

A Time for Everything under Heaven #8

Ecclesiastes 3:8; Luke 14:26

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If ever there were times when a person might expect to find happiness in this life, it would seem to be when love blossoms in the heart. Times of love make the heart sing and put a bounce in one's step. And yet the wise king of Israel, Solomon, would have us not even look to times of love as being a firm foundation upon which to build a life of enduring joy. For human love comes and goes. As important as human love is in this life, it will wax and wane. It will increase and decrease. Solomon even goes on to say that just as there is a time of blissful love here on earth, there is likewise a time of painful hate.

Now dear ones, if we cannot find a lasting enduring joy and happiness in earthly love, where can it be found? Again, Solomon directs our eye to Him who does not change—to Him who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The Spirit of God would have us to behold the beauty of our Savior, whose love for His people is ever constant, ever pure, and everlasting. If we would grow in joy, peace, and contentment in this life, we must grow in comprehending what is the breath, length, depth, and height of the unchangeable love of Jesus Christ? If we do not understand the love of God that is found in the cross of Christ for unworthy sinners, the joy of the Lord will elude us.

Are you seeking a lasting happiness in the love of a husband, wife, child, parent, brother, sister, or friend? You will be disappointed. Now I'm not saying that human love is meaningless and useless. Human love is a glorious blessing from God above. We ought to give that love one to another, and receive it from one another. In fact not to do so is a grievous sin (1 John 4:20). However, let me state emphatically, that looking for happiness in mere changeable human love will not bring lasting joy and contentment. Only resting in the immutable and unchangeable love of God will never disappoint us.

We consider this Lord's Day the final two couplets in Ecclesiastes chapter 3: (1) There Is a Time to Love and a Time to Hate, and (2) There Is a Time of War and A Time of Peace.

I. There Is a Time to Love and a Time to Hate (Ecclesiastes 3:8a).

A. Solomon comes as a penitent Preacher looking back over his own years of backsliding. He has learned that one cannot find a lasting joy by holding tightly to the various seasons and times which God sovereignly ordains for our lives. These seasons come and go, and just as there is a time to love, so the love of this world will pass away, and hate will take its place. Searching for peace and contentment in even the love of this world is vain and is like a trip that brings you right back to your starting place. However, there is a love that does bring true joy and happiness. Now that is a love that we should all desire.

B. There are four different words used in the Greek language for different concepts of love.

1. There is romantic or sexual love that is appropriate only between those who are married (EROS from which we get the word "erotic"). Although this word is not actually used in the New Testament, it was used extensively in Greek literature. EROS is the name of the Greek god with the bow and arrow that has been popularized on St. Valentine's Day (a Roman Catholic saint). This is the concept of love that most people have in mind when they use the word "love" today (a sensual or romantic love). Now there is nothing wrong with this concept of love within the proper context of marriage, but it is used more often in our cultural context outside of marriage, which issues forth in fornication, adultery, pornography, and lust, rather than true love. This is a love expressed toward those deemed worthy of it. It is passionate and emotional.

2. There is also a love of natural affection for those within a family (STORGE). Although the actual Greek word (STORGE) is not used in the New Testament, the Greek word, ASTORGOS (which means, without natural affection) is used and is condemned as being one of the prominent sins exhibited in the last days (2 Timothy 3:3). Thus, when the Holy Spirit condemns those who are without natural affection or without familial love, we understand that it is a duty to have a natural affection for family members. As with EROS (sexual love), STORGE is also a love expressed toward those deemed worthy of it (namely, family members), and it too is emotional in nature.

3. There is also a love of friendship (PHILIA), which is expressed toward those you like to be around. This is the love of companionship and fellowship. It is built upon common interests that are mutually shared. This love of friendship is not limited to one person as EROS (or sexual love) should be. In fact, there should be brotherly love expressed within the church for one another because of our common interest in the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:9). That sense of common interest among us is graphically portrayed when we sit down together around the Communion Table. As with the previous Greek words for love, EROS (sexual love) and STORGE (familial love), so also with PHILIA (brotherly love), it is a love expressed toward those deemed worthy of it (namely, friends), and it likewise is a love of emotion.

4. Finally, we come to another Greek word for love: AGAPE. This word for love (as a noun) was nearly nonexistent in the secular Greek language of ancient times. The other words for love were used extensively in Greek culture and literature. But even though there were various words for love available within the Greek language, the Holy Spirit took a word for love infrequently used, and infused it with significance in the New Testament, which none of the other words for love can possibly equal.

a. Why would the Holy Spirit take the most uncommon word for love and make it the most common word for love in the New Testament? For the very fact that the other Greek words for love were commonly used and had particular concepts associated with them already. Not so with AGAPE. One might say that it was previously a colorless word for love—that is until the love of God gave it the most brilliant and beautiful color in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to save undeserving sinners. If you want to understand AGAPE you must look to the cross of Christ. There you will see the two characteristics that distinguish it from other concepts of love (just mentioned above).

(1) AGAPE is a love for the unworthy, rather than for the worthy—for the undeserving, rather than for the deserving. This we see in the love of God for sinners, and the love which we are commanded to show to our neighbor in imitation of God's love. The other concepts of love that we considered were each one expressed toward those deemed worthy of it (whether toward a spouse in sexual love, or toward a child in familial love, or toward a friend in brotherly love). However, AGAPE is especially revealed in the love of God that reaches down from heaven to rescue undeserving sinners from the torments of hell. In order to fully understand this love for the undeserving, one must see the absolutely moral corruption of man as a sinner in the sight of God against the backdrop of the infinitely pure holiness of our God. How sinful and detestable we are as sinners in the sight of God. Could there be a greater contrast between two objects? Could there be a greater darkness and a greater brightness? Could there be a greater evil against a greater good? There is nothing (absolutely nothing) of worth in the sinner that could compel God or entice God to love him/her. In fact, the objects of this love are the very enemies of God (by nature). They are ungodly and morally detestable in the sight of God (according to Romans 5:6-10). That is what makes AGAPE absolutely unique. It is not that the word itself means a love for the undeserving. It is rather that the word was chosen and applied by the Holy Spirit to the love of Christ shown to guilty sinners, and thus was the word transformed.

(2) Following from the fact that AGAPE is a love for the undeserving, it is not dependent upon passion and emotion as are the other types of love: sexual love (EROS), familial love (STORGE) and friendly love (PHILIA). For when we speak of loving a husband/wife, a son/daughter, or a friend,

there is stirred up within us emotion and passion because of the relationship that attracts you to that person. But that is not so with AGAPE. By the very fact that it is a love for the undeserving, it is more volitional than emotional. AGAPE is a commitment. It is a conscious act to love that which is unlovely and unattractive. There is no inward passion in the concept of this love that necessarily compels one to reach out to another because of something good that is seen in that person. It reaches out to others simply because Christ reached out to such an undeserving sinner like me, and gave Himself for me that I might be made a child of the living God, endowed with a royal inheritance of which I am completely unworthy.

b. Now because God has loved us with a love that we did not deserve (and do not deserve), we are commanded likewise to love others with a love that they do not deserve (1 John 4:10-11). Why do we find it so difficult to love certain brothers or sisters? Let me suggest to you that in part it is due to our seeking to find something worthy in them. It is easy to love those who love us and like us. It is easy to love those who treat us with respect and say nice things about us. But when we feel we have been slapped in the face or treated unfairly, we see how difficult it is to bring ourselves to love that person or to pray for that person because of what he/she has done to us. In other words, that person is undeserving of our love. That individual is ugly to us. And so we become angry, vindictive, resentful, critical, and even hateful. But dear ones, we do not love our brother with AGAPE because he is friendly. We do not love our neighbor with AGAPE because he is neighborly. We do not love our wife or our husband with AGAPE because he/she is beautiful or handsome, charming or respectful. And not to love our brother/sister or our neighbor (whether he is a friend or foe) is a grievous sin against the love of God and against the gospel of Jesus Christ, which we have freely received by faith in Christ. Dear ones, there is no neutrality here. If we do not choose to love others with a love for the undeserving, we hate them according to the Word of God and abide in death (1 John 3:14). Furthermore, we cannot say in all honesty that we love God if we do not love our brother or sister (1 John 4:20). Dear ones, to look upon a brother or sister as having to merit our love is to miss the whole point of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Every other type of love will increase or decrease, depending upon how others have treated you. But that is not so with AGAPE. For regardless of how we are treated, we are to graciously and freely do what is good and right to others even as the Lord has done to us.

c. Now that we understand the nature of this love for the unworthy, what does it look like in action? How would we describe it? Dear ones, thankfully we have an entire chapter of the Bible devoted to fleshing out the concept of AGAPE (a love for the undeserving): 1 Corinthians 13 (Read it). Thus, there are different times and seasons that call forth a romantic love, a familial love, or a friendly love. But every time and season that God brings into your life and mine calls forth an undeserving love (AGAPE). Regardless of the circumstances, regardless of the person, there is a time and a place to show the love of Christ to others—even to those who hate us, persecute us, falsely accuse us, and severely criticize us. For, dear ones, this is a love to be shown even to those who make themselves our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48). You see, dear ones, the Lord Jesus takes away every possible excuse that we could bring as to why we can't love that person, as to why we can't pray for that person, as to why we can't do good to that person. For that you see is the very nature of AGAPE—it is a love for the undeserving. Are you growing in this love? Jesus said that others would know we are Christians by our AGAPE for one another—a love for the unworthy, and not just a brotherly love we have for one another in the family of God. Have we prided ourselves in our theological precision, our doctrinal understanding, our desire to worship God purely, but become dangerously backslidden in loving others with the love of Jesus Christ? Remember that without this kind of love alive in our hearts, alive in our desires, alive in our words, and alive in our actions, WE ARE NOTHING (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). This is a love that doesn't give to others because of what others have given to us. This is a love that doesn't keep a ledger of wrongs committed. This is a love that is not vindictive. But rather, this is a love that does what is good and what is right for even the chief of sinners. It is always the right time and season, dear ones, for us to grow in our understanding of the love of Christ and to display it to others. May this be the prayer of each

one of us: Read Ephesians 3:17-21.

C. Solomon then turns us from the various fleeting times of human love to another strong emotion within the hearts of men: hate (“a time to hate”). Now there may be a wrong time to hate, but there may also be right time to hate. That may seem strange in light of what has just been said about loving even our enemies. Let us quickly consider these various seasons and times to hate.

1. Much depends upon what we mean by hate. For the word “hatred” may be used in three different senses.

a. In one sense, hatred is not justified and never justified, for in that sense it is a transgression against God and His Word (“Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart” Leviticus 19:17). For if hatred means we are personally vindictive toward our neighbor (whether he is a friend to us or an enemy to us) or personally desire to get even with our neighbor, then that hatred is never right. It is always a sin. For the Scripture is clear that we are not to avenge ourselves against others—even against those who make themselves our enemies (whether in thought, word, or deed): Read Romans 12:17-21. May we not pray (with David) that God would ensnare the wicked, confuse the wicked, and destroy the wicked? Yes, that is simply the meaning of that petition in the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy kingdom come.” When we pray for God’s kingdom to come, we likewise are praying that God would destroy Satan’s kingdom with all who obstinately serve Satan in seeking to hinder the growth of Christ’s kingdom. But we do not pray such a prayer in order to avenge ourselves, but rather because we desire nothing to stand in the way of God’s kingdom moving forward. And when we pray for God to destroy the wicked, we also must keep in mind that He may destroy the wicked by either removing them from the earth or by setting His redemptive love upon them and making them the children of God (Psalm 83:16). In either case, the wicked are removed as a hindrance to the kingdom of God.

b. In a second sense, hatred is justified and is even the duty of a Christian. For when hatred means that we have a holy displeasure with and absolutely disapprove of those who hate our God and are the enemies of God by their willful transgression of God’s holy commandments, we must hate them even as God hates them (Psalm 139:21-22; 2 Chronicles 19:2). However, there is not in this hatred a personal desire to hurt someone because he has hurt you. There is rather a holy disapproval and displeasure with their hatred for God. You see, this sense of hatred is simply a question of our loyalty to God. This sense of hatred clearly tells us whose side we are on: God’s side or the side of His enemies? For if we do not find it detestable to us that the enemies of God speak against Him and against His Son, we must ask, where do our loyalties really lie? In having this holy disapproval or displeasure with the enemies of God, we are simply imitating God (Psalm 5:5; Psalm 11:5). It simply is not true that in this sense of hate, we must hate the sin but not the sinner. In this sense of hate, we must have a holy disapproval/displeasure for both the sin and the sinner. Just as we must take a holy pleasure in our brothers and sisters who delight to please the Lord, so we must take a holy displeasure in the enemies of God who delight to rebel against the Lord. And yet even when we find what the enemies of God do to be detestable to us, we are yet commanded to consciously choose to love the undeserving (AGAPE) by doing what is good and right to them, rather than being personally vindictive. Thus, this holy hatred for our enemies is not at all incompatible with the holy love that we are to have for our enemies.

c. There is a third sense in which I would submit that hatred is justified, lawful, and a duty. In this sense, hatred is used in a comparative sense to show how much greater our love for God is to be in comparison to our love for anyone else (Luke 14:26 as compared with Matthew 10:37). When “hate” is used in this sense, it does not mean that we are literally to hate our loved ones. It means that in comparison to the love we have for Christ, our love for our loved ones is far less. In this sense of hate, our duty is to make Christ our first love and our highest love. In this sense, we are simply obeying the very words of Christ in Matthew 22:37-40. Again this comparative hatred is simply a question of loyalty. Who has your supreme loyalty: your

father, your mother, your child, your husband, your wife, your brother, your sister, your pastor, your elder, or your civil magistrate? Or does the Lord Jesus Christ have your allegiance and devotion before anyone else? Again this holy hatred is perfectly compatible with the holy love we are to have for all our loved ones.

2. Regardless of the changing circumstances of love or hate in this world, Solomon would have us turn from that which is changeable and turn in faith to Christ who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Although we are to enjoy the blessings that God gives to us in this life, an enduring joy and happiness in this life can only be realized when it is built upon Him who never changes—whose character never changes, whose faithfulness never changes, whose promise never changes, whose justice never changes, and whose love never changes for us.

II. There Is a Time of War and a Time of Peace (Ecclesiastes 3:8b).

A. Let me simply say about times of war and peace that they are the public outworking of times of personal hate and love. We move here from the personal to the public manifestation of hate and love.

B. Likewise Solomon would place again before our eyes just how shifting is the sand beneath our feet when it comes to our public safety. We rejoice with much thanksgiving to God that we are not presently riddled and racked with terrorist attacks within our cities and communities. But that may all change in the future. Who knows? Only God knows. But although we presently enjoy a peace from such terrorist attacks within our community, Solomon's point is that since this can all change in the twinkling of an eye, should our joy rest in something as changeable as our public domestic peace? Not if we truly desire a joy that prevails even against all wars and all enemies of peace. God raises up nations and puts down nations. God decrees both times of war and of peace. He humbles the proud by wars and casts us upon Him, who alone can bring peace. Dear ones, let not your hearts be troubled. Let not your joy be shaken. For He who controls the nations is your God. He who is your God has loved you, His child, with an everlasting and undeserving love. If God has loved you and sacrificed for you Him who is most precious to Him (His only begotten Son) in order to rescue you from the pits of hell, what will He withhold from you that is good for you? Absolutely nothing! Whatever He brings into your life or mine (whether war or peace) is because He loves us, not because He hates us. Will you cling to that truth? If so, your joy will be full in His unchanging love.

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