studied. God’s love is holy love: it takes the moral condition of the beloved with absolute seriousness, and it does not rest until the beloved is as holy as the God who loves. God’s love is just love: it does not overlook sin but addresses it, at infinite cost, in the Person of the Son who bore its penalty. God’s love is sovereign love: it is not contingent on the worthiness of its objects but originates in the free, sovereign, electing purpose of the God who loves whom He chooses (Deuteronomy 7:7–8).

The key New Testament text for the doctrine of divine love is 1 John 4:8–10:

“The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”, 1 John 4:8–10, NASB 1995

Three features of this passage are of supreme importance. First, “God is love” (v. 8), not merely that God has love or expresses love, but that love is a description of His very being. This is one of only two places in Scripture where an attribute is identified with God’s being in this way (the other is 1 John 1:5: “God is Light”). The declaration does not mean that love is the only attribute of God, that all His other attributes are reducible to love or that love overrides every other consideration. It means that love is not an occasional expression of God’s character but a fundamental characterization of who He is in the depths of His being. It is a being-description, not merely a behavior-description.

Second, the love of God is defined not by sentimental feeling but by sovereign action: “By this the love of God was manifested... that God has sent His only begotten Son” (v. 9). The love of God is not a warm disposition toward humanity that remained unexpressed until the right moment; it is a sovereign, purposive, costly act of self-giving that cost God the dearest thing in the universe, His only Son. The cross is not evidence that God has love among other qualities; it is the supreme, climactic, once-for-all manifestation of what God’s love actually is: the love that gives everything, holds nothing back, and does not stop short of the full satisfaction of the demands that His own righteousness makes.

Third, the love of God is entirely initiative-taking and entirely undeserved: “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us” (v. 10). The love of God is not a response to human loveliness or human initiative; it precedes human response, does not wait for human deserving, and originates entirely in God’s own sovereign freedom. Romans 5:8 underscores this with devastating precision: “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (NASB 1995). Not while we were lovers of God, not while we were seeking Him, not while we were morally improving, while we were yet sinners. The love that moved the cross is not the love that responds to human goodness; it is the love that creates the conditions for human goodness by addressing human sinfulness.

The Distinction Between General Benevolence and Electing Love

The theological tradition has carefully distinguished between two dimensions of the divine love that are both real but operate with different purposes and different intensities.

God’s general benevolence is His common goodness extended to all people and all creatures without distinction. Jesus declares: “He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45, NASB 1995). The natural blessings of existence, health, sustenance, beauty, human relationship, the pleasures of the created order, all of these are expressions of a divine benevolence that does not restrict itself to the covenant community but extends, in varying measures, to the whole of the creation God has made. This is the love that

Psalm 145:9 celebrates: “THE LORD is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works” (NASB 1995).

God’s electing love is His particular, sovereign, saving love for those whom He has chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4). This love is not merely a more intense version of the general benevolence; it is a categorically different kind of love, the covenantal love that does not merely bless but transforms, that does not merely extend goodness but establishes a relationship of eternal belonging. Deuteronomy 7:7–8 is the paradigmatic Old Testament declaration of this electing love: “THE LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you.” The tautology is deliberate: God loves because God loves. The ground of His electing love is found entirely within Himself, in the sovereign, free, underived benevolence of His own will, not in any quality that He has observed in those He chooses.

III. The Grace of God: Unmerited Favor Toward Those Who Deserve Only Wrath

Grace is love made specific in the direction of the undeserving. If love is the sovereign, self-giving commitment of God to the good of His people, grace is that love as it encounters sinners who deserve not blessing but condemnation, not favor but wrath, not life but death. Grace is the most specifically gospel-oriented of all the divine attributes, because it is the attribute that defines the relationship between a holy, righteous, just God and a guilty, condemned, helpless humanity.

The New Testament word for grace is *charis*, a rich Greek term that carries connotations of beauty, delight, and free favor. In classical Greek usage, *charis* was the gift freely given by a patron to one who had no claim upon it, the benefaction extended not on the basis of the recipient’s merit or social standing but on the basis of the patron’s own generous and free disposition. Paul takes this term and applies it to the sovereign, free, unmerited favor of God toward sinners, in a way that utterly dwarfs every creaturely analogue.

Ephesians 2:4–7 is the most magnificent New Testament declaration of divine grace in its full theological richness:

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”, Ephesians 2:4–7, NASB 1995

The passage opens with one of the most glorious two-word phrases in all of Scripture: “But God.” The immediately preceding verses have described the human condition in its full, unremediated horror: dead in transgressions and sins (v. 1), following the course of this world (v. 2), living in the lusts of the flesh and the desires of the mind (v. 3), children of wrath by nature (v. 3). And then: But God. The two words constitute the entire hinge

between the human situation as it is and the human situation as God's grace has made it. "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love ... made us alive."

Notice what Paul emphasizes about the nature of this grace. It comes to those who are "dead", not sick, not weakened, not in need of assistance, but dead. Dead people do not respond to incentives; they do not make choices; they do not improve their condition through effort or willpower. The salvation that grace provides does not assist the half-alive; it resurrects the dead. And it does so entirely on the basis of God's own rich mercy and great love, with no contribution from the one who is raised. This is the character of grace: it operates toward those who have nothing to offer, who deserve the opposite of what they receive, and who are incapable of the very response that grace calls forth, until grace enables that response by making the dead alive.

The distinction between grace and mercy, which are closely related but not identical, is worth pressing: grace is God's giving of what we do not deserve (positive: life, righteousness, adoption, eternal glory); mercy is God's withholding of what we do deserve (negative: death, condemnation, wrath). Both flow from the same divine love; both express the generosity of the God who is rich toward those who are spiritually bankrupt. But they address different aspects of the human plight: grace addresses our poverty (we have nothing; God gives everything), while mercy addresses our guilt (we deserve punishment; God withholds it).

IV. The Mercy and Patience of God: Compassion Withheld and Judgment Delayed

The mercy of God is His compassionate response to the miserable, His tender, active, practically engaged care for those who are suffering the consequences of sin, whether their own or others'. The Hebrew *hesed*, which we encountered in the refrain of Psalm 136, is one of the richest words in the Old Testament vocabulary: it combines the ideas of covenant faithfulness, steadfast love, loyal mercy, and relentless kindness in a single term that resists adequate translation into any single English word. "Lovingkindness," the NASB's typical rendering, is perhaps the best available approximation.

Lamentations 3:22–23, written in the immediate aftermath of Jerusalem's destruction, in the bleakest and most desolate circumstances imaginable, declares the mercy of God with a clarity and a tenderness that have sustained the faith of God's people through every subsequent generation of trial:

"The LORD's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.", Lamentations 3:22–23, NASB 1995

The mercy of God is "new every morning", not because it was exhausted yesterday and has been replenished overnight, but because the God who is its source is the immutable, inexhaustible, eternally rich God whose *hesed* is as fresh at each new dawn as it was at the first morning of creation. The mercy does not diminish with repeated use; the compassions do not grow weary with repeated extension. They are new every morning because the God who gives them is always fully, perfectly, and inexhaustibly Himself.

The patience (or longsuffering) of God is His willingness to defer judgment, to extend the time of opportunity, and to delay the full expression of His wrath in order to allow space for repentance. Second Peter 3:9 provides the most direct New Testament declaration of divine patience and its purpose: “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (NASB 1995). The apparent delay of Christ’s return is not divine forgetfulness or divine impotence; it is the patient, purposive withholding of judgment by the God who takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but desires their repentance and their life (Ezekiel 33:11).

The patience of God is not infinite in duration, a day of judgment will come, as 2 Thessalonians 1 and Revelation 20 declare with unsparing clarity, but it is real, present, and operative in this present age as the space of grace within which the gospel is proclaimed and the elect are gathered in. Paul’s declaration in Romans 2:4 is both an invitation and a warning: “Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” (NASB 1995). The patience that is meant to lead to repentance must not be mistaken for permanent indulgence; the God who is patient is the same God who is just, and the patience that is refused will give way to the justice that is certain.

V. “God Is Love”: The Most Celebrated and Most Distorted Declaration in Scripture

No statement in all of Scripture has been more celebrated, more quoted, more embroidered on pillows, and more thoroughly distorted than the four words of 1 John 4:8: “God is love.” It is the statement that popular religion has made the center of its theology of God, and it is a statement that, when properly understood, is profoundly true and profoundly transforming. The problem is not the statement; it is the interpretive framework within which it is received.

What “God is love” does not mean: It does not mean that love is the only attribute of God, such that His holiness, righteousness, justice, and wrath are either fictional or subordinate to love in a way that love can override them. It does not mean that God’s love is the sentimental, morally indifferent, unconditionally accepting affection that modern therapeutic culture imagines, a love that overlooks sin, tolerates everything, judges nothing, and makes no demands. It does not mean that because God is love, everyone is automatically acceptable to God regardless of their relationship to His Son. And it does not mean that love is a category that can be read off from human experience and then projected upward onto God, as if God’s love is simply the human experience of love made bigger and more reliable.

What “God is love” does mean: It means that love is a fundamental characterization of God’s being, not merely an occasional expression of His behavior. It means that the God who is love has expressed that love supremely, definitively, and most fully in the giving of His Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:10), a giving that was costly beyond all human comprehension, that addressed not merely the emotional need of the beloved but the moral problem of sin, and that demonstrated the love by satisfying the justice that love required. It means that the Trinity itself is the eternal, self-

sufficient community of love in which the Father, the Son, and the Spirit have loved each other from before the foundation of the world (John 17:24), and that the love extended to sinners in the gospel is the overflow of this eternal, intra-Trinitarian love into the created order.

The danger of distortion is real and it is present. When the church preaches a love of God that is divorced from His holiness, it preaches a love that needs no cross, because if God's love simply accepts sinners without addressing their sin, no atonement is necessary. When the church preaches a love of God that is divorced from His justice, it preaches a love that offers no real security, because a God who overlooks moral reality today might overlook it differently tomorrow. When the church preaches a love of God that is divorced from His sovereignty, it preaches a love that may be strong but is finally impotent, because a love that cannot guarantee its own ends is a love that may ultimately fail. The love of God is only as great as the God who loves, and the God who loves is the holy, righteous, just, omnipotent, sovereign, eternal, immutable God of Scripture. Let us preach that love in its full biblical depth, and not the smaller, safer, more comfortable counterfeit.

VI. The Heseḏ of God Through Redemptive History: Psalm 136 as the Canonical Witness

The most comprehensive and most liturgically focused biblical meditation on the goodness, love, and faithfulness of God in the concrete history of His dealings with His people is Psalm 136, the great psalm of twenty-six verses, each of which ends with the identical refrain: *ki le'ōlam hasdeh*, “for His lovingkindness (heseḏ) is everlasting,” or as some renderings put it, “for His steadfast love endures forever.”

The structure of Psalm 136 is a sustained catechism of the divine heseḏ through the whole of redemptive history. It begins with the character of God Himself, the LORD is good, the LORD of lords, the God of gods (vv. 1–3). It moves to creation: He made the heavens, the earth, the great lights, the sun and moon (vv. 5–9). It then traces the great acts of redemption: the Exodus from Egypt (vv. 10–16), the wilderness journey (v. 16), the conquest of the Promised Land (vv. 17–22), and the rescue from enemies and the ongoing provision of food for all flesh (vv. 23–25). And at every single point, in the character of God, in the act of creation, in the historical deliverance of Israel, in the daily provision of sustenance, the refrain is the same: His lovingkindness is everlasting.

The pastoral function of this psalm is to train the worshipper to see every dimension of his experience, his existence as a creature, his place in history, his daily sustenance, his personal deliverances and his communal history, through the lens of the divine heseḏ. Every good thing is a manifestation of the love that endures forever. Every mercy received is an expression of the compassion that never fails. The twenty-six-fold refrain is not mere liturgical repetition; it is the deliberate formation of a theological habit of mind: the habit of reading all of life through the lens of the everlasting lovingkindness of God.

The New Testament takes up this canonical witness to the divine heseḏ and locates its supreme and final expression in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The love

that never ceases, the compassions that never fail, the hesed that is new every morning, all of it was concentrated and crystallized and expressed with a definitiveness that no previous act of divine love had achieved, in the moment when the Son of God was “delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification” (Romans 4:25, NASB 1995). The everlasting lovingkindness of Psalm 136 is the same love as the love of God displayed in the cross of Christ; the difference is not one of kind but of culminating expression.

VII. The Pastoral Significance: The Love That Does Not Fail

We close this lesson, the most explicitly gospel-saturated lesson in the whole of Unit 5, with the pastoral significance of what we have studied. The goodness, love, grace, mercy, and patience of God are not merely doctrines to be affirmed in the abstract; they are living realities that address the most fundamental needs of the human soul, and that, when truly apprehended, transform the character and the direction of human life.

A. For the Guilty: Grace Beyond Deserving

For the person who is crushed under the weight of guilt, who knows the precise distance between who she is and who she ought to be, who has catalogued her failures with a thoroughness that no accuser could exceed, the grace of God is not a comforting fiction but the most objective and most robust reality available. “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8, NASB 1995). Not after you improved. Not after you proved yourself. Not after you became worthy of the love that was offered. While you were yet a sinner. The grace that meets you is not the grace that waits for you to deserve it; it is the grace that comes to you in your desert, in your ruin, in your worst and most deserving-of-judgment moment, and makes you alive.

B. For the Despairing: Mercy That Does Not Exhaust

For the person who fears that he has exhausted the patience of God, that the repeated failures and the persistent sins have finally worn through the last fiber of divine tolerance, Lamentations 3:22–23 is the word of God that meets him in his despair: the compassions of God never fail. They are new every morning. Not because the failures are not real, not because the sin is not serious, but because the source of the mercy is the immutable, inexhaustible, everlasting-lovingkindness God whose hesed does not diminish with repeated drawing upon it. The mercy that has met you in every previous failure is the mercy that will meet you in this one. Great is His faithfulness.

C. For the Doubting: Love Defined at the Cross

For the person who doubts whether God truly loves him, who looks at his circumstances, his suffering, the silence of his prayers, and the distance that seems to separate him from the God he has been told loves him, the answer of Scripture is not a philosophical argument but a historical fact: “By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him” (1 John 4:9, NASB 1995). The love of God is not established by the pleasantness of your circumstances; it is established by the cross. The cross is not a symbol of divine

love; it is the most concrete, most costly, most historically verifiable act of love in the history of the universe. And it was done, in full knowledge of every failure, every doubt, every sin, and every moment of unbelief in your life, while you were yet a sinner. Rest in that.

D. For the Complacent: Love That Demands

For the person who has been using the love of God as a license for moral complacency, who has taken the grace of God as evidence that sin does not matter, that repentance is optional, that the call to holiness can be deferred indefinitely because God will forgive anyway, the fully biblical doctrine of divine love is the most effective corrective available. The love of God is holy love. It is the love of the God who is too pure to approve evil, who has demonstrated His love by satisfying the justice that sin requires. It is a love that does not leave the beloved in the condition it finds them; it is a love that transforms, sanctifies, and conforms the beloved to the image of the Son. Paul's response to the complacent use of grace is the most penetrating: "Shall we continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be!" (Romans 6:1–2, NASB 1995). The grace of God is not a permission to remain in sin; it is the power that breaks sin's dominion and creates the holiness that the holy God who loves us demands and, by His Spirit, enables.

Key Texts (NASB 1995)

Psalms 136:1–3, 23–26 (representative)

"Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good, for His lovingkindness is everlasting. Give thanks to the God of gods, for His lovingkindness is everlasting. Give thanks to the Lord of lords, for His lovingkindness is everlasting ... Who remembered us in our low estate, for His lovingkindness is everlasting, and has rescued us from our adversaries, for His lovingkindness is everlasting; who gives food to all flesh, for His lovingkindness is everlasting. Give thanks to the God of heaven, for His lovingkindness is everlasting."

Ephesians 2:4–7

"But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."

1 John 4:8–10

"The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

Romans 5:8

“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

Lamentations 3:22–23

“The LORD’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.”

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Goodness of God	God’s fundamental moral perfection in His being and character, encompassing all that is genuinely, truly, and perfectly good. He is the ultimate standard and source of all goodness (“No one is good except God alone,” Mark 10:18), so that every creaturely goodness is a derived and partial reflection of His absolute goodness. Encompasses His character, His creation, and His governance.
Love of God	God’s sovereign, self-giving, covenant-keeping commitment to the good of His people. Not sentimental affection but holy, just, and costly love, expressed most definitively in the giving of His Son to be the propitiation for sin (1 John 4:10; Romans 5:8). Eternal and intra-Trinitarian in its origin (John 17:24), extending to His people not because of their merit but by His sovereign free choice (Deuteronomy 7:7–8; Ephesians 1:4).
Grace (Charis)	Greek charis: unmerited favor, God’s giving of what we do not deserve and could not earn. Specifically, God’s sovereign bestowal of life, righteousness, adoption, and eternal glory upon those who deserve only wrath and death. Distinguished from mercy (which withholds deserved punishment) by its positive character: grace gives what we lack, mercy withholds what we deserve. The very heart of the gospel (Ephesians 2:4–8).
Mercy	God’s compassionate withholding of the punishment that sin deserves, extended to the miserable and the guilty. Distinguished from grace (which gives what is undeserved) by its negative character: mercy withholds what is deserved. Both flow from the same divine love; both are expressed in the cross where the punishment we deserved was borne by Christ so that the mercy we did not deserve could be extended to us.
Hesed (חֶסֶד)	Hebrew term of extraordinary richness, combining covenant faithfulness, steadfast love, loyal mercy, and relentless kindness.

Common Grace	Typically rendered “lovingkindness” (NASB) or “steadfast love” (ESV). The refrain of Psalm 136 (ki lə’ōlam hasdo, “for His lovingkindness is everlasting”) is the most sustained liturgical declaration of divine hesed in all of Scripture. The foundational Old Testament term for the covenant love that persists through Israel’s faithlessness. God’s general benevolence extended to all people without distinction, restraining sin and bestowing natural blessings (sun, rain, health, human relationship, the pleasures of the created order) on both the righteous and the wicked (Matthew 5:45). Distinguished from saving grace (which transforms and redeems) by its limited scope: common grace restrains sin and sustains creaturely life but does not regenerate the heart or secure salvation.
Electing Love (Special Love)	God’s particular, sovereign, saving love for those whom He has chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4). Covenantal in character, transforming in effect, and entirely grounded in God’s own sovereign freedom rather than in any foreseen merit or worthiness of the elect (Deuteronomy 7:7–8; Romans 9:11–13). Not merely a more intense version of common grace but a categorically different kind of love that creates the covenant relationship of eternal belonging.
Patience / Longsuffering (Makrothymia)	God’s willingness to defer the full expression of His wrath in order to allow space for repentance (Romans 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). Not infinite tolerance but purposive restraint: the patient God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked and desires repentance and life (Ezekiel 33:11). The patience that is refused gives way to the justice that is certain; the patience that leads to repentance issues in the grace that saves.
Cheap Grace	A term coined by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (The Cost of Discipleship, 1937) for the misuse of divine grace as license for moral complacency, the reduction of grace to the divine willingness to overlook sin without demanding transformation. Distinguished from costly grace, which takes seriously both the infinite cost of the cross and the total claim of Christ upon the life of the believer. Romans 6:1–2 is Paul’s definitive refutation: grace does not increase by the increase of sin; rather, grace creates the freedom from sin’s dominion that genuine transformation requires.
“But God” (Ephesians 2:4)	The two-word hinge of Ephesians 2:4 that marks the transition from the human condition in its full unremediated horror (dead in sin, children of wrath, vv. 1–3) to the divine act of grace (made alive, raised up, seated in the heavenly places, vv. 4–6). Among the most theologically weighty two-word combinations in the New Testament: the entire human situation before God is transformed by the sovereign, gracious intervention of the God who is rich in mercy and great in love.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that God is good, not merely benevolent in a general sense, but fundamentally, absolutely, and inexhaustibly good in every dimension of His being and every act of His governance. We must believe that God is love, not in the sentimental sense that strips love of its moral seriousness, but in the full biblical sense: the holy, sovereign, covenant-keeping, cross-shaped love that takes sin with absolute seriousness and addresses it at infinite cost. We must believe that God's grace is not the divine willingness to overlook moral failure but the sovereign, costly bestowal of life and righteousness upon those who deserve condemnation. And we must believe that these attributes, goodness, love, grace, mercy, patience, do not compete with or override God's holiness, righteousness, and justice; they are expressions of the same holy character, shaped by the same holy nature, and displayed most fully in the same holy act: the cross of Jesus Christ.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

The love of God, rightly understood, should produce in us the most profound and most sustained gratitude that any creaturely heart can experience. "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Let that truth be felt, not merely known. Let the weight of "while we were yet sinners" press upon the conscience with its full specificity. Let the cost of the Son's giving be held before the mind with the full horror of Gethsemane, Golgotha, and the cry of dereliction. And then let the love that moved through all of that, the sovereign, holy, costly, initiative-taking, unconditional love of the triune God, fill the heart with the kind of gratitude that cannot contain itself and inevitably overflows into worship, obedience, and the declaration of His praise.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

1. **Guard the integrity of the love of God in your preaching and teaching.** The most common theological failure in contemporary evangelical Christianity is not the denial of God's love but its distortion, the preaching of a love that has been detached from holiness, justice, and wrath, and therefore requires no cross, demands no transformation, and issues in no genuine security. Preach the love of God in its full biblical depth: holy love, just love, sovereign love, costly love, transforming love. Let the cross be the definition of what "God is love" actually means.
2. **Use Psalm 136 as a liturgical discipline of gratitude.** The twenty-six-fold refrain of Psalm 136 is a training program in the theological habit of seeing all of life through the lens of the divine hesed. Try the practice of reading Psalm 136 aloud in your personal devotion or in family worship, allowing the refrain to be spoken responsively. The discipline of declaring "for His lovingkindness is everlasting" across every dimension of creation and redemption is one of the most effective means of forming the habit of gratitude.

3. **Rest in Lamentations 3:22–23 in seasons of spiritual dryness and failure.** The person who fears that repeated failure has finally exhausted the patience of God needs to hear, with the full weight of its context (the ruins of Jerusalem, the most devastating moment in Israel's history), that the LORD's compassions never fail. Memorize Lamentations 3:22–23. Pray it in your worst moments. Let the newness of every morning be not merely a natural phenomenon but a theological declaration: His mercies are new today because He is faithfully, immutably, everlastingly who He is.
4. **Examine your own relationship with grace for complacency.** The grace of God is not a license for moral indolence. Ask yourself honestly: Have I been using the love and grace of God as a cover for persistent sin that I have not genuinely committed to abandon? Have I been treating the patience of God as permanent permission rather than as a gift of time intended to lead to repentance? Let the full cost of the cross, the holy love that satisfied the holy justice of the holy God, press upon you with sufficient weight to make complacency impossible.
5. **Proclaim the love of God as the context, not the substitute, for the call to repentance.** Romans 2:4 declares that the kindness of God is designed to lead to repentance, not to make repentance unnecessary. In your evangelism and pastoral care, do not pit love against repentance, or grace against obedience. The love that sent the Son to bear the cross is the love that calls the sinner to repentance and the believer to holiness. The God who is love is the same God who commands all people everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30).

D. For Every Season of Life

For the new believer: Romans 5:8 is the theological ground of your assurance, not your spiritual performance. God demonstrated His love not by waiting for you to become worthy but by acting while you were yet a sinner. Your security in Christ is not based on the quality of your love for Him but on the quality of His love for you, a love that is holy, sovereign, eternal, and cross-secured.

For the one in spiritual desolation: When the felt sense of God's love has withdrawn and your prayers feel unanswered, Lamentations 3:22–23 is not a sentimental platitude; it is the theological anchor of a man writing in the ruins. The lovingkindnesses never cease. The compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Not because circumstances are good, but because God is who He is, and His being does not change with your feelings or your circumstances.

For the one tempted toward moral complacency: Ephesians 2:4–7 declares that you have been made alive, raised up, and seated in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, and that God did all of this so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward you. You are a display case for the grace of God. Let the magnitude of what has been given motivate the wholeness of what is offered in return: a life lived entirely, joyfully, and holily for the One who has given everything for you.

For the pastor and teacher: Lesson 16 is the theological counterbalance to Lessons 14 and 15. A church that has been well-taught on the holiness and justice of God needs to hear, in the same theological framework and with the same pastoral urgency, that this holy, just God is also the God who is love, not in spite of His holiness and justice but as the fullest expression of them. Let the whole counsel of God be your standard: preach the attributes that make grace necessary, and then preach the grace that makes the attributes good news.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. How would you have defined “God is love” before studying this lesson? How has your understanding of that declaration changed, deepened, or been corrected by what you have studied? Share briefly with the group.

Observation Questions (What Does the Text Say?)

2. Read 1 John 4:7–12. Identify every statement John makes about the nature of God’s love. How does John define love in verse 10 (“not that we loved God, but that He loved us”)? What is the specific content of the love in verse 10, what did God send His Son to do? How does the declaration “God is love” in verse 8 function in John’s argument?

3. Read Ephesians 2:1–7. Describe the human condition in verses 1–3 as specifically as possible. What does the phrase “But God” in verse 4 signal? What three things does God do for those who were dead in sin (vv. 5–6)? What is the stated purpose of His grace in verse 7?

4. Read Lamentations 3:19–26. What is the immediate context of Jeremiah’s declaration in verses 22–23, what has he just described in verses 19–20? Why is it significant that the confession “The LORD’s lovingkindnesses never cease” comes in the middle of this particular passage? What does Jeremiah say he does in verse 21 to arrive at hope?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

5. Explain the distinction between God’s general benevolence (common grace) and His electing love (saving grace). How are they similar, and how are they categorically different? Why does the distinction matter for understanding the full scope of divine love?

6. What is the difference between grace and mercy? How do both flow from the same divine love but address different aspects of the human plight? How does the cross simultaneously display both, mercy (withholding deserved punishment) and grace (bestowing undeserved life)?

7. Explain what “God is love” does and does not mean. What are the three most common distortions of this declaration? How does 1 John 4:10 (the love defined by propitiation) serve as the corrective to each of these distortions?

8. The lesson argues that the love, goodness, and grace of God are not in competition with His holiness, righteousness, and justice, but are expressions of the same holy character. How does the cross of Christ demonstrate the truth of this argument? What would be wrong with a love that did not require the cross?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

9. Romans 5:8 declares that God demonstrated His love “while we were yet sinners.” What is the significance of that timing for your assurance? Are there specific sins, failures, or areas of weakness that cause you to doubt whether God’s love extends to you? How does Romans 5:8 specifically address those doubts?

10. Lamentations 3:21 says: “This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope.” The arrival at hope is a cognitive act, a deliberate recalling of theological truth in the midst of desolation. What specific truth do you most need to “recall to mind” in your current season of life? How does the discipline of theological memory function as a pastoral resource?

11. Dietrich Bonhoeffer coined the term “cheap grace” for the use of divine grace as license for moral complacency. Is cheap grace a temptation in your own life? What would it look like to receive the grace of God in a way that is fully serious about both the infinite cost of the cross and the total claim of Christ upon your life?

12. Psalm 136 trains its worshippers to see every dimension of life, creation, history, daily provision, personal deliverance, through the lens of the everlasting hesed of God. What would it look like, practically, to cultivate this habit of theological seeing in your own life? Identify two or three specific circumstances from your current life and practice declaring over them: “for His lovingkindness is everlasting.”

Prayer Focus

Open your prayer with the refrain of Psalm 136: Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good, for His lovingkindness is everlasting. Let the twenty-six-fold refrain of the psalm be not merely a liturgical formula but a genuine act of theological perception: see the goodness of God in the fact of creation (He made the heavens, the earth, the great lights), in the history of redemption (He led Israel through the sea, through the wilderness, into the promised land), in the daily provision of sustenance (He gives food to all flesh), and in the specific, personal deliverances and mercies of your own life. For His lovingkindness is everlasting.

Then come before the God of Ephesians 2 with the full awareness of what you were before His grace reached you: dead in your transgressions and sins, a child of wrath by nature. And then speak the two words that changed everything: But God. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love, made me alive. Raised me up. Seated me in the heavenly places. Thank Him for the specific grace that met you in your specific deadness, your specific sinfulness, your specific unworthiness, and made you alive in Christ.

Close by resting in Romans 5:8 as the most objective possible statement of the love of God: God demonstrates His love toward me, in that while I was yet a sinner, Christ died for me. Sit with those words. Let the “while I was yet a sinner” be specific to your own record. And then let the love that overcame that record, the holy, sovereign, costly, cross-secured love of the triune God, be the resting place of your soul. God is good. His love endures forever. His compassions never fail. They are new every morning, and great is His faithfulness.

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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