

## Love One Another      1 John 4:7-21

God is love. Some people can't believe it. They are rightly troubled by all the evil in the world. So if God is love, how can he allow all of this suffering and murder and violence and corruption? These people may sincerely wonder, "If God exists, is love even one of God's attributes?"

Others misunderstand this statement and would have it mean that God always and everywhere radiates a sentimental positive vibe toward all that we say and do.

Writing all the way back in the year 386 A.D., the Latin scholar Jerome relates a story that had been handed down about the Apostle John.

*"The blessed John the Evangelist lived in Ephesus until extreme old age. His disciples could barely carry him to church and he could not muster the voice to speak many words. During individual gatherings he usually said nothing but, "Little children, love one another." The disciples and brothers in attendance, annoyed because they always heard the same words, finally said, "Teacher, why do you always say this?" He replied with a line worthy of John: "Because it is the Lord's commandment and if it alone is kept, it is sufficient."*

– Jerome, Commentary on Galatians, at 6:10

As we examine John's writings, especially this letter of 1 John, the story sounds absolutely authentic. He repeats the phrase 3x in the section we'll read today, it already appeared 2x in Ch.3 and he uses it 4x elsewhere in the Bible. If we're willing to accept that God's commandments are the outward expression of his character, then we must acknowledge that he expects the world to learn of his love through the love that they see in us. For example,

**2 John 1:5**      *And now I plead with you, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment to you, but that which we have had from the beginning: that we **love one another**.*

Read also **1 John 3:11** and **3:23**.

**God's love is revealed in the Scriptures and demonstrated at the cross, but still must be made tangible through the lives of his people.**

- I.    Love one another.      4:7-11
- II.   Abide in God's love.    4:12-16
- III.  Let love cast out fear.  4:17-21

**Read the passage through and underline the phrase love one another in 4:7, 11 & 12.**

**I. Love one another. 4:7-11**

4:7-8 The person who cannot love reveals that he or she has not been changed to the core by the message of the gospel. Our ability to love is based on the fact that we know him.

Love is not God's only attribute, so we should never think of God as only love and love alone. God is holy, he is righteous, he is merciful and patient. God is good. In 1:5 we read that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. Still, love is John's main focus for us today.

What does it mean that **God is love**? It means that God persistently gives of himself to others and always seeks their benefit. This is simply part of who God is. The Father loves the Son; the Son loves the Father; the Spirit loves the Son, and so on and so forth. Within the very being of God, love is expressed on a continuous basis.

The fact that God is love does not imply that everything we call "love" is necessarily godly. The verse does not say "love is God." Nowhere is that idea expressed in the Bible. Human expressions of love can be very distorted. Knowing God will lead to loving others rightly.

4:9-10 Here's what John means when he talks about God's love.

God's love is something abstract or theoretical. The love of God required outward expression. Love prompted God to send his Son so that we might have life. And that life was gained for us at the cross. F.F. Bruce has put it like this,

*"The Christian affirmation that God is love is not sustained by ignoring the cross, in all its stark obscenity, but by setting it in the forefront of the situation."*

Therefore, God's love sets the standard for the love Christians are called to personify. Agape love can only be expressed by us after we receive it from God. It originates with him. Without beginning from him as a source, our love will inevitably fall short.

God's love, agape Love, is not about self-gratification. It is about pouring one's life out for others. That is what Jesus did by becoming the propitiation – the atoning sacrifice – for our sins. He gave his life so that we could be made right with God through his shed blood.

To take this a bit further, in order to understand the immensity of God's love for us, we have to first understand the heinousness of our sin in his sight. This is the first step to understanding what Christ did for us at the cross.

*"God's holy antagonism to sin must somehow be turned away if sin is to be forgiven and the sinner restored." (Stott)*

So how can this happen? The right question to ask is, "If God is ultimately our judge, and if a judge hopes to be righteous, how can he forgive sinners?" John Stott explains further,

*"The biblical idea of propitiation "is an appeasement of the wrath of God by the love of God."*

4:11 Once we realize what Christ did for us at the cross, we are then freed up to love others.

*“Real agape cannot but express itself in practical conduct, but also because the crucial act of agape was actually performed in history, on an April day about AD 30, at a supper-table in Jerusalem, in a garden across the Kidron valley, in the headquarters of Pontius Pilate, and on a Roman cross at Golgotha.” – C.H. Dodd*

The deeper we go into the meaning of the Cross, the more our love for Christ will increase. As our love for God grows, our love for people made in his image will grow proportionately. The **ought to** in this verse is not because God is outwardly forcing us to love others, but because inwardly we are constrained by the love of God in our hearts.

**God’s love is revealed in the Scriptures and demonstrated at the cross, but still must be made tangible through the lives of his people.**

## II. Abide in God’s love. 4:12-16

4:12 Listen to this verse and compare it to what John says at the beginning of his Gospel.

*John 1:18 No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.*

In the Gospel, John makes the point that the character of God was revealed to us in Jesus. Here, he emphasizes that God’s character needs to be revealed through us as we love one another.

4:13 God’s Holy Spirit has indwelt us as born-again believers in Jesus Christ. That is how God abides in us. The NT often speaks of our being “in Christ” We are in Him and He is in us.

4:14 **Savior of the world** This expression only appears in the Bible twice. This first time is in John 4:42 where this same expression comes from the Samaritans. He is their Savior.

*John 4:42 [The Samaritans, after hearing about Jesus from the woman at the well and then coming to see Jesus for themselves, said], “Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world.”*

John wants us to take a look at these statements closely. He ties abiding in God’s love with abiding in right beliefs about Jesus. Doctrine matters. Theology matters. The truth matters to John. God’s love cannot exist where the truth of God’s word is ignored.

4:15 Here is a summary of what John wants us to believe about Jesus:

*“Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, who came in the flesh as the Saviour of the world and gave himself as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.” – Colin Kruse*

4:16 John wants us to **know and believe the love that God has for us**. He wants us to be assured of God's love. Assurance of God's love, his favor – and ultimately of our own salvation, is not an arrogant bit of presumption. It's based on a clear understanding of what Christ has done for us on the cross. Abiding in this love means that we are constantly bringing it to mind, reminding ourselves of the reality of it.

This love will then ultimately express itself outwardly through us toward others. Loving one another will be the mark of those who truly know God.

*John 13:34-35* <sup>34</sup>A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. <sup>35</sup>By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

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### III. Let love cast out fear. 4:17-21

4:17-18 **Perfect love casts out fear.** When we read this we shouldn't think that the fear John is talking about is something like "reverence for God." Our reverence will only become greater through our experience of God's love. Experiencing God's holy love makes us desire to be more obedient to his commands. It causes us to draw closer to God.

**Personal Illustration:** When our daughter Eliza was just a toddler, she was afraid to come near me. She wouldn't come when I called her. She seems incredibly, unexplainably suspicious. She got over it, of course, but I think this is something like the fear John is talking about here.

John says this fear is associated with torment or punishment. So we are afraid of God. This kind of fear expresses itself in a lack of trust in God. A fearful response to God, based on an inadequate bond with God – an inadequate grasp of his love for us – can cause us to flee like Jonah from the presence of the Lord. Remember what he did?

*Jonah 1:3* *But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.*

And this is what we sometimes do. We run away from God. We distance ourselves from God. And we wind up getting swallowed by big ugly fish because we are heading in the wrong direction.

John wants us to have boldness or confidence before God. He wants us to be unashamed before Christ at his coming. This confidence is then associated with our understanding that we are Christ's personal representatives in this world.

Think of what Paul says in **Romans 8**:

**Romans 8:14-16** <sup>14</sup>For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. <sup>15</sup>For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." <sup>16</sup>The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

Go back and review **3:1, 3:16** and again **4:16**. This is the love that casts out fear.

4:19 We love [him] because he first loved us. The word "**him**" seems to be a later addition.

NLT inserts "each other"

ESV and NIV insert no object. *We love because he first loved us.* And that's the end of it.

4:20 This theme keeps showing up – this connection between loving God and loving others. John likes to remind us of it. See **2:9-11**; the comparison with Cain killing his brother in **3:11-24**; the passage today, **4:7-21**. We can also look ahead to **5:2**.

Loving God and loving neighbor are two sides of the same coin. We can't have one without the other. Jesus made that clear when asked about the greatest commandment. He wouldn't just give one, but gave the second as a natural outflow of the first.

4:21 Let's read **John 13:34-35** again.

**John 13:34-35** <sup>34</sup>A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. <sup>35</sup>By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

*"Those who love God cannot refuse to love the image of God that meets them in their fellow believers." – Glenn W. Barker*

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#### **Application: What does God expect of us?**

- He expects us to believe that he loves us. This is why I believe Paul prayed the following prayer that he records in Ephesians chapter 3.

**Ephesians 3:14-19** <sup>14</sup>For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>15</sup>from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, <sup>16</sup>that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, <sup>17</sup>that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, <sup>18</sup>may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height— <sup>19</sup>to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

- He expects us to get to know him. When we understand his love for us, we cannot help desiring to walk more closely with him. Set aside a special time to spend with him this week.
- He expects us to grasp the wickedness of our sin so that we can see his love clearly in the cross.
  - This is hard for us. Let's face it, we like to justify ourselves. We like to excuse ourselves.
  - Take a good look at your own sin. You know what it is. Ask God to help you to hate it.
  - Then, make sure you understand what Christ did for you at the cross.
  - This will help you to more clearly see Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world.
- He expects us to abide in his love. To abide means to stay there. It will be easy to think about loving God and loving others right after we read this passage. Remind yourself of this truth every day this week. We need to abide there. We need to live in God's love. We can't allow ourselves to forget about it.
- He expects us to allow his perfect love to cast out our fears. Don't run away from God because you are uncomfortable because of what he might expect of you.
  - Is it possible that he will ask you to change a few things or give up something that you love very dearly? Well, yes, if that thing is an idol.
  - There are plenty of things that can put themselves between us and God. We often put them there. We have to remove them.
- He expects us to love one another – and he means it. This is a self-giving, self-sacrificing love. That's what his love for us is like. It is not a love of self-gratification. It is a love that looks out for the benefit of others. It's a love that is willing to die on a cross for your enemies.
- Seriously consider who needs to experience God's love through you and exactly how you can express it.
  - Perhaps a neighbor or co-worker who you don't get along with would be surprised by something you say or do.
  - Perhaps a family member that you have had a difficult relationship with needs to experience some unconditional love.
  - Someone may treat you really badly this week. What would it communicate to them if you respond in love rather than the more natural responses of fear or anger?

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