



To be accepted. To be known. To be loved—there's really nothing more our hearts long for. From the moment we are born to the day we die, to be unconditionally loved is the deep desire of our hearts. For many of us, we first experienced that kind of love from our mothers. The skit was cute and inspirational because it's true, "mom will love my card. She always does." For others of us, it was someone else—a father, a spouse, a best friend—where we truly experienced unconditional love.

But, maybe for some of you, unconditional love has been illusive. That concept might be foreign to your experience. And even when it comes to God and our relationship with him, I think many of us struggle with fully receiving his love. I know I've wrestled with a nagging doubt that God is disappointed with me. Because we see so many flaws and inconsistencies in our lives we wonder how God could not be disappointed with us. So, we try harder. We show up at church more. We try to muster more self-control in an effort to be more spiritual and stop the big sins. But, then we fail... again. And suddenly we are feeling the sting of guilt and shame. We're driven away from God. Our hearts condemn us. We stop coming to church. We walk away from truth tellers and our souls get sick.

How do we end that pattern and way of living? How do we recover from the lies we tend to believe? Here's how: we recapture how God see us. That's what I want us to look at this morning. I want us to consider two passages in the Bible that speak about the radical, unconditional, and crazy love of God. I realize too that Mother's Day can be a really hard and painful time for many women. If you're single and don't want to be or struggle with infertility or lost your mother recently, you're trying to endure Mother's Day, not enjoy it. I get that. So, my hope and prayer is God's Word will encourage you today and remind you of God's incredible love for you.

Let's begin our journey with Jesus' baptism. Matthew, in his account of the life of Jesus, writes this,

**As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:16-17).**

## Recapture Who You Are—Beloved by God

Jesus, traveling from Galilee, met John the Baptist in the wilderness at the Jordan River to be baptized. At first, John said, "I am not worthy to baptize you!" But, finally John consented and Jesus was baptized. Then something radical happens as Jesus comes out of the water—God the Father speaks to Jesus. What's the big deal? For roughly 400 years, between the writing of the OT and NT, God was silent; not one word from him. No prophet... no Scripture... nothing. And suddenly, at Jesus' baptism, God speaks to his Son. God broke 400 years of silence by quoting from the Prophet Isaiah (42:1) and the Psalms (2:7), **"This is my Son, my beloved, with him I am well pleased."** Every Jew would have immediately recognized those words from the Hebrew scriptures. They were deeply significant. Jesus is identified as both the Suffering Servant and the Messianic King. In other words, Jesus is the One Israel for 400 years has been waiting for.

God not only spoke but God affirmed his Son. As a father, I'm learning there is nothing more important than speaking words of truth and life into and over my children. I'm not great at it, but I'm working on it. Here, at a significant event in Jesus's life—his baptism—God the Father placed his stamp of approval on his Son and his future ministry. God looked on his Son and said, "I love you. I'm so proud of you. You're incredible." And here's the kicker: God said those words **before** Jesus' ministry. Before Jesus healed a single person, before Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, before he called one disciple, or calmed a raging storm, or cast out a single demon, or went to the cross. God said, "You are **my** son, **my** beloved, with you I am well pleased."

As his sons and daughters, you are God's beloved. He is well pleased with you. It doesn't matter what you do or don't do for him, he calls you by name; you are his. You're loved unconditionally. It's who you are. But, here's the problem: at our core many of us don't really believe that. Because if we did, everything would change. There would be nothing to prove any longer. No one's opinions about us matter anymore either. So once we understand our "belovedness," we are free to go out and make a difference in the world. We no longer seek approval from anyone or anything. It's no longer about our performance. Are you living with a deep understanding that you are beloved by God? There is nothing more important. It's what you need. It's what your

marriage, your kids, church and community needs. Men and women, walking with Jesus, empowered by their “belovedness.”

One of the major obstacles of taking in God’s love for us is believing nothing will ever separate us from his love. Again, I think if we are honest, we believe there are some things that can actually separate us from God’s love. Apostle Paul said it best,

**Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:**

**“For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”**

**No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:35-39).**

### **Remember—Nothing can Ever Separate the Beloved from His Love**

Not only do you need to recapture who you are as God’s beloved son or daughter, we also need to remember that nothing can ever separate us from his love. It’s hard for us to understand God’s love because the word “love” has become polluted and cheapened. In the same breath I say “I love God” and seconds later “I love the Warriors.” Twice, Apostle Paul, in this passage used the word love. He could have chosen a number of Greek words for love:

- *Eros*—a love based on feelings.
- *Phileo*—a love based on mutual benefits, brotherly love.
- *Agape*—love that is sacrificial and unconditional.

Which word do you think he used? *Agape*.

From the moment we are born, we are conditioned to believe that we get what we deserve. Nothing in life is free. But, when you come to faith in Jesus, a paradigm shift occurs. In God’s kingdom the last are first, the poor are rich, and the dead are alive. Religion is man reaching up to God. Christianity is God coming down in the flesh to us in Jesus. Religion is what we do **for** God. Christianity is what’s been done for us **in** Jesus. This means God doesn’t love you any more or any less for whatever you do or do not do. He loves you because he loves you. That’s why Paul mentions several possible things that could separate us from the love of Christ and with every point his answer is no:

- Can trouble separate us? No.
- Can hardship separate us? No.
- Can persecution? No.

- How about famine and nakedness? No.
- What about danger or the sword? Surely the risk of death can separate us? Not even close.

Paul could speak of these things with confidence because he had experienced them all. He wrote in 2 Corinthians 11:23b, *“I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.”*

Paul continues to talk about God’s love in verse 37, but does something interesting. He says, *“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”* Wait, I thought God **loves** us, present tense. Suddenly, Paul says God **loved** us, past tense. Think about that. What if my wife introduced me as her husband whom she loved, past tense? I would be mad! Why does Paul do this? He is pointing to something in the past, to Christ’s work on the cross. Jesus Christ showed his love for us by suffering on the cross in our place and for our sins, so nothing can ever separate us from his love. This means our confidence is not our love for God but his love for us. No one and nothing can separate us from God’s love because God did not even withhold his own Son! On the contrary, we are more than conquerors! The word “conquerors” is a fantastic word in the original language: *hypernikáo*. If Paul wanted to say that we are victorious, he could have just said *nikao*. Instead, he adds the prefix *hyper*. We are hyper-victorious because God is hyper in love with us!

Paul concludes this passage in verse 38 with his own testimony about the love of God. He says in the present tense, “I am convinced.” That means he has become convinced and remains convinced that no one and nothing can ever separate him from God’s love. To make his point, Paul describes ten things that try to separate us from his love. In other words, whatever you can think of, even the most powerful spiritual forces, still can’t separate us from God’s love. He saying, “Are you convinced yet that nothing can ever separate you from God’s love? If not, there’s nothing more I can say!”

God says to you today—I love you, you are mine; remember, nothing will ever come between my love for you. Mary Ann Bird in her memoir *The Whisper Test* writes:

*I grew up knowing I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate, and when I started school, my classmates made it clear to me how I looked to others: a little girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and garbled speech. When schoolmates asked, “What happened to your lip?” I’d tell them I’d fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. I was convinced that no one outside my family could love me.*

*There was, however, a teacher in the second grade whom we all adored—Mrs. Leonard by name. She was short, round, happy—a sparkling lady.*

*Annually we had a hearing test. Mrs. Leonard gave the test to everyone in the class, and finally it was my turn. I knew from past years that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher sitting at her desk would whisper something, and we would have to repeat it back—things like “The sky is blue” or “Do you have new shoes?”*

*I waited there for those words that God must have put into her mouth, those seven words that changed my life. Mrs. Leonard said, in her whisper, “I wish you were my little girl.”*

God says to every person deformed by sin, “I wish you were my son” or “I wish you were my daughter.” If you don’t know Jesus in a personal way, he’s whispering to you this morning, “I wish you were my son...I wish you were my daughter.” Nothing you’ve done can ever separate you from his love.

Years ago, the person who first got me thinking about my belovedness was the late Henri Nouwen. He was a popular Christian writer and Catholic priest who wrote over 40 books and whose spiritual life deeply influenced many people, including my own. In his book *Beloved by God* he encourages the reader to recapture who they really are—a person deeply loved by God. Unfortunately many people do not see themselves in this light and instead seek to be loved by other people and other things. In the Bay Area especially, we define ourselves in three ways:

1. “I am what I do”
2. “I am what others say about me”
3. “I am what I have”

In his book, Nouwen argues how those false lies deeply affect us. Nouwen writes,

*It certainly is not easy to hear that voice in a world filled with voices that shout: ‘You are no good, you are ugly; you are worthless; you are despicable, you are nobody—unless you can demonstrate the opposite.*

*These negative voices are so loud and so persistent that it is easy to believe them. That’s the great trap. It is the trap of self-rejection. Over the years, I have come to realize that the*

*greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection.*

*When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity, and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions. We are the Beloved. We are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children and friends loved or wounded us. That’s the truth of our lives. That’s the truth I want you to claim for yourself. That’s the truth spoken by the voice that says, “You are my Beloved.”*

How can we apply this to our lives today? I want you to take out those blank cards that were on your chair. Remember, in the skit we saw earlier, the little girl is making a card for Mother’s Day and says, “Even if she is blind, she is going to love my card, she always does.” If you are a mother, hopefully you will be getting a Mother’s Day card from your children and some other happy things. But, for the rest of us, I got to thinking: If God were to write you a card today, what would it say?

I want you to think about what you need your heavenly Father to speak into your life today. Would his card to you say, “I love you,” “I’m proud of you,” “You’re such a great mother,” “Thank you for trusting me.” What would God’s card to you say? Only you know that.

Here’s what I’d like you to do: either now or sometime this week, take home that blank card and spend some time alone with God. Prayerfully ask, “God, what exactly do you want to tell me? What specifically do I need to hear from you?” Then design a card with those words. You creative types will love this exercise. You engineers and accountants, just do your best! And if you don’t know what God would say to you, just write, “I love you, Sincerely, Your Heavenly Father.”

Recapture who you are—Beloved by God.

Remember what is true—Nothing can ever separate the Beloved from His love.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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Catalog No. 1430-N

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This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, May 14, 2017 at Central Peninsula Church North  
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