

# Their Ground Is the Excellent Nature of Divine Things, Not Self-Interest

by Jonathan Edwards

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*The sermon argues that the ground of gracious affections is the transcendently excellent and amiable nature of divine things, not self-interest.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 16:11, Psalm 27:4, Psalm 34:8, Psalm 63:3, Psalm 145:9, Luke 10:27, Romans 5:8, 1 Peter 1:8, 1 John 4:7, 1 John 4:19

**Topics:** "Divine Love", "Gracious Affections"

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## Description

Jonathan Edwards preaches about the primary foundation of gracious affections, emphasizing that true love for God and divine things stems from recognizing their transcendently excellent and amiable nature, rather than any self-interest or benefits received. He refutes the notion that all love arises from self-love, explaining that true love for God is rooted in His infinite excellency and glory, which is the chief ground of all true love. Edwards highlights that a natural principle of self-love may lead to affections towards God, but true and holy love in saints arises from seeing God's loveliness first, with self-love playing a secondary role.

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## Transcript

II. The first objective ground of gracious affections, is the transcendently excellent and amiable nature of divine things as they are themselves; and not any conceived relation they bear to self, or self-interest.

I say, that the supremely excellent nature of divine things, is the first, or primary and original objective foundation of the spiritual affections of true saints; for I do not suppose that all relation which divine things bear to themselves, and their own particular interest, is wholly excluded from all influence in their gracious affections. For this may have, and indeed has, a secondary and consequential influence in those affections that are truly holy and spiritual, as I shall show how by and by.

It was before observed that the affection of love is, as it were, the fountain of all affection; and particularly that Christian love is the fountain of all gracious affections: now the divine excellency and glory of God and Jesus Christ the word of God, the works of God, and the ways of God, &c., is the primary reason why a true saint loves these things; and not any supposed interest that he has in them, or any conceived benefit that he has received from them, or shall receive from them, or any such imagined relation which they bear to his interest, that self-love can properly be said to be the first foundation of his love to these things.

Some say that all love arises from self-love; and that it is impossible in the nature of things, for any man to have any love to God, or any other beings, but that love to himself must be the foundation of it. But I humbly suppose it is for want of consideration that they say so. They argue, that whoever loves God, and so desires his glory or the enjoyment of him, he desires these things as his own happiness; the glory of God, and the beholding and enjoying his perfections are considered as things agreeable to him, tending to make him happy; he places his happiness in them, and desires them as things, which (if they were obtained) would be delightful to him, or would fill him with delight and joy, and so make him happy. And so, they say, it is from self-love, or a desire of his own happiness, that he desires God should be glorified, and desires to behold and enjoy his glorious perfections. But then they ought to consider a little further, and inquire how the man came to place his happiness in God's being glorified, and in contemplating and enjoying God's perfections.--There is no doubt but that after God's glory, and the beholding his perfections, are become so agreeable to him, that he places his highest happiness in these things then he will desire them, as he desires his own happiness. But how came these things to be so agreeable to him, that he esteems it his highest happiness to glorify God, &c.? Is not this the fruit of love? A man must first love God or have his heart united to him, before he will esteem God's good his own, and before he will desire the glorifying, and enjoying of God as his happiness. It is not strong arguing, that because after a man has his heart united to God in love, as a fruit of this, he desires his glory and enjoyment, as his own happiness, that therefore a desire of this happiness of his own must needs be the cause and foundation of his love; unless it be a strong arguing, that because a father beget a son, therefore his son certainly beget him. If after a man loves God, and has his heart so united to him, as to look upon God as his chief good, and on God's good as his own, it will be a consequence and fruit of this, that even self-love, or love to his own happiness, will cause him to desire the glorifying and enjoying of God; it will not thence follow, that this very exercise of self-love, went before his love to God, and that his love to God was a consequence and fruit of that. Something else, entirely distinct from self-love, might be the cause of this, viz., a change made in the views of his mind, and relish of his heart; whereby he apprehends a beauty, glory, and supreme good, in God's nature, as it is in itself. This may be the thing that first draws his heart to him, and causes his heart to be united to him, prior to all considerations of his own interest or happiness, although after this, and as a fruit of this, he necessarily seeks his interest and happiness in God.

There is such a thing as a kind of love or affection that a man may have towards persons or things, which does properly arise from self-love; a preconceived relation to himself, or some respect already manifested by another to him, or some benefit already received or depended on, is truly the first foundation of his love, and what his affection does wholly arise from; and is what precedes any relish of, or delight in the nature and qualities inherent in the being beloved, as beautiful and amiable. When the first thing that draws a man's benevolence to another, is the beholding those qualifications and properties in him, which appear to him lovely in themselves; and the subject of them, on this account, worthy of esteem and good will, love arises in a very different manner than when it first arises from some gift bestowed by another or depended on from him, as a judge loves and favors a man that has bribed him; or from the relation he supposes another has to him, as a man who loves another, because he looks upon him as his child. When love to another arises thus, it does truly and properly arise from self-love.

That kind of affection to God or Jesus Christ, which does thus properly arise from self-love, cannot be a truly gracious and spiritual love, as appears from what has been said already: for self-love is a principle entirely natural, and as much in the hearts of devils as angels; and therefore surely nothing that is the mere result of it can be supernatural and divine, in the manner before described.[48] Christ plainly speaks of this kind of love, as what is nothing beyond the love of wicked men: Luke 6:32, "If ye love them that love

you, what thank have ye? For sinners also love those that love them." And the devil himself knew that that kind of respect to God which was so mercenary, as to be only for benefits received or depended on (which is all one), is worthless in the sight of God; otherwise he never would have made use of such a slander before God, against Job, as in Job 1:9, 10: "Doth Job serve God for nought? Has not thou made a hedge about him, and about his house," &c. Nor would God ever have implicitly allowed the objection to have been good, in case the accusation had been true, by allowing that that matter should be tried, and that Job should be so dealt with, that it might appear in the event, whether Job's respect to God was thus mercenary or no, and by putting the proof of the sincerity and godness of his respect upon that issue.

It is unreasonable to think otherwise, than that the first foundation of a true love to God, is that whereby he is in himself lovely, or worthy to be loved, or the supreme loveliness of his nature. This is certainly what makes him chiefly amiable. What chiefly makes a man, or any creature lovely, is his excellency; and so what chiefly renders God lovely, and must undoubtedly be the chief ground of true love, is his excellency. God's nature, or the divinity, is infinitely excellent; yea it is infinite beauty, brightness, and glory itself. But how can that be true love of this excellent and lovely nature, which is not built on the foundation of its true loveliness? How can that be true love of beauty and brightness which is not for beauty and brightness' sake? How can that be a true prizing of that which is in itself infinitely worthy and precious, which is not for the sake of its worthiness and preciousness? This infinite excellency of the divine nature, as it is in itself, is the true ground of all that is good in God in any respect; but how can a man truly and rightly love God, without loving him for that excellency in him, which is the foundation of all that is in any manner of respect good or desirable in him? They whose affection to God is founded first on his profitableness to them, their affection begins at the wrong end; they regard God only for the utmost limit of the stream of divine good, where it touches them, and reaches their interest; and have no respect to that infinite glory of God's nature, which is the original good, and the true fountain of all good, the first fountain of all loveliness of every kind, and so the first foundation of all true love.

A natural principle of self-love may be the foundation of great affections towards God and Christ, without seeing anything of the beauty and glory of the divine nature. There is a certain gratitude that is a mere natural thing. Gratitude is one of the natural affections of the soul of man, as well as anger, and there is a gratitude that arises from self-love, very much in the same manner that anger does. Anger in men is an affection excited against another, or in opposition to another, for something in him that crosses self-love: gratitude is an affection one has towards another, for loving him, or gratifying him, or for something in him that suits self-love. And there may be a kind of gratitude, without any true or proper love: as there may be anger without any proper hatred, as in parents towards their children, that they may be angry with, and yet at the same time have a strong habitual love to them. This gratitude is the principle which is an exercise in wicked men, in that which Christ declares concerning them, in the 6th of Luke, where he says, sinners love those that love them; and which he declares concerning even the publicans, who were some of the most carnal and profligate sort of men, Matt. 5:46. This is the very principle that is wrought upon by bribery, in unjust judges; and it is a principle that even the brute beasts do exercise; a dog will love his master that is kind to him. And we see in innumerable instances, that mere nature is sufficient to excite gratitude in men, or to affect their hearts with thankfulness to others for kindnesses received; and sometimes towards them, whom at the same time they have a habitual enmity against. Thus Saul was once and again greatly affected, and even dissolved with gratitude towards David, for sparing his life, and yet remained a habitual enemy to him. And as men, from mere nature, may be thus affected towards men; so they may towards God. There is nothing hinders but that the same self-love may work after the same manner towards God as towards men. And we have manifest instances of it in Scripture; as indeed the

children of Israel, who sang God's praises at the Red Sea, but soon forgot God's works: and in Naaman the Syrian, who was greatly affected with the miraculous cure of his leprosy, so as to have his heart engaged thenceforward to worship the God that had healed him, and him only, excepting when it would expose him to be ruined in his temporal interest. So was Nebuchadnezzar greatly affected with God's goodness to him, in restoring him to his reason and kingdom, alter his dwelling with the beasts.

Gratitude being thus a natural principle, it renders ingratitude so much the more vile and heinous; because it shows a dreadful prevalence of wickedness, when it even overbears and suppresses the better principles of human nature: as it is mentioned as an evidence of the high degree of the wickedness of many of the heathen, that they were without natural affection, Rom. 2:31. But that the want of gratitude, or natural affection, is evidence of a high degree of vice, is no argument that all gratitude and natural affection has the nature of virtue, or saving grace.

Self-love, through the exercise of mere natural gratitude, may be the foundation of a sort of love to God many ways. A kind of love may arise from a false notion of God, that men have been educated in, or have some way imbibed; as though he were only goodness and mercy, and not revenging justice; or as though the exercises of his goodness were necessary, and not free and sovereign; or as though his goodness were dependent on what is in them, and as it were constrained by them. Men on such grounds as these, may love a God of their own forming in their imaginations, when they are far from loving such a God as reigns in heaven.

Again, self-love may be the foundation of an affection in men towards God, through a great insensibility of their state with regard to God, and for want of conviction of conscience to make them sensible how dreadfully they have provoked God to anger; they have no sense of the heinousness of sin, as against God, and of the infinite and terrible opposition of the holy nature of God against it: and so, having formed in their minds such a God as suits them, and thinking God. to be such a one as themselves, who favors and agrees with them, they may like him very well, and feel a sort of love to him, when they are far from loving the true God. And men's affections may be much moved towards God, from self-love, by some remarkable outward benefits received from God; as it was with Naaman, Nebuchadnezzar, and the children of Israel at the Red Sea.

Again, a very high affection towards God may, and often does, arise in men, from an opinion of the favor and love of God to them, as the first foundation of their love to him. After awakenings and distress, through fears of hell, they may suddenly get a notion, through some impression on their imagination, or immediate suggestion with or without texts of Scripture, or by some other means, that God loves them, and has forgiven their sins, and made them his children; and this is the first thing that causes their affections to flow towards God and Jesus Christ: and then after this, and upon this foundation, many things in God may appear lovely to them, and Christ may seem excellent. And if such persons are asked, whether God appears lovely and amiable in himself, they would perhaps readily answer, yes; when indeed, if the matter be strictly examined, this good opinion of God was purchased and paid for before ever they afforded it, in the distinguishing and infinite benefits they imagined they received from God: and they allow God to be lovely in himself, no otherwise than that he has forgiven them, and accepted them, and loves them above most in the world, and has engaged to improve all his infinite power and wisdom in preferring, dignifying, and exalting them, and will do for them just as they would have him. When once they are firm in this apprehension, it is easy to own God and Christ to be lovely and glorious, and to admire and extol them. It is easy for them to own Christ to be a lovely person, and the best in the world, when they are first firm in it, that he, though Lord of the universe, is captivated with love to them, and has his heart swallowed up in

them, and prizes them far beyond most of their neighbors, and loved them from eternity, and died for them, and will make them reign in eternal glory with him in heaven. When this is the case with carnal men, their very lusts will make him seem lovely: pride itself will prejudice them in favor of that which they call Christ: selfish, proud man naturally calls that lovely that greatly contributes to his interest, and gratifies his ambition.

And as this sort of persons begin, so they go on. Their affections are raised from time to time, primarily on this foundation of self-love and a conceit of God's love to them. Many have a false notion of communion with God, as though it were carried on by impulses, and whispers, and external representations, immediately made to their imagination. These things they often have; which they take to be manifestations of God's great love to them, and evidences of their high exaltation above others of mankind; and so their affections, we often renewedly set agoing.

Whereas the exercises of true and holy love in the saints arise in another way. They do not first see that God loves them, and then see that he is lovely, but they first see that God is lovely, and that Christ is excellent and glorious, and their hearts are first captivated with this view, and the exercises of their love are wont from time to time to begin here, and to arise primarily from these views; and then, consequentially, they see God's love, and great favor to them.[49] The saint's affections begin with God; and self-love has a hand in these affections consequentially, and secondarily only. On the contrary, those false affections begin with self, and an acknowledgment of an excellency in God, and an affectedness with it, is only consequential and dependent. In the love of the true saint God is the lowest foundation; the love of the excellency of his nature is the foundation of all the affections which come afterwards wherein self-love is concerned as a handmaid: on the contrary, the hypocrite lays himself at the bottom of all, as the first foundation, and lays on God as the superstructure; and even his acknowledgment of God's glory itself depends on his regard to his private interest.

Self-love may not only influence men, so as to cause them to be affected with God's kindness to them separately; but also with God's kindness to them as parts of a community: as a natural principle of self-love, without any other principle, may be sufficient to make a man concerned for the interest of the nation to which he belongs: as for instance, in the present war, self-love may make natural men rejoice at the successes of our nation, and sorry for their disadvantages, they being concerned as members of the body. So the same natural principle may extend further, and even to the world of mankind, and might be affected with the benefits the inhabitants of the earth have, beyond those of the inhabitants of other planets, if we knew that such there were, and how it was with them. So this principle may cause men to be affected with the benefits that mankind have received beyond the fallen angels. And hence men, from this principle, may be much affected with the wonderful goodness of God to mankind, his great goodness in giving his Son to die for fallen man, and the marvellous love of Christ in suffering such great things for us, and with the great glory they hear God has provided in heaven for us; looking on themselves as persons concerned and interested, as being some of this species of creatures so highly favored: the same principle of natural gratitude may influence men here, as in the case of personal benefits.

But these things that I have said do by no means imply, that all gratitude to God is a mere natural thing, and that there is no such thing as a spiritual gratitude, which is a holy and divine affection: they imply no more, than that there is a gratitude which is merely natural, and that when persons have affections towards God only or primarily for benefits received, their affection is only the exercise of a natural gratitude. There is doubtless such a thing as a gracious gratitude, which does greatly differ from all that gratitude which natural men experience. It differs in the following respects:

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