The Prayer of Agur - Part Two

# Understanding God's Love

## (Proverbs 30:10-33)

Welcome to Christ’s Community Church, we are in the second part of our miniseries, the Prayer of Agur. Last week we interrupted the series to celebrate Valentine’s Day and we talked about an “Uncommon Love” because it seemed like Valentine’s Day was important enough that we should pause to reflect on God’s love in us and through us. I think it’s a good reminder because we can find ourselves at different times having difficulty grasping the concept that the creator of the universe could actually love us personally, as an individual; but that’s exactly what the Bible tells us, that’s the point Paul makes in Romans chapter 5, verse eight,

“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

And so, we might demonstrate our love for one another with kind words over dinner, or with flowers and gifts, but God goes so much farther beyond that demonstrating his love for us on the cross. And yet, many people struggle with the love of God because they feel unworthy to receive such extravagant love, but it’s the truth. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). And he demonstrates his love for us on the cross, dying in our place, and the Bible tells us in application of this truth,

“Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11).

And so, I want you to hold on because I’m going somewhere, it’s all going to come together.

In the first part of this series we discovered three verses containing this little prayer of Agur. It’s actually the only prayer found in the entire book of Proverbs. And so, in this book containing 31 chapters of ancient wisdom, the first 29 compiled by King Solomon, chapter 31 written by King Lemuel, and then there is chapter 30 written by a man named Agur. It’s surprising to find nestled there among the writings of Kings, this man of obscurity whom we really don’t know anything about.

In this short prayer, Agur gives us a formula for contentment, where we’re living with purpose and not futility, clarity and not chaos, neither too fast nor too slow, but it’s a life in balance. And so, as we begin today, let’s read this prayer before we continue on:

"Two things I ask of you, O Lord; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God” (Proverbs 30:7-9).

In this prayer, we find Agur giving us a plan for living a life that is just right, but as we continue reading, we’re going to discover that the prophet is going to go much deeper. At the end of this prayer, he’s only one third of the way through his God breathed writing assignment and he’s going to toss out a few words of advice. As these verses unravel before us we are going to discover that he is a deep thinker and a great list maker. He begins in verse 10 describing some habits that we really shouldn’t be doing, he says,

"Do not slander a servant to his master, or he will curse you, and you will pay for it” (Proverbs 30:10).

As I begin to prepare a message there will be things that I’m reading in the Word of God that will seem to jump out of the pages. It’s at that point that a sermon begins to formulate, maybe just a few notes jotted down on a piece of paper, but then God begins adding thoughts and supporting Scriptures in my mind. Today’s message is born out of a multiplicity of things, the times that we are living in today, having just celebrated Valentine’s Day, but the text of this passage demands the subject. And our world is so messed up, we’re celebrating our love for one another, and yet hatred is sweeping across our nation like wildfire. There is division on the left and on the right, not just between Democrats and Republicans, but you find yourself being cautious when you go out into public places. A car driving down the street backfires and you find yourself instinctively diving under your table at the restaurant.

This morning, I have the cumbersome task of preaching a gospel of love in a culture which is disseminating a message of hatred and vindictiveness which adds contemporary meaning to the words of Agur in verse 10,

"Do not slander a servant to his master, or he will curse you, and you will pay for it” (Proverbs 30:10).

And so, there is this threat of retaliation, this propagation of hatred in our culture, on the streets and in the media. Hatred, which is easily seen when you’re the victim, but it’s much harder to detect, and even hidden when it’s germinating in our own hearts.

Agur describes it this way, he says in verse 11,

"There are those who curse their fathers and do not bless their mothers; those who are pure in their own eyes and yet are not cleansed of their filth; those whose eyes are ever so haughty…”

“Whose glances are so disdainful; those whose teeth are swords and whose jaws are set with knives to devour the poor from the earth, the needy from among mankind” (Proverbs 30:11-14).

I wonder if you’ve ever noticed how we’re so much better at inflicting pain then we are at tolerating it? I believe this must be something common to all of us because we find ways of justifying our feelings or the way that we react to a certain situation because of something that has happened to us in the past. In other words, we give ourselves permission to act in a certain way, as if we are exempt from conviction no matter how obnoxious we may be, because we feel that we’re justified by some experience in the past that gives us that right.

And so, right here in these first few verses following his prayer, Agur has taken us from a place of contentment, this sweet spot, and suddenly he changes gears. He’s like, you better wake up because the world is messed up,

"There are those who curse their fathers and do not bless their mothers; those who are pure in their own eyes and yet are not cleansed of their filth; those whose eyes are ever so haughty…”

He’s calling us to introspection, self-examination, because 15 minutes ago we were praising God with hands lifted high. In other words, he’s describing this situation where I was worshiping God, savoring the presence of the living God, and then I cursed out so and so in the parking lot on the way home.

I wonder if you have ever considered how our relationship with God could be so strong and our relationship with others so weak? You know, how could you be so anointed, walking in such glory, and yet hate your neighbor? Honestly, it makes me question the substance of our lives, because if our vertical relationship with God and are horizontal relationships with others intersect as they should, then you should be able to see my love for God by how I love others.

Have you ever considered how we could be so insensitive that we kill our own children but shelter our pets? That we could be so callous that we fly into a building and kill thousands of people that we don’t even know? How can we be so uncaring, especially while we’re worshiping and professing to love God? The thing that’s really troubling is that there have always been people who have hurt and killed others thinking that they’re doing God a favor. In fact, you may remember Saul in the New Testament, he was one of those because he persecuted the church in the name of God. He testified,

“I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison” (Acts 22:3-4).

I wonder if that’s why Jesus warned, “A time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God” (John 16:2).

But it’s always been that way, it didn’t just start in our generation, way back before Jesus time, people killed the prophets in the name of God.

And so, Agur gives us a warning, but let’s look at it a different way, I want to show you a better way. Let’s read first John chapter 4, the apostle John writes in verse 17 and following,

“In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him” (1 John 4:17).

In other words, in this culture, in this climate of hatred, there is a way that love is made complete in us, so that we can come boldly and with confidence on the day of Judgment. He says, because we’re like him, our love is made perfect, and so we can start loving as he would, and then verse 18 says,

“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:18-19).

And so, the Spirit of God says, you don’t need to be afraid of me because there is no fear in love.

“We love because he first loved us” but there are some people that honestly shock me with just how cold they can be, so intent on promoting themselves and destroying everyone and everything in their way. And maybe you’ve reached out, you wanted to be friends, you wanted it to work, you wanted that relationship to grow, but it was a one-way street, it was a dead end.

Agur warns us in verse 15, "The leech has two daughters. 'Give! Give!' they cry. "There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say, 'Enough!': the grave, the barren womb, land which is never satisfied with water, and fire which never says, 'Enough!' "The eye that mocks a father, that scorns obedience to a mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley, will be eaten by the vultures” (Proverbs 30:15-17).

It’s hard to understand how we could be so callous and miss out on the loving purpose of God, but it happens. The kings of the earth and the people of the world did not believe that Jerusalem could be overcome, but it happened,

“Because of the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed within her the blood of the righteous. Now they grope through the streets like men who are blind. They are so defiled with blood that no one dares to touch their garments” (Lamentations 4:13-14).

There is a hardness of heart that mocks a father and scorns obedience to a mother. It’s hard to understand how it could be, but Charles Spurgeon described it this way, he said, “The same sun which melts wax hardens clay. And it’s the same Gospel which melts some people to repentance, that hardens others in their sins.” And so, the problem is not with the sun, it’s with the thing or the substance that it touches. Jesus described it this way in Matthew chapter 5,

“He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45).

When I was a young boy I lived in Holland and taking advantage of that opportunity my family traveled around Europe extensively. And so, I’ve been in Germany, toured the concentration camps, walked through the gas chambers, and I was shocked by the evil of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, but what really blows me away is when I think about slavery in America. The very fact that men and women could be treated worse than animals, they could be beaten and abused, and then their owners could go to church and sing hymns, worshiping and praising God.

It’s just as Agur says in verse 18, "There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden. "This is the way of an adulteress: She eats and wipes her mouth and says, 'I've done nothing wrong” (Proverbs 30:18-20).

It’s hard to reconcile how you can say that you love God and hate another human being. It’s hard to understand how you could be so blind to say, “I’ve done nothing wrong.” And yet even today there are preachers and denominations that hate each other, sanctuaries, places where there should be love but there is hate. In the same way, some “families” are a contradiction of the term, because there are brothers and sisters that hate each other, kids that hate their parents, parents that hate their kids and yet the Bible says,

“If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20).

And so, until God sees your love for your neighbor, your brother or your sister, you can’t love God. In fact, he says you’re a liar, and so you might as well stop singing those praise songs because anybody who says they love God and doesn’t forgive obviously hasn’t allowed the love of God to penetrate their hearts.

God has given us this command in verse 21: “Whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1 John 4:21). And yet I wonder how many of us have those areas that our faith isn’t allowed to touch, where we won’t allow ourselves to be changed, making it’s easier to forgive other people’s children than our own, easier to be nice to a stranger than to our own families. But God doesn’t measure our faith by how many times we go to church, how loud we praise him, or even how many Scriptures we know. He measures our faith by how we treat others, because he says, “Whoever loves God must also love his brother.”

I hope you’ll understand that mercy doesn’t end with you, but mercy begins with you, and so if you’ve been forgiven much, don’t be nearsighted and blind when you know it’s only by his mercy that you take your next breath. Some of you know that like me you should’ve been dead, but God had mercy, and so what he’s asking you to do today is to reflect the mercy that you’ve been given. You see, it’s only by his grace that we’ve been cleansed from our sins, we didn’t deserve it and yet when we were still sinners Christ died for us. That’s why Agur says this in verse 21,

"Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up: a servant who becomes king, a fool who is full of food, an unloved woman who is married, and a maidservant who displaces her mistress” (Proverbs 30:21-23).

You see, he’s talking about grace, and the reason I need to be merciful is because I have received the kindness of the Lord. And so, every time I want to be judgmental, I just need to remember what God did in my life. And we should all ask ourselves do I really have the right to be angry now, to keep someone captive for being human, or maybe we should just be real and praise God for what he’s brought us through by his mercy. Agur takes us into some deep soul-searching to consider who may be suffering, alone and neglected because of something that we refused to give? And so, we need to ask ourselves, “Who am I to deny someone else mercy?”

Agur finishes Proverbs chapter 30 with another curious list of observational humor in verse 24,

"Four things on earth are small, yet they are extremely wise: Ants are creatures of little strength, yet they store up their food in the summer; coneys are creatures of little power, yet they make their home in the crags; locusts have no king, yet they advance together in ranks; a lizard can be caught with the hand, yet it is found in kings' palaces.

"There are three things that are stately in their stride, four that move with stately bearing: a lion, mighty among beasts, who retreats before nothing; a strutting rooster, a he-goat, and a king with his army around him. "If you have played the fool and exalted yourself, or if you have planned evil, clap your hand over your mouth” (Proverbs 30:24-32).

Today, you have a choice to ignore this message, as long as you don’t apply it, but if you apply it, it’s going to stir up something deep in your heart. You see, somewhere there is somebody, maybe somebody in this room, somebody your angry with and they’re suffering because of your lack of love. And maybe the Spirit of God is bringing a little conviction to some of you so that you might clap your hand over your mouth recognizing that you have thought more highly of yourself than you ought. You exalted yourself like a lion, strutting like a rooster, a male goat, or a king surrounded by his army.

You know, the Bible says in second Timothy, chapter 3,

“Mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, and without love…” (2 Timothy 3:1-3).

In other words, people who are unloving and unforgiving, having lost the ability to have empathy for another. I’m not talking about people who hurt your feelings, I’m talking about your heart, you being willing to be humane enough to love people, to care about people, to make sure they’re okay, to make sure the kids are okay. It’s time to wake up because Agur closes this chapter saying,

“For as churning the milk produces butter, and as twisting the nose produces blood, so stirring up anger produces strife" (Proverbs 30:33).

And so, he reminds us that the lion, the rooster, the goat, and a king with his army may think they’re invincible, but no matter how powerful you think are, when you fail to show loving kindness and mercy to another you will be thrown off your throne. When you exalt yourself, stirring up anger, strife is certain to come your way.

I know that’s a lot to take in, but we need to remember that this world has its limits, there are mysteries we can’t understand, and we all make mistakes, but even kings need to remember that there is an ultimate authority, and his name is Jesus. He is the one who offers you the authentic love you’ve been looking for your whole life. He doesn’t care about the superficial stuff that’s so important to everyone else. The Bible says,

"The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

He looks at the heart, he cares about your heart, and because he’s God he knows all the hurt, the darkness, and the sin that’s there and he loves you.

In fact, he proved his love for you, the Bible says,

“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

He proved his love by dying for our sin, the sin that separates us from him, even when we couldn’t of cared less, but while we were still sinners. That’s how much he loves you, that’s how much he desires to have a relationship with you, but he doesn’t force his love on you. You have to respond to it, you have to choose it, that’s what the Bible tells us,

“We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

And so, your relationship with him begins as an act of faith, putting your trust in the one who loved you enough to die for you. You don’t have to do anything to impress him or get him to love you, because he already does. We love because he first loved us and so I pray that you will experience the ever-present all-encompassing love of God today.

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