

Why I Am a Calvinist, Part 6

... and why every Christian is a Calvinist of sorts.

(By Phil Johnson)

Part VI: We love Him because He first loved us

Notice: this profound text is a clear statement about the sovereign power of God's love. It is a lesson about the sovereignty of God's saving purpose. It is a celebration of the glory of sovereign love.

The verse, despite its brevity, also turns out to be incredibly rich with meaning. Look at it closely and you'll see at least five great doctrinal lessons this verse teaches us. Today, we'll consider two of them; then we'll look at the other three in tomorrow's post.

First, the text teaches us about:

1. THE PERVERSENESS OF OUR FALLEN STATE

In other words, it underscores for us how bad our sin is, and how deeply infected we are with sinful tendencies.

Think with me for a moment about the implications of that phrase at the end: "He first loved us." In other words, there was a time when we *didn't* love Him. That is the very essence of depravity, isn't it?—a failure to love God as we ought. Nothing is more utterly and totally depraved than a heart devoid of love for God. Romans 8:7 says, "The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God."

That describes a hopeless state of utter inability to love God, to obey His commands, or to please Him. That is the state of all whose hearts have not been renewed by Christ.

This is a particularly poignant expression coming from the apostle John—who in his gospel refers to himself repeatedly as "that disciple whom Jesus loved." Notice: in John's own mind, Jesus' love for him completely defined who he was.

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Why was this such a prominent feature in John's thinking? I think he gives us a clue right here in our verse. The reason he was so preoccupied with the love of Christ for him is that he knew that love was utterly undeserved. He was keenly aware of his own sinfulness. As amazed as John was with the love of Christ for him, he must have been equally amazed at the thought that his own heart had once been devoid of any love for One who was so lovely. How can the human heart be so cold to One who is so worthy of our love? Anyone who truly appreciates the glory of Christ's love, as John did, will be appalled and horrified at the realization that our own hearts do not love Him as we ought to. The knowledge of how perfectly He loves us produces such a sense of utter unworthiness, doesn't it?



You can see this vividly, even at the end of John's life, when he sees a vision of the risen Christ in Revelation 1, and he writes in Revelation 1:17, "And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead." He was literally frightened into a coma, because this vision of the glorified Christ smote him with such an overpowering sense of his own sinfulness. And in an almost involuntary response, he collapsed on his face in a dead swoon out of fear. And there he lay until Jesus "laid His right hand upon [him,] saying . . . Fear not."

That same overpowering consciousness of sin and shame is implied in the words of our verse, "We love Him, because He first loved us." We are so utterly and totally depraved that if God Himself did not love us with a redeeming love, we would never have loved Him at all. If that does not fill you with a consciousness of your own sin—if it doesn't shock you with a stark realization of the impenetrable hardness of the fallen human heart—then you need to meditate on it a little longer.

I hope you can see how this verse clearly and forcefully underscores the very essence of human depravity. There is nothing more desperately wicked than a heart that fails to love God. There is nothing more blind and irrational and sinful than not loving Someone so worthy of our love. We should need no motive to love Him other than the sheer glory His perfect being. And yet, we would not love Him at all if He had not first loved us!

Remember, this is the first and great commandment (Matthew 22:37): "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." The whole of God's law is summarized and epitomized in that one simple rule. To break that commandment is to fail in every single point of the law. There is nothing more completely and totally wicked.

And yet, our verse reminds us that we are so hopelessly and thoroughly wicked that not one of us could ever truly love God unless God Himself enabled us to do so. That is the doctrine of total depravity in a nutshell. It means that we are totally unable to save ourselves. We have a debilitating moral inability that makes our love for Him an utter impossibility until He intervenes to give us the ability to love Him.

We cannot by sheer force of will set our hearts to love Him, because as fallen creatures we are so in love with our own sin and rebellion that our desires are twisted. Our affections are warped and hopelessly corrupted. And we are powerless to change ourselves. "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil" (Jeremiah 13:23). "The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint" (Isaiah 1:5). "The [unregenerate] heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked"—who can possibly understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9).

Our hearts are poisoned by sin, and that is why we do not and cannot love God on our own. That is precisely what we mean when we talk about total depravity. It's not that we are as evil as we could possibly be, but that evil has infected us totally—in every part of our soul—so that we are incapable of righteous desires and holy motives and loving affections toward God. Some theologians prefer the expression *total inability*, rather than *total depravity*. But the truth is the same—and I hope you can see how it is implied in this text. Arminians, if they are true Arminians, and not full-blown Pelagians, actually affirm that truth.

So that is the first doctrine taught by this verse: *The perverseness of our fallen state*. Here's a second one:

2. THE PRIORITY OF GOD'S ELECTING CHOICE

He loved us first. That is exactly what this verse says. It is also the whole gist of what the doctrine of election teaches. God's love for us precedes any movement toward God on our part. Even Arminians affirm that much of the doctrine of Election. God loved us first.

The apostle John is actually echoing something Jesus once said to him. That last night prior to the crucifixion, when the disciples were alone together with Jesus, after they ate the Passover meal together in the Upper Room, Jesus said to them (John 15:16), "Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you."

Now, John and the other apostles might have protested, "*But that's not true, Lord; we did choose You.*" After all, they had left all to follow Him. Peter said so explicitly in Mark 10:28: "Lo, we have left all, and have followed Thee." They had made a conscious, deliberate choice to abandon their former lives, their loved ones, their livelihoods, and all they had—in order to follow Christ. They had indeed *chosen* to devote their lives to following Him. And in the case of John and his brother James, giving up their livelihood meant giving up the family fishing business, which by all appearances was a lucrative business for them.

John himself had met Jesus while John was under the discipleship of John the Baptist. As soon as he and Andrew understood that John the Baptist was pointing to Jesus as the promised Messiah, they left John the Baptist in order to follow Jesus. In a very real sense, they *did* choose Jesus. So what did Jesus mean when He said, "Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you"?

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He meant simply that whether they realized it or not, He had chosen them *first*. His choice was the decisive one. They would never have chosen Him at all had He not first chosen them. *They loved Him because He first loved them.*

Even if you are a devoted Arminian, you implicitly affirm this truth. You acknowledge it every time you thank Him for saving you. You know in your heart that you cannot take personal credit for your love toward God. You did not love Him first; We love him, because He first loved us. You and I are no better than the unbelieving people who still hate and reject Him. The only reason we love Him while they remain at enmity with God is that God's loving grace has worked a miracle in our hearts to enable us to return His love.

First Corinthians 4:7 asks, "Who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?" Do not think for a moment that you can take credit for your love toward Christ. If you love Him at all, it is only because He first loved you. That is the very essence of the doctrine of election.

"We love Him, because He first loved us." In other words, God took the initiative in salvation. One of the points Roger Olson makes in that book I referred to is that historic, knowledgeable Arminians *do* affirm that truth. God is both the Author and the Finisher of our faith. He started the

process. His love for us not only came before any love we have for Him; but *His* love is what secured our love for Him. That's exactly what this text says.

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